

Massey University Heritage Jubilee Sculpture Commission, Wellington Campus

Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi
Poutaha, 2014 welded aluminium



The artist:

Filipe Tohi was born in Ngele'ia, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, and immigrated to New Zealand in 1978. His contemporary paintings and sculptures are imbued with his Pacific island heritage. Tohi is a master craftsman of the traditional art of lalava - the Pan-Pacific technology used on houses, canoes, and tools before the introduction of Western materials. He has studied the construction of lalava to understand the patterns and language hidden inside the layers of sennit, which he recreates in his own contemporary art of 'lalavaometry'. He uses materials such as sennit, coloured wool, and also translates these techniques and aesthetics into large sculptures, often constructed in steel or aluminium.

The line-space intersection of lalava produces elaborate and complex geometric designs of an abstract nature. Within the abstract designs lalava holds important implications on the social, philosophical, astrological, navigational, epistemological, ontological, and ecological levels. By deciphering the existing designs, Filipe unlocks visual histories recorded by Tonga's earlier Tufunga Lalava. His sculptures reflect a pan-Polynesian aesthetic that he sees as a means of fostering understanding

between cultures. His work speaks not only of his homeland of Tonga, but the experiences of migrating and living in New Zealand. He works with a wide variety of media from wood, stone, and wool to industrial materials such as steel and perspex. Tohi uses natural media to represent the past and steel as a contemporary component: "For me, stainless steel represents the shiny new structures in the modern world. Wood is based more in tradition - in natural things from our environment."

Tohi has worked on an international level since carving his first commission for the New Zealand Embassy in Saudi Arabia in 1987. Two years later, he held his first solo exhibition at the Govett Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, New Zealand. The most recent solo exhibition *Tukutuku Kafa Mei Lotomoana: Survey Part Two* took place in 2014 at Mangere Arts Centre. Filipe instructed many students during his years at Rangimarie Arts and Crafts Centre and was a founding member of the Te Kupenga in New Plymouth. He has been a full time artist since 1990 and has participated in numerous exhibitions around the world including the UK, Lithuania, France, Germany, USA, Australia and Japan. Filipe has major public sculptures in New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Japan, and China.

Poutaha, 2014

The sculpture is titled *Poutaha* - meaning a marker, like those of a memorial or kumara god. Filipe Tohi was inspired by ancient godsticks that marked boundaries and signified deities when wrapped with rope. The godsticks were used by Maori and in other places around the Pacific before and during early contact with Europeans.

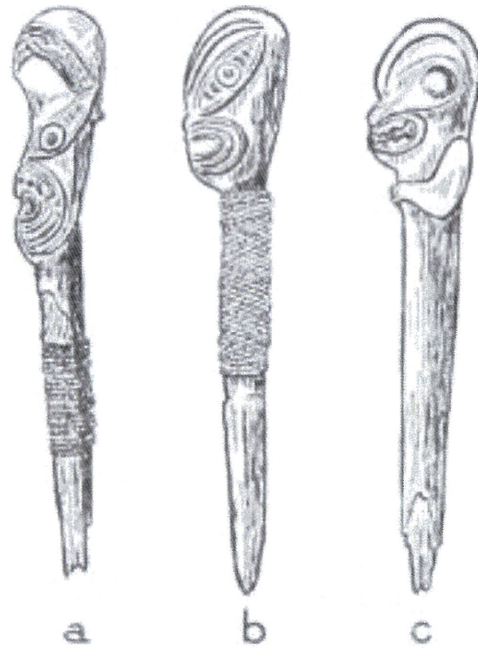


Fig. 97. Maori god sticks, after Skinner.
a, Maru; b, Kahukura; c, Hukere.

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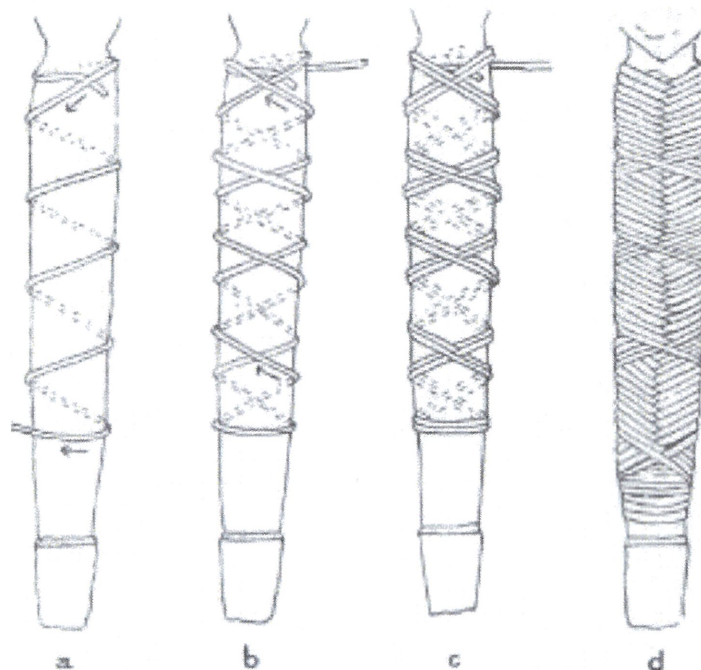


Fig. 98. God stick lashing.
a-c, stages in lashing; d, completed design.

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a-c, stages in lashing; d, completed design.**

From *The Coming of the Maori*, Te Rangi Hiroa, 1949

<http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-BucTheC-t1-g1-t4-body1-d3-d7.html>

Tohi was influenced by the account that the area of the university (Puke Ahu) was said to have been a garden growing area. The artist also recognizes the connections between Taranaki and Wellington through mana whenua, Te Ati Awa. Tohi lived in Taranaki for a long period of time. He aligns the three diamond shapes in the central axis of the sculpture with the three feathers of Te Raukua, a symbolic legacy left for all people by the prophets of Parihaka in Taranaki¹, and he was also inspired by lashing seen in the various migrations of Oceania, and noted at the blessing of the work that the form was also reminiscent of a waka.

There is also an aspect of commemoration which the artist wants to put forth.... god sticks were also memorials. *Poutaha* is based on a symbol of the past so the sculpture is a memorial as well as a unification of past (god sticks and lashings) and present (media and form) together. He states, it is a "binding present and past."

See the relevant quotes supplied by the artist below.

"A 'godstick' was a material symbol of a god conceived in human form, and the spirit entered the symbol only when invoked by the priest. On such occasions the point stick was wrapped with flax fibre braid to 'bind' the spirit of the god to the image..."

"an unidentified deity we see the specially wrapped sacred lashing which symbolizes the 'binding' to the image of the spirit of the god as his attendant spirits done in a lashing pattern...."

Duff, Roger, Ed. *No Form of Iron: Culture of Cook's Polynesians*, Christchurch: 1969, Page 41

¹ Te Raukura conveys the following message:

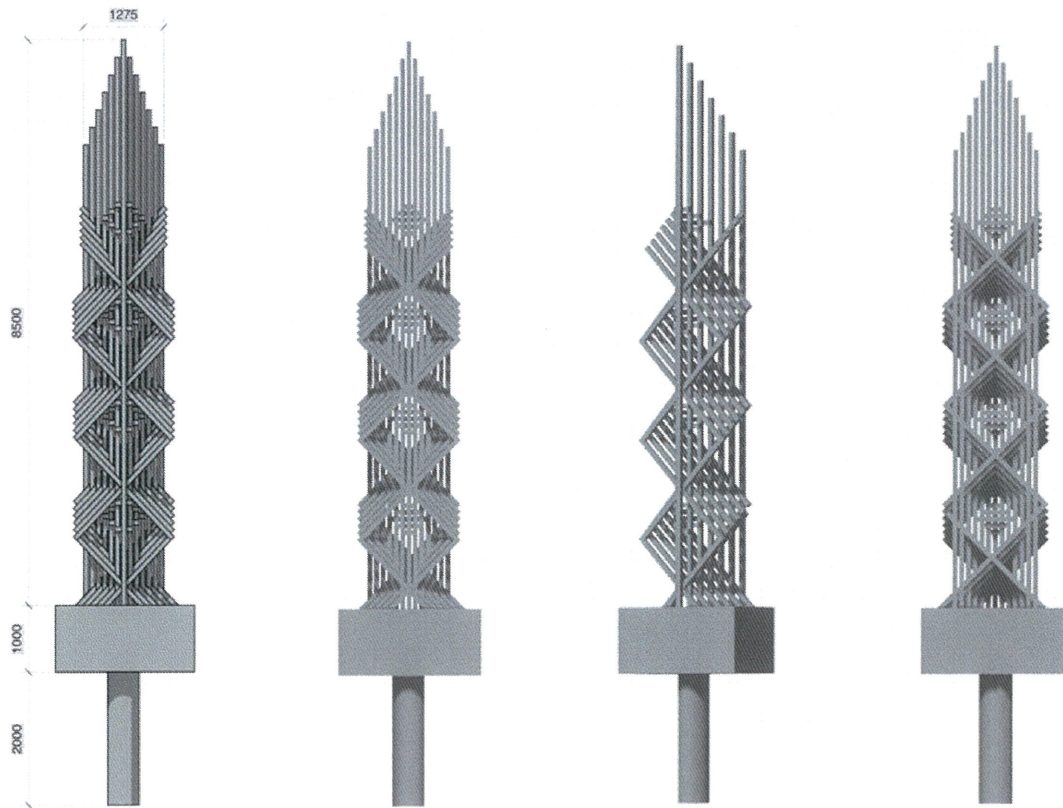
- Kororia kit e Atua I runga rawa (Glory to God on high)
- Maungarongo ki runga I te whenua (Peace on earth)
- Whakaaro pai ki nga tangata katoa (Goodwill to all mankind)

This message was a central teaching of the prophets Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi of Parihaka.

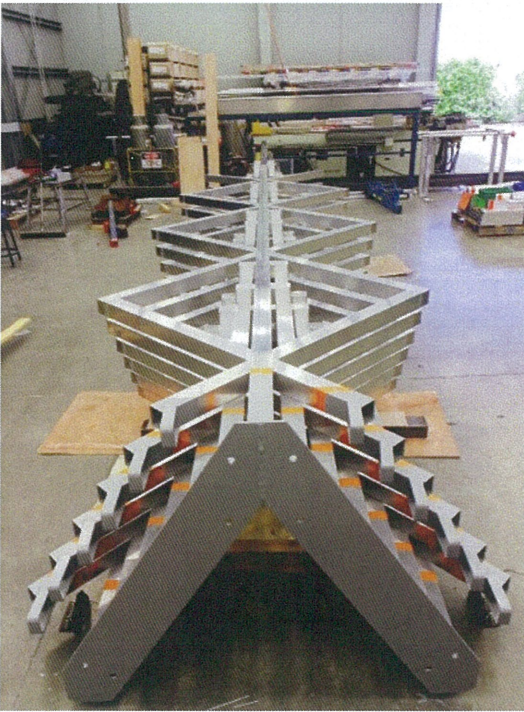
http://www.atiawa.com/runanga_logo.html

<http://www.pnbst.maori.nz/what-we-do/cultural-well-being/history/te-raukura-2/>

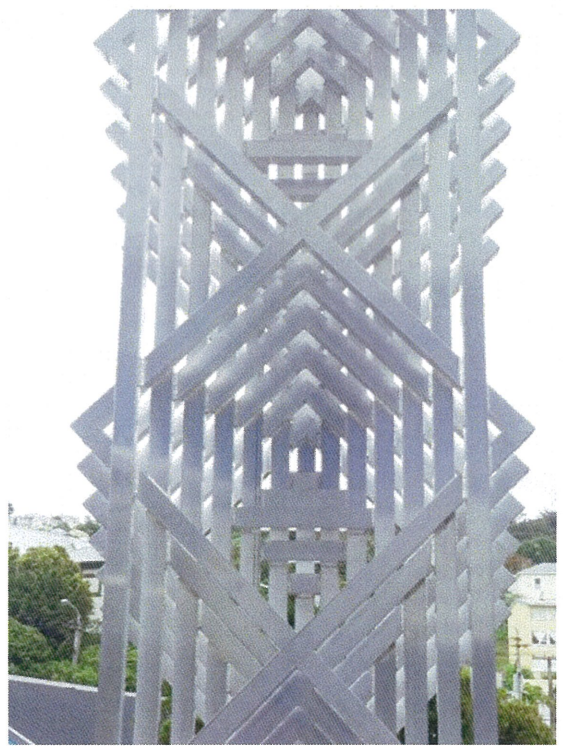
Initial drawing:

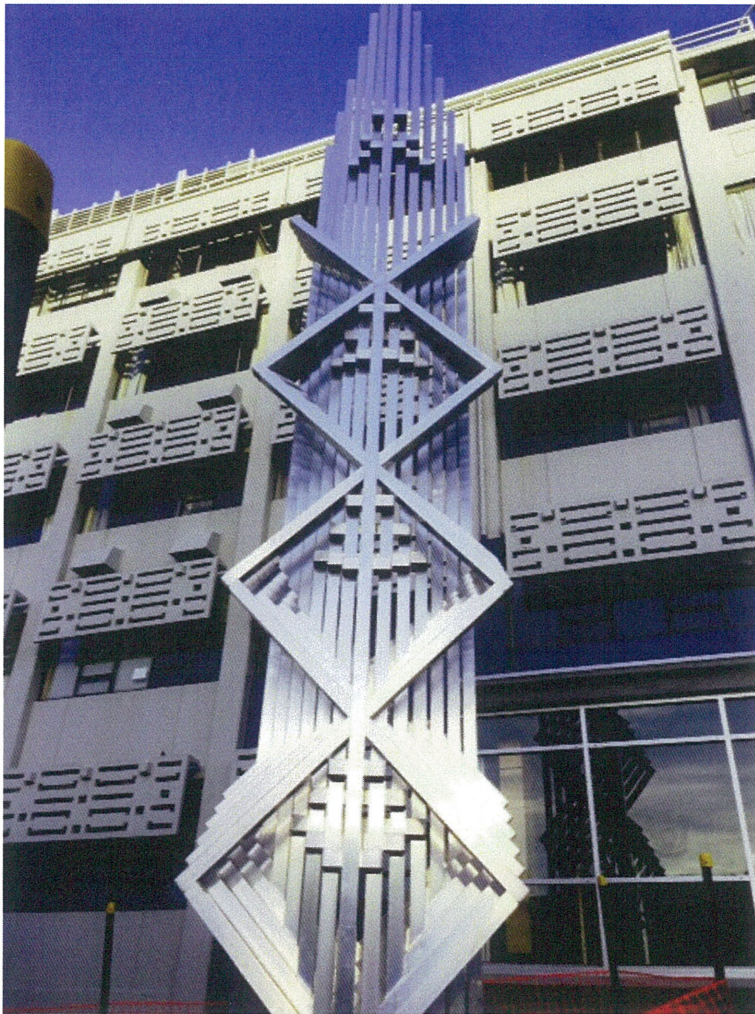
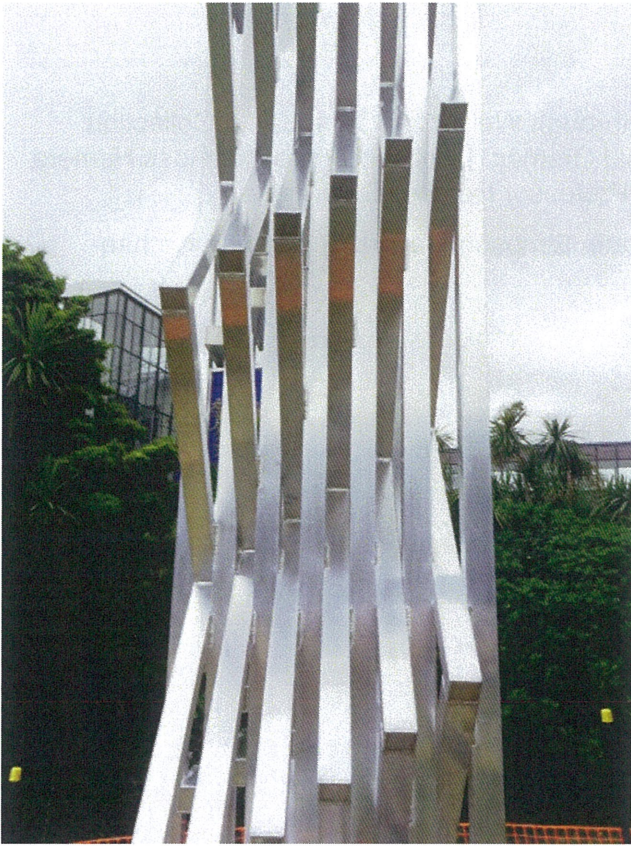


Work in progress, at Fraser Engineering, Upper Hutt, Wellington:



Installation:





Credits:

Artist: Filipe Tohi

Commissioning body: Massey University, through Wellington Campus Art Collection Committee – Deanna Riach, Registrar, Paul Orsman, Librarian, Professor Ross Hemera (CoCA), Simon Morris (CoCA), Associate Professor Heather Galbraith.

Fabricators: Fraser Engineering, Taita, Martin Simpson Managing Director, Nathan Marchant, Design Engineer

Engineer: Nick Undrill

Welder: Gary Kells

Site works and lighting: D.W. Dentice

Transport and positioning: Titan Cranes

Massey University RFM: Janet Flint, Damien Gartner