

# Tattoos and culture essay



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Tattoos and Culture Body modification has been found in all cultures throughout the world. Tattoos are a perpetual form of modification known historically and globally. It is impossible to visit a grocery store, drive down the street or watch television without seeing a tattoo. It is unknown when, or who developed the idea of tattoos, but there is evidence that the art has been around since the ancient Egyptian times, about five thousand years ago (Allen, 2009).

Although tattoos are common in many cultures, it means different things to individual cultures. Tattoos have been a way to capture status and identity, religious and spiritual devotion, as well as containing symbolic reasoning. Tattoos have served to display the status of an individual throughout history. In most other parts of the ancient world, tattoos were disfigurements used merely to identify criminals or slaves. The Romans would tattoo their slaves as a way to proclaim their status, and as a way to mark their territory.

Tattoos on the slaves were a way of branding them like one would do to an animal. Besides demoralization, slaves were also marked with tattoos to identify them if they tried to escape from their masters, so they could be found easily. The Romans also used tattoos to display their status in the Roman army, but this was more rare (Allen, 2009). Today, and throughout their cultural history, Tahitians wear tattoos as a privilege and to show the status of members of the tribe. "Tattoo" comes from the word "Tatu" originating from the Tahitians.

"Tatu" is translated as "making a mark" (Carpenter, 2008). The tattoos consist of symmetrical shapes and designs that the men wear covering their

entire bodies; their torsos, arms, legs, and ears, but excluding their face. Only priest and warriors carry tattoos on their faces and it is to show high rank and honor. Some of the different status categories to which the men can become a part of are: gods, priests, leaders of war, or chiefs (Resture, 2009). Identity is another feature that tattoos express.

Just like the way someone may dress to express oneself, whether is be bright clothes and flashy hair, or black clothes and dark makeup, tattoos are a more complex way one can project their personal identity to society.

Tattooing in the U. S. is often due to identity reasons and is a huge countercultural movement, which includes people whose sense of community is strengthened through this form of body modification. Thirty-six percent of Americans from the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine have tattoos (Carpenter, 2008), and forty percent of Americans from the age of twenty-five to forty, have at least one tattoo.

People feel they are special and have a visual form of individually that can be seen from the outside, although sometimes, this is translated as the tattooed is a trouble maker or a rebellion (Carpenter, 2008). A tattoo gives one a sense of belonging to another.

For example, a punk-rocker with a certain type of tattoos can relate to other punks who have the same type of tattoos and for the same reason. They then become a part of a formed subculture. People use the practice of tattoos to show that they belong to a group of people, but on the contrary, they use it to prove they are separating themselves from the ordinary.

Although everyone is made special and unique, tattoos make this lucid “ It’s not that we’re sheep, getting pierced or cut just because everyone else is. I like to think it’s because we’re a very special group and we like doing something that sets us off from others..

. ” (Miller, pg. 241) On one hand tattoos bring subcultures together, but on the other hand, it separates them from others by sometimes being “ tagged” as nonconformists and they judged as those who are deviant. Some studies claim that an abundance of tattoos are related to antisocial disorders because they are willingly alienating oneself from everyone else (DeMichele, 2000).

A Freudian theory suggests that tattoos are “ sadistic fantasies, masochistic fantasies, sadomasochistic fantasies, guilt arising from incestuous wishes, masturbation and repressed homosexual desires” (DeMichele, 2000).

Although these beliefs may be true at times, they are frequently mistaken because more commonly, tattoos represent a stronger connection with one’s culture. Gang members use tattoos to show pride and recognition that they belong to a particular gang. A street gang named Sur: 13 is signified by a number “ 13” tattooed on the gang member’s hand.

The foe gang members, called Norte 14 identify themselves with a tattoo of a bird (Herald, 2010). Some gang members place a tear drop under their eye.

Originally, the tear drop was worn to represent time spent in prison, however, it has evolved to mean a variety of different things. Some gang members tattoo the tear drop to symbolize that they have committed

murder, this teardrop remains open. While an open teardrop is symbolic for killing someone, a closed teardrop represents someone they have lost, like a family member or a member of their gang (Walker, 2010). Dot tattoos are another popular tattoo among gang members.

Generally, the tattoo consists of three to five dots. Most of the time, the dots are tattooed on a gang member's elbow, the web of their hand, or their wrists.

The dots are referred to as "party dots". They are a symbol of three places where the gang member can go, these places are: the hospital, prison, or to their grave. It is also common for the dots to translate to "my crazy life" or "the crazy guys" (Walker, 2010). Religious and spiritual tattoos have become one of the most popular of the tattoos in the industry, and in some cultures, it is believed that tattoos provide religious and spiritual powers.

In Thailand, where Buddhism and Hinduism are practiced, the Shan people generalized tattoos into three different categories: ??? Tattoos that cause others to either like or fear the tattooed and that cause the spirits to be kind.

??? Tattoos that acts on the tattooed, improving their skill. ??? Tattoos that protects the person from animals biting them, knives from cutting them, and bullets from entering their body (Miller, 2007) The first category of tattoos brings health and is regularly tattooed on women. The design can be placed on the calf, on joints (such as an elbow), the mouth, or the top of the tongue.

In this category, placing the tattoo on the back, or over the heart is the most powerful form of this tattoo. In the second category, the tattoo is all related to words and is worn by men.

It is also believed to increase memory and one's speaking ability and also increases their intimidation and courage. This tattoo is worn on the wearer's right shoulder. When its powers are needed, the wearer brushes their lips on the tattoo (Miller, 2007). The third category of tattoos protects against bites from animals and insects with a protective barrier but the more powerful ones will protect from being hurt from weapons.

Most of the time, the tattoo is an illustration of a cat on the lower arm. It is believed that if one gets too many of this category of tattoos, they will seal their body off completely and will prevent good fortune.

The Shan people of Thailand do not doubt the power of the tattoo because it holds sacred power (Miller, 2007). Christians are often times found with religious tattoos. Crusaders will often have a small cross inked on their body, normally their hand, to ensure a Christian burial if they are found past away in a far away land.

About twenty percent of tattoos in America are religious of nature (Wong, 2003).

Christians often pronounce their loyalty to their religion by means of the tattoo culture. The person with the tattoo becomes closer to their God by using their bodies to show their faith (Wong, 2003). The Aztec tattoos held

great symbolic reasoning. Most of the time, they wore tattoos which symbolized their adoration for their gods.

Although it is less significant, the Aztec people also had tattoos in regard to their tribe and their status within the tribe.

At an early age, the Aztecs were tattooed to start the process of developing to adulthood in both males and females. Throughout a child's life, more tattoos were added to show maturity. The bodies of the Aztec people were devoted to their God and, depending on which God whose support they wanted, would bear a tattoo in honor of them. A very common symbolic tattoo was that of the sun.

The Aztecs believe that the sun is proof of an after life because of its constantly rising and setting. The sun god was the most venerated of all the gods (Barnz, 2007).

Tattoos are a form of body modification which has been a way to capture status and identity, religious and spiritual devotion and holds great symbolism. Tattoos have infiltrated sub-cultures such as gang members, punk rockers, and religious beings. Tattoos routinely embody itself in many aspects of culture all around the world, and have long existed.

Tattoos have been socially embedded into cultures everywhere becoming a cultural phenomenon. References Allen, T. (2009). Greek and roman tattoos. Retrieved from

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