

Introduction class  
people valued and  
strongly identified



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **Introduction**

This paper looks into tattoos used by the people of western America as compared to the Polynesian tattoos. The paper critically looks into the meanings and purposes of tattoos in the two communities as used in the past in juxtaposition with how the tattoos are used today and associated meanings. The comparison will help bring out clearly differences between conceptions and understanding of tattoos in the two communities over time.

## **Thesis**

People today wear tattoos largely for decoration purposes and to a lesser extent as a mark of identity e. g. among criminal gangs. Although tattoos worn in the past and those worn today resemble or have some similarities, most of these tattoos meanings and purposes have changed with time. No matter the meaning or purpose, tattoos and body arts don't affect how people work and individuals do not change by wearing tattoos.

Therefore, modern societal disdain for tattoos or looking cynically at people who wear tattoos, without understanding what the tattoos mean to the individuals, is not justified.

## **Tattooing**

Tattooing is described as the art of decorating the body using a sharp instrument like a needle of ink or any other colored pigment. The sharp instrument is inserted under the skin and a design is made.

It is a permanent decoration of the body and it is an art that has been practiced since old days. Different people from different tribes and cultures

worldwide have used tattooing for different purposes. Tattoo is a word borrowed from the Polynesian 'tatu' or 'tatau' which means 'mark'.

This practice has been exercised in the West since the Neolithic era[1].

Tattoos have played important roles in the traditions of different tribes, and in this case In Western America and Maori tribe, they have played very important roles of representing their cultural identity.

### **Tribal tattoos in the Past Western America**

In the past, in Western America, tribal tattoos were considered to be for the low class people. Tattooing as a practice was ridiculed by middle and upper class people. In this society, tattoos were a sign of social status as only the low class people could be seen wearing them. The low class people valued and strongly identified with given tattoos. These tattoos distinguished and embodied their identity and were done on body parts where they could be seen by everyone. The tattoos had profound meaning i.

e. they symbolized something important in their culture[2]. In the traditional society, tribal tattooing is something that was done as a cultural practice.

Men and women were tattooed and each group had special designs that were applied on them. In many cases, people did not have a choice as per what tattoo to apply.

The social norms required that at a given stage in one's life, he or she had to apply a given kind of tattoo. Nobody, among the traditional tribes of western America, could refuse being tattooed as this was a very important cultural practice. Refusing to get a tattoo meant giving up on marks that indicated

clearly ones social position, ones identity or ones affiliation. As a symbol of <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-class-people-valued-and-strongly-identified/>

social status, all people especially the highly placed in society sought to show case their tattoos. In the past, some of the patterns that people used on the bodies could also be found on the object they used. One way of engraving tattoo patterns on objects used was carving. Carving was used on many articles including ornaments and weapons.

Tattooing in traditional Western America was a borrowed practice; tattooing originated from Polynesia. Many European sailors copied this art and spread it to Western societies. The Americans copied the tattoos and incorporated them into their cultural practices. Initially, they used tattoos as a mark of religious and spiritual devotions. Additionally, they also applied tattoos as decorations on those who showed bravery and as a mark on outcasts.

### **Tribal Tattoos in the Present Western America**

Today, tattoos in western America are used predominantly for decorations; they are permanent makeup. Others use it to hide any ugly marks on their skin. Finally, some other widespread use of tattoos is for identification purposes especially among criminal gangs.

Some of the traditional practices still remain. For example, Eskimo girls in Western America are tattooed when they reached maturity. Traditionally, a line was tattooed from the lower lip to the chin of each girl that came of age and later when she got married, two more lines were tattooed on her. This was to distinguish her as a married woman. Western Eskimo men on the other hand got tattoos for personal identification. The tattoos represented something they have done successfully[3]. In some Eskimo communities, these kinds of cultural tattooing practices remain intact today. However, in

mainstream western America, people are more liberal about tattoos and the meanings ascribe to some of the tattoo symbols or patterns are totally different from the original use and meanings.

## **Tribal Polynesian Tattoos**

Most tattoo patterns applied in western America are said to have originated from ancient Polynesia. Ancient Polynesia is a region around the Pacific Ocean that consisted of several islands and each Island had its own distinct culture. However, the distinct cultures had a lot of similarities because people in the area had similar origins. Polynesian art is to date aped by many because it is very beautiful and intriguing. Polynesian tattoos represented ones family line and social prestige[4]. This is different to the case in ancient Western America where they viewed tattoos to be for the low class people.

The traditional Polynesian tattoos are unique and are recognized around the world. Some tattoos were considered sacred among the Polynesian tribes; this is because of the design and the process one underwent in order to acquire a tattoo. Both men and women got tattoos for different purposes. The tattoos were mostly placed on their faces. Tattoos were used for decorative purposes, but certain symbols and patterns were used to indicate accomplishment i. e. they represented strength and courage. Strength and courage was displayed through other activities but even the act of acquiring a given kind of tattoo in itself required enough courage.

This is because the process of acquiring given tattoos was often very painful. The tattoos, applied by the Polynesians, gave them a sense of identity

because they were unique from other tribal tattoos. Some families or warrior groups did specific tattoos for individual's identification purposes.

Tattoos were done on warrior's backs so that, in case the head was cut off by enemies during wars; they were able to identify their warriors, just like the Maori people of New Zealand[5]. Tattoos were done on Polynesian women as well for different purposes. They were tattooed mostly on the lips and also around the chin. One purpose of the tattoos was for beauty, and a woman whose lips were fully tattooed in blue color signified the beauty of a Polynesian woman. Men on the other hand were tattooed according to their ranks and positions. Tattoos represented social prestige and positions for the Polynesian people, therefore each special group, e.

g. the chiefs and warriors got specifically designed tattoos.

### **Polynesian Tattoos as Applied Today**

Polynesian tattoos are still liked and sort after by many individuals around the world. However, today, these tribal tattoos have lost their original meaning. When Europeans started interacting with the Polynesians, they started transferring Polynesian tattoos to Europe.

They adopted the Polynesian tattoos basically for aesthetic or decorative purposes. The Polynesian people through interaction have also lost much of their traditional pride. Current tattooists have taken Polynesian tattoos and have somehow deflated the original usage of the tattoos. Traditionally, most Polynesian tattoos were done on the face; on the other hand, modern tattoos are done on other body parts. Tattoo designation has changed as tattooing

as a practice became commercialized and trivialized. For example, tattoos  
<https://assignbuster.com/introduction-class-people-valued-and-strongly-identified/>

that could traditionally only be used by chiefs or warriors are now applied by anybody.

This changes their meaning to mere decoration. If there is an identification sense to their usage, it is the traditional identity or original signification.

## **Conclusion**

Some people tend to associate tattooing with delinquency.

However, as this paper has shown, this is a practice that was widely practiced in traditional societies. The meanings and use of tattoos have changed over time. However, certain elements in the meanings and use of tattoos have remained intact.

For example, some of the tattoos that were used to signify bravery and strength exhibited in accomplishing something or due to the ordeal in acquiring them are still applied or worn today[6]. These kinds of tattoos still have a sense of their original meaning. They still command a lot of courage and bravery for individuals to be able to acquire them. Other senses or meanings in tattooing that have remained are national identification and ornamental value. Tribes used tattoos that signified their nationhood. In the world today, people still apply tattoos to the same effect by using flag colors in tattoos etc.

Much tattooing in the past was ornamental; this still remains the case because many youths go for tattoos as decorations.

## Bibliography

Atkinson, Michael. *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*.

Toronto. University of Toronto Press, 2003 Hodge, Frederick, Webb.

*Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*. Scituate: Digital Scanning Inc, 2003 Levy, Janey.

*Tattoos in Modern Society*. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2008

Margo, DeMello. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000 Robley, Horatio, Gordon.

*Maori Tattooing*. New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2003 Sheumaker, Helen, and Wajda, Shirley, Teresa. *Material Culture in America: Understanding Everyday Life*.

California: ABC-CLIO, 2008 Sheumaker, Helen, and Wajda, Shirley, Teresa.

*Material culture in America: understanding everyday life*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 69 DeMello, Margo. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 136 Frederick, Webb, Hodge. *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*.

(Scituate: Digital Scanning Inc, 2003), 700 Michael, Atkinson. *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 32 Robley, Horatio, Gordon. *Maori Tattooing*. (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2003) 23 Janey, Levy. *Tattoos in Modern Society*.

(New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2008), 18