

# Body art and ornamentation across two cultures

Literature



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The humanistic aspect of anthropology stems from our desire to know and understand other cultures. Anthropologists with a humanistic orientation approach the study of cultures as translators who try to make the symbols of one culture understandable in terms of those of another. They attempt to portray and interpret the customs, values, worldview, or art of one culture so that they can be appreciated by readers accustomed to a different language and way of viewing life (Carpo, 2013).

For the purpose of this paper, I will explore the various aspects of body art and ornamentation across two specific cultures; the Yoruba's of West Africa, and the Hindu's of India. First, body art and ornamentation between two cultures signifies a figurative death and rebirth that typically involves a painful experience as a means to encourage an individual's self-discovery. Tattoos are a worldwide phenomenon and archaeological evidence suggests that the practice stretches as far back in time to at least the Upper Paleolithic period, or 10, 000 to 40, 000 years ago.

Everywhere they are found, tattoos are created in essentially the same way—ink, dye, or ash is rubbed into an incision or inserted or injected under the skin (Carpo, 2013). Many African societies symbolically view body art and ornamentation as a special role in guiding one's destiny and success, mediating between world of the living as well as the spiritual world, expressing community ideals, defining power and leadership, protecting and healing, and celebrating or commemorating the cycles of life, human and agricultural.

Two recent studies in southern Africa consider how politics is inscribed on the body and how tattooing can be used as a means of empowerment

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(Gengenbach 2003) or as a means of social control (Auslander 1993). Across West Africa, scarification and the related practice of cicatrization, which involves rubbing plant juices into an incision to create a permanent welted scar, are used to beautify the faces and bodies of men and women and to communicate a variety of social roles and statuses.

Throughout the history of African culture, anthropologists have noted a wide variety of body markings among African peoples, with scarification being the most permanent form, and that many cultures worldwide use forms of body art and ornamentation such as tattooing, and piercings for a variety of reasons. Tattoos might be for ritual or magical purpose to the pre-historic man, but it is basically for aesthetics and beauty among Yoruba women and contemporary wearers.

The Yoruba society in the past decades up till perhaps thirty years ago believe a maiden before getting married or even after marriage must cut tattoo marks on certain parts of her body for the purpose of enhancing that part of the body for societal appreciation and for a husband's appreciation. Today, this practice has virtually declined greatly. The family institution was established to put in place or achieve social harmony in its place of jurisdiction (Ajibade 2006).

Marking the body for beautification was put in place for women attracting their husbands. Whether the tattoo is worn for graphic design or personal reasons tribal tattoo are definitely one of the most popular tattoos all over the world. Tribal symbols vary, reasons for tattooing were generally the same; ranging from marriage and rite of passage. In the past, Yoruba teenage girls wore on their bodies' names of their future husbands just as

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engaged ladies wear engagement rings indicating her romantic commitment to her fiancé (Ajibade 2006).

In ranked societies characterized by significant differences in social status, the extent and degree of elaboration in tattooing signified the individual's social status. The higher the one's social status, the more elaborate one's tattoos. Even though the people of India have expended limitless energy and creativity in the invention of ornaments that celebrate the human body, adorning the visible, material body, they feel, satisfies a universal longing for the embellishment of its intangible counterpart, namely the human spirit.

Jewelry forms an important aspect of ornamentation in India. It is more costly and permanent than other forms of adornment and therefore provides economic security. Certain items of jewelry are passed down as heirlooms that provide continuity between generations. The type and amount of jewelry worn by a woman depends on her age and changes over the course of her life. Shukla states that jewelry marks every major social change in a woman's life, from maidenhood to widowhood.

A child is adorned with jewelry, but as she grows up, she is urged to use less and less jewelry because of the fear that she may be attractive to boys. Soon after marriage, the daughter-in-law wears all the customary ornaments like earrings, nose rings, bangles, toe rings, and necklaces. The bindi, or dot on the forehead, and sindur, or orange/red powder in the parting of the hair, are mandatory symbols of the married state. Bangles have also been an important part of body ornamentation from the time of the Harappa/Mohenjo-Daro civilization (Schildkrout 2004).

The painting of the palms and feet of the bride with henna is customary in Hindu weddings. It signifies an important transition in the bride's life. This is done a day before the wedding. The bride and the female guests have their hands and feet painted in exquisite designs by a mehndi (henna) expert. In conclusion, the most important reason body art and ornamentation between two cultures is that many cultures worldwide use forms of body art and ornamentation such as tattooing, and piercings for a variety of reasons.

The diverse interdisciplinary literature on corporeal inscription several themes emerge. First, the body, as a canvas, is not only the site where culture is inscribed but also a place where the individual is defined and inserted into the cultural landscape. Tattoos, scars, brands, and piercings, when voluntarily assumed, are ways of writing one's autobiography on the surface of the body. Second, bodily inscriptions are all about boundaries, a perennial theme in anthropology between self and society, between groups, and between humans and divinity.

Third, it is known that body art and ornamentation is an acceptable practice and this approach also highlights the fact that the surface of the body has been the site of considerable theoretical interest since the beginning of anthropology (Schildkrout 2004). Skin is a surface onto which anthropology and related disciplines have projected their understandings of the relationship between psyche and society, the commonalities and differences between cultures, and even the meaning of art.

Tattoos, which are now so common across most sectors of American society, have long been a worldwide phenomenon. But despite their ubiquity, they have no widely shared meaning. Different peoples perceive different designs

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as aesthetically pleasing and attach different meanings to them. Tattoos, like most other elements of culture, can only be fully understood in the context of the specific culture in which they occur.