

Headhunting Among the Konyak Nagas: Tradition of Tattooing

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine tattoos as a type of tradition that provides the person with an identity and socio-political standing. It also tries to comprehend the dwindling art of tattooing through the eyes of the Konyaks of Nagaland, India. The Konyak are divided into two groups based on their tattoos: Shen-tu, who have tattoos on their faces, and Tangta-tu, who have tattoos on their bodies. Tattoos may distinguish an aristocratic clan member from other clan members, a warrior from an average man, and an unmarried female from a lady who is engaged. Tattoos were used by the Konyak people to identify members of a certain tribe, hamlet, clan, or person. It was a sign of valour and military triumph. When this art style was at its peak, people wandered around naked, making tattoos apparent. Tattooing was intrinsically tied with headhunting for males. The most crucial achievement for males was to be honoured with the 'warrior' tag, which symbolises their bravery, strength, and victory in battle. Their achievements are reflected in their tattoo designs. Tattoos on women represent their biological transition from one stage of life to the next. Tattoos are still present nowadays; however they are limited to the elder age. This presentation is thus a trip back in time to tattooing culture, where we will investigate the motives, procedure, philosophy, and rituals involved in the dwindling art of tattooing.

Keywords: Headhunting, Tattoos, Konyak Nagas

Introduction

Tattoos have been used for millennia to transmit numerous ontological, psychological, and societal themes such as beauty, cultural identity, rank and position, medicine, and supernatural protection. Tattooing has been and continues to be a visual language of the skin through which culture is imprinted, experienced, and maintained in a variety of ways. To completely appreciate the meanings that tattoos have carried throughout human history and into the present, it is necessary to investigate some of the ways tattoos, as cultural transmission devices, have been deployed cross-culturally across time.

Tattooing and headhunting are intricately intertwined in Konyak society, as tattoos were acquired through additional raids and killings. The prominent tattoos in Konyak culture indicate distinct tribal characteristics. Tattoos were worn as clothing and decorations; they were a symbol of both beauty and pride, and the various patterns established a distinct differentiation and identity of a tribe, clan, and social standing. Tattoos may distinguish an aristocratic clan member from other clan members, a warrior from an average man, and an unmarried female from a lady who is engaged. Tattooing was done in conjunction with certain rites and ceremonies to mark the life cycle and coming of age. Tattoos were used by the Konyak people to identify members of a certain tribe, hamlet, clan, or person. It was a sign

of valour and military triumph. When this art style was at its peak, people wandered around naked, making tattoos apparent.

Objectives

- To find out the origin behind the tattoos
- To find out the philosophy behind the tattoos
- To find the reasons behind the tattoos
- To find the process and rituals behind the tattoos
- To find the relation of headhunting to the tattoo culture

Methodology

The present study is both an exploratory and explanatory one in nature. It comprises of two methods of research namely 'Case study method' and 'Ethnographic method'. Case study method was used because of the study being specific to the Konyak Nagas. Ethnographic method on the other hand was used as a tool to investigate the area of study.

Data Collection

The sources of data for the present study primarily comprises of oral and primary forms of data collection. Interviews and field visits were conducted across numerous villages across the Konyak regions (Mon district of Nagaland) to ascertain accurate information.

Sampling Techniques

The researcher selected the methods of purposive sampling and snowball sampling for this researcher. Purposive sampling because of the intention of selecting respondents based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme and Snowball sampling because the participants will refer the researcher to other respondents who may be able to potentially contribute or participate in the study. A total of 39 respondents (only tattooed folks, ages 75 and up) across 30 different villages were part of the sample size.

Data Analysis

The primary method of data analysis used is that of a thematic analysis because of the study being new and information not being widely available so the researcher had to rely on the active process of reflexivity relying on the experience and interpretations through first hand information and subjective experience.

Origin of the Tattoos

The precise and historical origin of tattoos among the Konyaks is unknown because there is no written documentation; instead, information was passed down verbally by elders who continued the tattooing tradition even then without being aware of its precise beginnings. They assert that tattooing has been a practice from the time of their ancestors, and all they were taught was to adhere to this particular tradition. As tattooing was a widely practiced custom, it has persisted without a clear historical basis. Yet, there are certain folktales that claim to show the history of tattooing.

According to certain mythology, during the time of Methuselah in biblical history, a tribe of people that resembled savages resided on one of the lands and were renowned for their brutality and untamed character. When Enoch, the father of Methuselah, saw those individuals slaughtering their own relatives, he became enraged and chased them to distant places. In order to conceal their identity and avoid being discovered, they painted their faces with mud and ashes, fled to a foreign country, and continued to smear their faces. These individuals later became known as the Konyaks.

Another folktale claims that the first instances of Konyak tattooing occurred during the headhunting era, when a group of people staged a raid into an adversary's region. The expedition party, which included the Angh, warriors, and elders, could not take a head that day; only an orphan lad could. According to custom which said that the person who severed an enemy's head would gain the title and honor of a warrior, this stoked rivalry among them. Instead, they mocked the orphan boy by making marks on his face and body. As the boy grew older, the marks made him look attractive, and this became his distinctive mark. After then, it became customary for the men who were successful in gaining control to mark them to set themselves apart from the commoners.

Philosophy behind the Tattoos

Tattoos were equivalent to degrees for the Konyaks. It represented the guys' progress through initiation, success in a headhunt, and social position. The tattoos on the ladies symbolised the evolution of the biological cycle from one stage to the next.

“The tattoo notion can be compared to the official degrees of education we have now, such the HSLC, Graduation, and Post Graduation degree, with the initiation of the chest tattoo being the HSLC, the facial tattoo being Graduation, and the neck tattoo being Post Graduation, and the more heads hunted, the more degrees were gained” Angh Yeanglem

During rites of passage, tattooing was a necessity for initiation or coming of age. Konyak boys and girls were forced to get tattoos when they reached maturity. Those who did not were thought to become nuts. The tattoos helped a person to blend in and become accepted as a part of the community.

The tattoos were also used as part of a purification ceremony after a successful headhunting attempt to fend off ill luck from the victim who possessed the head taker. After the murder of the adversaries, the head taker himself had to drop some blood by getting branded. It functioned as a decorative element as well as a means of distinguishing the various Konyak ethnic groups. It helped them stand out from other organisations.

Reasons for getting the Tattoos

Tattoos represented life milestones for Konyak males, such as attaining a specific age or the number of heads seized during a headhunting raid. They were carried out as initiation into the paan after a headhunting raid. The paan was a socio-cultural institution that played an important part in shaping and shaping the Konyak man's social-ethical beliefs in society. A man was forced to participate in a raid as soon as he joined the men's club. This was done in order to get the tattoo traces on his face and torso. As recompense for his participation in the attack, a man received tattoos on his breast and face. Tattoos depicting human figures with numerals denoting the number of heads severed were tattooed on the face, chest, neck, back, arms, and legs of the individual who severed a head or heads. If the father, brothers, family members, or others in the paan were successful in taking heads, a man may get tattoos even if he did not actively participate in the hunt.

The Konyak lads' initial tattooing age varied according to their tattoo group. It happened around the age of 16 in some populations, and around the age of 20 in others. The guys slept with their parents for the first two nights after having their tattoos to relax and respond to their ailments. They were required to continue working at the paan after that since they had not been excused.

The tattoos obtained also differed by tattoo group, with some gaining the chest tattoo at a younger age than others and others having to wait seven years for the second initiation, while the waiting period for some groups to obtain the face tattoo was as little as five years, and for some, the face tattoo was acquired after they had begun a family; they participated in the raid as a mark of a new beginning and received the tattoo.

A naomei was a heroic warrior who successfully beheaded an enemy's head or numerous heads during a headhunting expedition. As a mark of his bravery, only he was allowed to have full-body tattoos. He was the only one with the human form and neck tattoos. A Naomei's chest was entirely drawn with human figures before the tattooing on his back began, depending on how many heads he had stolen. He had the same prestige, respect, and authority as the Anghs, and he was the only one who could request special tattoo patterns to distinguish himself from the others. Following a headhunt, he hosted a "feast of merit" for the people of his paan or the entire village to commemorate his achievements. If a man did not decapitate a head immediately, all that remained of him for the rest of his life were the tattoo drawings on his chest and face.

Process and Rituals related to Tattooing

The tattooing method differed depending on the individual and the tattoo group. A person had to complete a number of prerequisites and perform a number of rites before, during, and after having a tattoo. Before a tattoo could be put to a child, a woman, an ordinary man, a naomei, or an Angh, several conditions had to be met. A youngster had to go hunting in order to properly complete his first initiation. Women, on the other hand, were not needed to hunt; instead they would chop down trees to depict the act of cutting individuals in the same way as males cut heads as part of her initiation ceremony. They perceived women who did not have tattoos or whose tattooing window had closed as uneducated and ignorant. Nonetheless, the only factors utilised to decide women's tattoos were their sexual maturity, capacity to marry, and marital status. To become a Naomei, it was essential to chop off the head and return it home as a trophy, and the naomei who survived many hunts were bestowed even more prestigious tattoos. Even after a successful hunt, a naomei has the option of getting a tattoo on his neck. It was critical to prepare a special hunt in the King's honour for the Angh's tattoo. The soldiers who complete the mission are rewarded with wealth, and the King is rewarded with the facial tattoo. If the first batch fails, another group is despatched.

“We wanted to go join the hunt and join the ranks of men but because of the ban on headhunting we couldn't perform the same rituals as the paan, so to re-enact the hunting of heads and to continue with the rite of passage, we cut the trees or branches of the trees to signify an enemy being taken and with the branch falling to signify the enemy fallen.” Ngunngam, 85

Tattoos are only performed by the Anghya(Queen) of the Chief King's house, and even if that person is the Queen of another Chief King from another village, they are not authorised to tattoo inhabitants of other villages. The only exception is that if the town does not have a tattoo artist or if the one they do have is sick, they will call a tattoo artist from an adjacent village, who is always another Queen. The community's Angh traced the tattoos on the inhabitants' bodies and faces. If a specific day is arranged

for the tattoo, the tattoo must be done on that day, and if the artist is not pleased or made uncomfortable, the procedure will not go smoothly.

“I still remember getting my tattoos done, my first one on my chest at the age of 15 after participating in a hunt, and my second one on my face at the age of 20 following a successful headhunt. It took a whole day to tattoo on the face, and it hurt so badly that I assume pregnancy must hurt just as much. My chest tattoo took around 4 or 5 hours and was less painful than the discomfort on my face.” Anglong, 105

When a teenager acquired his first tattoos, he would spread out on the floor. His relatives and friends gathered in a squat around him, holding his limbs immobile. Because shrieking was considered unmanly, a piece of cloth was placed in his mouth to conceal his painful moans. The Konyak lads' initial tattooing age varied according to their tattoo group. It happened around the age of 16 in some populations, and around the age of 20 in others. The guys slept with their parents for the first two nights after having their tattoos to relax and respond to their ailments.

One of the most essential tattoos for a lady was on her knees. A Konyak woman was tattooed on her knees after being engaged to be married. During this operation, bamboo mats were used to block off the whole tattooing area. It was banned for other guys to see her since she was either pregnant or engaged to be married. Throughout the tattooing, female family members and pals surrounded the tattooee and encouraged her by singing songs.

“Why did we even tattoo back then when it hurt so much? My whole face was bleeding while tattooing and the pain was immense. I remember wanting to give up but still going on with it because it was a rule and i had to follow it despite the unbearable pain” Wangchah, 86

Rituals done before Tattooing

For two to three days before to the tattooing procedure, the prospective tattooee abstained from ingesting anything brought from outside the family household. Following the tattooing, a five-day rite known as temlingpu was performed. The tattooee has to follow a certain set of guidelines. It was permissible to consume meat prepared or cooked entirely with bamboo stalk, millet, and white rice.

Rituals performed during Tattooing

A feast was organised for the tattooed person's house on the day of the tattooing. Pigs, cows, or chicks were slaughtered based on their economic status. They prepared a range of rice meals and unique delicacies. This event included nyik nyak nyik nye steamed in clay pots. Family and visitors were liberally served rice beer that had been prepared in preparation. Friends, neighbors, and family members were all invited to the celebrations. All day, they drank rice beer and sang incessantly. To take home as presents, the invitees were given huge slabs of pork wrapped in banana leaves.

Rituals done after Tattooing

Foods such as beans, taro, lentils, maize, and others were prohibited. Household chores and physical labor in the fields were strictly banned for fear of the freshly pierced wounds becoming infected from sweat. Because animal blood had to be spilt during ritual sacrifice, a pig, cow, or hen was slaughtered on the day of the tattoo. The guys slept with their parents for the first two nights after having their tattoos to relax and respond to their ailments. They were required to continue working at the paan after that since they had not been excused.

Significance of the Tattoos

The advantages and societal ranks that came with tattooing were equally as essential as prestige, respect, and pride inside the community. Because some groups of individuals cannot be recognized only by appearance, it was also employed as a technique to differentiate between the elderly and the young, and so on. Knowing the disparities between different groups of individuals, as well as who is older or younger, is one of the benefits of tattooing.

Another interpretation of the facial tattoo is that when a new group of people joins the morung, it denotes that the older members have specific underlings to work for and under them, the newly joined Ei have more companions to assist them, and some of the more seasoned members are promoted to the second phase of initiation. Others with facial tattoos have the ability to command, persuade, and otherwise manipulate others with and without chest tattoos. However, anyone who does not have a neck tattoo can be requested by a naomei. As a result, it is analogous to a rise in rank and privilege.

Conclusion

The traditional tattooing culture of the Konyak people characterized them. This customary ceremony has been practiced for generations. However, no civilization ever remains static. As a consequence of cross-cultural encounters with foreigners in the early 1930s and the introduction of Christianity in the middle of the 1940s, the Konyak people found it impossible to retain their political and geographical isolation. As a result, for a number of reasons, traditional tattooing dwindled and finally vanished. After the British took control in 1935, the practice of headhunting was deemed illegal in the Administered Areas. As a result, the restriction was extended to all other areas.

Following the arrival of Christianity and the conversions that happened in the middle of the 1940s, tattooing was reduced to the position of a heathen activity and connected with paganism. The ban on headhunting, conversion to Christianity, education, and engagement with the outside world all pushed the Konyaks to live modern lives. In 1960, the Konyak Students' Union passed a formal resolution against tattooing. Tattooing was seen as a painful and unpleasant procedure, thus it earned widespread approbation. Because they no longer had the unmistakable tattoo markings on their body, the Konyaks could now blend into a broader group.

While the Konyak Students' Union's entire prohibition did not take effect until the late 1970s, when the bulk of the Konyak tribe had been converted to Christianity, the final tattooing occurred in the late 1970s.

“When the Indian government arrived and ordered the tattooing practise to be discontinued, we were devastated since it was a practise that identified us and was a deep rooted in our culture. We were fine with the end of headhunting, but we wanted to keep the tattooing tradition alive so that we could keep something unique to ourselves. He goes on to say. The prohibition had already ended their rite of passage for tattooing, but they didn't want that to stop them, so they used to sneak into the forest and hunt animals to gain the privilege to acquire tattoos.” Lemnyei Anghna, 80.

Glossary

Angh: Village Chief/King

Anghya: Chief's Wife/Queen

Ei: Youngsters who just joined the paan.

Naomei: Warrior

Nyik nyak nyik nye: Sticky red rice

Paan: A paan functions as a men's club as well as a civil centre

Shen-tu: Face tattoo group

Tangta-tu: Body tattoo group

Temlingpu: A five-day rite where the tattooee has to follow a certain set of guidelines.

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