

The Culture of Tattooing in Woman Society: The Ao Nagas and The Konyak Nagas

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Abstract

The Konyak Nagas and Ao Nagas have separate cultural histories that are woven into their daily lives. Tattoos are deeply ingrained in both societies, acting as important symbols of personal identity and cultural history. This research is an attempt to understanding the tattooing process's philosophy and motivations, as well as a deep dive into the tattoo artist's methods and procedure. Tattooing is more than just adornment in many cultures; it plays an important part in social rituals, rites of passage, and reflects key life events. Each tribe has its own set of patterns and symbolism to honour cultural contributions and storytelling traditions. The goal of this essay is to take you on a fascinating journey through the historical significance, cultural connotations, and current changes in these civilizations. By analysing their complex tapestry of tattoo artistry, we may gain a greater understanding of how tattoos create identity, preserve history, develop social bonds, and spark discussions about cultural variety in Northeast India.

Keywords Tattoo, Ao Nagas, Konyak Nagas, Culture

1. Introduction

Tattooing has long been seen as a form of art and cultural expression, with diverse civilizations all over the world utilising it to represent identity, status, spirituality, and other things. The Konyak Nagas and Ao Nagas are two tribal clans in Northeast India recognised for their exquisite tattoo customs, particularly among women. We can get intriguing insights into their historical relevance, customary practises, symbolism, and emerging dynamics by diving into the cross-collation of tattoo culture amongst different civilizations.

Tattooing is not just a decorative practise in these tribes; it is an essential aspect of social rituals and rites of passage. They are frequently used as tribal membership symbols or to reflect significant life events like as coming-of-age ceremonies or marriage rites. When it comes to tattoo designs, each tribe has its own set of themes, patterns, colours, sizes, and placement preferences. These aspects embody old ideas and storytelling traditions that deserve to be recognised for their cultural contributions.

The Konyak Nagas and the Ao Nagas are two separate ethnic clans in Nagaland, India's north-eastern province. While both tribes have distinct cultural identities, they do have certain parallels when it comes to female tattoo culture.

Tattooing is an important aspect of the Konyak Nagas' traditional history. Tattoos were traditionally given to Konyak women as a rite of passage during puberty or marriage. These complex tattoos would not only improve the women's attractiveness, but would also represent their courage, power, and social

rank in the community. These tattoo patterns and motifs were distinctive to each tribe and carried special meanings.

Tattooing, on the other hand, was largely practised by women rather than males among the Ao Nagas. Tattoos were used to represent beauty, adoration, good health, and fertility. While tattooing was more frequent among women in Ao Naga society, men were also tattooed on a modest scale. It was not, however, as prevalent or culturally significant as it was for women.

However, as current pressures such as globalisation and urbanisation alter indigenous cultures across the world, traditional practises may change. It is critical to consider how modern influences affect tattoo cultures in both tribes. This allows us to recognise the efforts done by people and organisations to preserve and revive traditional tattoo practises in textual form, ensuring their cultural legacy thrives in changing times.

2. Objectives

- Explore the traditional tattoo culture among the Konyak Nagas and the Ao Nagas.
- Understand the significance and symbolism associated with tattoos in these tribal communities.
- To understand the process and techniques involved in tattooing.

3. Methodology

The current study is exploratory as well as explanatory in character. It consists of two research methods: 'case study technique' and 'ethnographic method'. Because the study was limited to the Konyak and Ao Nagas, the case study technique was adopted. The ethnographic technique, on the other hand, was utilised to research the subject matter.

Data Collection

The current study's data sources are mostly oral and primary data gathering methods. To gather reliable information, interviews and field trips were performed in a number of communities in Nagaland's Konyak and Ao areas (Mon and Mokochung districts). Only a few secondary sources and publications pertaining to the issue of interest were discovered and were thus resorted to for reliable information.

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, subjective experience and available article sources.

4. Tattooing in the Ao Naga society

Tattoo artists among the Ao Naga were always old ladies who conducted the ceremony in the bush near their hamlet. Ao males were seldom tattooed, and it was severely banned for any male to be present when a woman was being marked in several places. Girls were frequently tattooed before puberty, when they were between the ages of 10 and fourteen. According to Ao Naga informants contacted, it is critical for a girl to get a tattoo because otherwise "she would be in disgrace and would not marry well."

The tattoo designs were chosen by the village council and are tied to the tribe's traditional dress. The purpose of the tattoo was for beautification and also for good health, and the tattoo designs differ from

village to village because those designs were based on traditional attires, and while they are different, they are quite similar to each other, but the overall gist is the same.

4.1. Reasons for Tattooing

Tattoos as ornaments: Before Christianity, there were frequently social disparities between the affluent and the poor. The affluent had decorations and gems to wear and enhance their bodies and looks, but the poor did not, so they opted to decorate themselves with tattoos, which they might consider their ornaments. Even the affluent had tattoos, but on top of the tattoos they had ornaments that made them seem so lovely that in order to at least have a uniform among the females they decided to place the tattoos: all six tattoos and their designs would be the same whether they were poor or rich.

For the purpose of marriage: Because they were frequently married between the ages of 14 and 15, the parents wanted their poor children to have some form of individuality and beauty that they could exhibit, and therefore a female was tattooed for the purpose of marriage. There are a total of six tattoos, with the last one done on the calves to represent a woman's door open for marriage, therefore ladies with all six tattoos were considered lovely and ready for marriage. If a girl refused to tattoo or did not have all of the tattoos, she was considered unfit to marry.

For good health: Tattooing was typically done before puberty, between the ages of 14 and 16 years old. There were many girls at the period who did not want to have the tattoo, but the elders advised them that if the aim of the tattoo is not just for marriage, but if you receive the tattoo, you will not get sick but would remain in good health. As a result, several people received the tattoo for the benefit of their health rather than for marriage.

4.2. Tattooing Technique and Process

A bamboo mat is laid on the ground in front of a girl who is ready to get tattooed. Several elderly women restrain her as the operator plays her instruments. The instrument for puncturing the skin is a little cluster of cane thorns wrapped to a wooden holder and placed into an adze-like head formed from a plant stalk. The old woman marks the tattoo design on the girl's skin with a piece of wood dipped in the colouring materials. If a female yells and resists during the tattooing, a fowl is quickly sacrificed nearby to placate any bad spirits that may be exacerbating the agony.

The puncturing is accomplished by striking this device into the skin with a kamri root: a very hefty, sappy plant with an onion-shaped root. After the blood has been cleaned away, the black colouring substance is reapplied, and the tattoo client is left to lament her wounds until they heal. Typically, the colouring substance is derived from the sap of the bark of a tree known as naphi. This is gathered and burned in a kettle over a fire. A piece of broken pottery or a leaf is placed over the receptacle in which the sap is burning, and the soot that collects is collected and combined.

They slept on the machang (a bamboo resting area) and avoided heat once the tattoo was finished until it healed, which may take up to a month. They believed that wiping their tattooed places with dew drops would help them recuperate. So it wasn't just the pain of the tattoo, but also the time it took to recover. It was rather long. The tattoos are not finished over time; rather, all six tattoos are performed on the same day, one after the other.

4.3. Tattoo Artist

The ancient ladies with the essential tattooing expertise were only available in a few villages, and they visited the communities between December and January. These months were typically chosen for the procedure since the cooler the weather, the faster the wounds healed. Tattoo artists were chosen based on their ability and expertise, and the craft was passed down via the female line, with the operators teaching it to their daughters, who in turn taught it to their children. A tattooist's daughter was almost always expected to follow in her mother's footsteps in some places. It was thought that if she didn't, her life would be plagued by disease and she would finally perish.

When there were no excellent tattoo artists in the communities, they would summon tattoo artists from neighbouring villages to tattoo them. The tattoos were done while they were nude in the machang. Although tattooing was not free, food, pork, and wine were provided. Payment was never paid in cash, but rather in tangible possessions present at home.

5. Tattooing among the Konyak Women

Tattooing was a necessity for initiation or coming of age among the Konyak during rites of passage. Konyak boys and girls were compelled 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 culture of tattooing was however significant of sex among the Konyak Nagas: the males had tattoos to represent their roles in the paan (men's dormitory) and had to participate in several hunts to achieve and acquire the tattoos with the highest rank being that of a naomei (warrior) whilst the women had tattoos specific to her growing, sexual development, capacity to get married, and toitaipu (marital status) it signaled their position in society.

Because women were not forced to hunt, they would chop down trees to simulate the act of cutting individuals like males cut heads or partake in a headhunt as part of her initiation ceremony. They perceived women who did not have tattoos or whose tattooing window had closed as uneducated and ignorant.

5.1. Reasons for Tattooing

As a rite of passage: Tattooing was a necessity for initiation or coming of age among Konyak women during rites of passage. Female Konyaks had tattoos that represented their physical journeys. The act of acquiring a tattoo indicated that one had attained maturity and had progressed to the next stage of life. Lines going down vertically from the buttocks to the ankles were tattooed on the cheeks, chin, navel, arms, hands, chest, and back of the legs at the start of puberty. This was when a girl was introduced as Shao-impu and went to sleep at the yho (women's dormitory) with her girlfriends.

For the male representatives: Some tattoos were put in appreciation of the father, brothers, or male relatives' achievements during a headhunting raid. A Konyak girl was forced to have permanent tattoos placed on her body.

For the sake of marriage: A Konyak woman was tattooed on her knees after being engaged to be married. Following the birth, a tattoo was placed on the right thigh as a reminder of the husband's and his clan's reproduction. The most important tattoo for a female Konyak is on the knee. It represents her transition from single to marriageable status, as well as her elevation into the husband's family. In solidarity with the anguish caused by him, the guy she is engaged to foregoes labouring in the fields that day. In the paan, he sings and blasts the mithun's horn all day.

5.2. Tattooing Technique and Process

The Konyaks tattooed using hand tapping and hand hammering methods. Hand tapping was done with a needle comb laced with threads and poked into the flesh using a mallet-like implement. Hand hammering just needed the comb of needles to be pounded against the skin on a regular basis. For exact impressions, skin stretching assistance was required. The sap of Kong trees, known as ying tee, was used to make ink pigment. The tattooed region was stencilled with an inked bamboo strip and then tapped with the needle comb to drive ink into the dermis layer and induce blood to flow out, resulting in long-lasting discolouration. Depending on the intricacy, each session might span several hours or perhaps an entire day. Hot water, banana leaves, and a unique salve prepared from roasted lichen paste were used to heal. Wounds healed in around 7-10 days.

A girl aged 8 to 10 years old may have her father, siblings, or other male relatives there to witness the treatment or to assist the tattoo artist in keeping her limbs motionless while she endured the agony. 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.

5.3. The Tattoo Artist

Tu is the term for tattoo in all Konyak languages. Tu is accomplished by puncturing the skin with a rattan thorn. The majority of tattoo artists were women, namely the Anghya (queen), who belonged to an aristocratic lineage. Because it was a heritable ability, this indigenous craft was passed down from mother to daughter. They took the designs with them when they married and moved to other villages, which is how the majority of villages in each of the three Konyak tattoo groups have identical tattoo patterns. The tattoo artist would often choose patterns based on the person's tribe, gender, or social standing.

Tattoos are only performed by the Anghya 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 village does not have a tattoo artist or if the one they do have is sick, they will always 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.

6. Conclusion

The demise of tattooing tradition among the Ao Nagas began in 1876 with the arrival of Christianity, although practise was still ongoing at the time. Because Christianity preached that tattooing was banned in the faith, several of their daughters converted to Christianity in order to avoid practising the art of tattooing. Some girls did not want to be tattooed even before Christianity because they did not want to experience the sorrow and suffering or the humility of not tattooing, thus they saw Christianity as an escapade. With the passage of time, more and more people became converted, and the village council outright abolished the practise of tattooing.

The Konyak people's traditional tattooing culture dwindled and finally vanished as a result of cross-cultural interactions with outsiders, the advent of Christianity, and the British prohibition of headhunting in the 1930s. Following Christian conversions, tattooing was considered a heathen pastime and was associated with paganism. Tattooing was condemned by the Konyak Students' Union in 1960, as a painful and unpleasant practise. As a result, without their unique tattoo marks, the Konyaks were able to merge into a larger group.

7. References

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