

Tattooing in Transition: Socio-Cultural Forces Shaping Attitudes

Sujata Sonowal

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya
(M.A, NET)

Abstract:

The art of body modification particularly tattooing has been regarded as an indigenous cultural practice, which has undergone a remarkable transformation after the influence of globalization and modernization. Traditionally, tattoos were long being served as a form of recognition by ancestors, a form of spirituality carrying deep-rooted indigenous significance. However, with the influence of modern cultural transformation and its impact on the development of advance technology and global cultural exchange the entire concept of tattoo making has taken into a new wave of body modification. The traditional symbolic heritage has now been reinterpreted within the global markets of body art. By drawing insights from the field, interviews, the researcher aims to present a comprehensive understanding of how socio-cultural changes have reshaped the meaning of tattoos in contemporary Indian context and how these broader transformations have shaped public perception. The growing visibility of tattoo studios, artists are playing a crucial element in understanding the shift.

Keywords: Tattoo, Stigma, Socio-cultural, Modernization and Global Media

1. INTRODUCTION:

Tattooing, the art of engraving the human skin, is an ancient cultural practice that continues to this day. The Romans and Greeks practiced tattooing extensively, as did some of their less civilized contemporaries. Early Christians forbade tattooing, and its popularity declined in the Dark and the Middle Ages (Roenigk, 1971). The ritual of tattooing can be found in Greece, Persia, the Sudan, China, Japan, as well as in the Polynesia Island, “where an artistic peak was reached and where the word ‘Tatau’ meaning artistic, originated” (Ferguson Rayport, et, al, 1955).

Tattoo is one of the key elements of a society’s culture and tradition and is an expression of unique identity. In the late 18th century, Captain Cook reintroduced it to Europe through his contact with Polynesia (Roenigk, 1971). The term tattoo was first introduced into the English language by Captain Crook on his return from the South Seas. It is originated from the Tahitian word ‘tatau’ which refer to the practice of pricking the skin with indelible ink (Konyak, 2014). Thus, the origin and historical meaning of the word tattoo is believed to have two derivations that is “ta”-striking something and “tatau”- to mark something (Savitha, 2017). It was first used by the French navigator Bougainville to highlight the body decoration of the Tahitian natives (Fedorenko, 1999). In 1769, James Cook coined the word tattoo after observing the “rapid rhythmic rapping” as needles were hit with a stick into the skin of Tahitians and New Zealanders (Zelyck, 2005).

2. Review of Literature:

Tattoo as Totem:

The concept of tattoo as a totemic symbols has its roots from the anthropological understanding of the symbolic relations between animal, plants which represents person's connection to clan, ancestry and spiritual world. Emile Durkheim's, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915) provides one of the earliest theoretical frameworks on totemism, emphasizing its social function as a collective symbol of unity and belonging. In many traditional societies such as the Apatanis and Konyak's of Northeast India, the Maoris of New Zealand, and the Inuit of the Arctic- where tattooing acted as a spiritual passport, linking the body to the cosmos and tribe (Rubin, 1988). Among Indian tribes, tattooing locally was known as godna, was practiced to mark identity, protection, and divine blessings. Godna is a permanent mark on the body; it is believed that God will save the individual in crisis even after death by recognizing the symbol (Dutta, 2021). The Northern and North-Western regions of India, practice tattooing since time immemorial. Among the Santhals as well as the Banjaras of Central India, the practice of tattooing have the belief that when a women dies and goes to heaven, those tattoos help her survive there (Hembram, 2021). Similarly, in Northeast India, among the Naga communities, tattooing is believed to have a sacred history that resembles ancestral relationship and connections. Among the Naga communities, facial and body tattoos were referred to as Shahnyu yaha or 'Tiger familiar spirit', that were symbols of bravery among Chang Nagas. It was an ancient practice associated with headhunting- bringing head of rival tribal member (Krutak, 2020).

Sacred Symbols, Ritual Knowledge and Loss of Context

Tattooing which has its existence since time immemorial, across indigenous and traditional societies, has one of the earliest forms of embodied cultural expression. There are evidence that in Polynesian societies tattooing functioned as a rite of passage and a marker of genealogical lineage, courage, and social status. Scholars such as (Gell, 1993) emphasized that Polynesian tattoos were not individualistic expressions but collective cultural inscriptions that bound the wearer to ancestral narratives and community obligations. In Thailand and Philippines, tattoos served as a variety of purposes such as protection and charms against evil spirits or as status symbols to display one's prowess and deeds to the tribe. Sak Yant is Thai Buddhist magical tattoos based on ancient yantras that are considered powerful forms meant to ward off negative influences (Docena, 2018). These tattoo symbols were the powerful mediums through which spiritual transformation were believed to be transmitted onto the body (Tambiah, 1984; McDaniel, 2011). Mandala art form which has its deep rooted history in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology has now been extensively used as symbols of balance and mindfulness. Their widespread adoption illustrates how sacred cosmological diagrams are transformed into minimalistic or geometric aesthetic suited to global wellness and spirituality markets.

Tattoo and Technology: Innovations in Tattooing Practices

Hand tapping prevalent in Thailand and Cambodia, where it is known as sak yant. Hand tapping includes practices where tattooing points or combs are hafted at an angle to their handle and driven into the skin using a beater or mallet (Meyer, 2022). In Northeast India, Naga tribes employed similar tapping tools, often made from citrus thorns or sharpened bamboo, combined with soot-based inks, to record warrior achievements and clan identity (Furer-Haimendorf, 2016). (Allen, 2006) argue that the endurance required during the hand-tapping process is central to the tattoo's meaning, transforming pain into a marker of maturity, courage, and social belonging. Besides, hand tapping, another widely practiced traditional method is hand-poking or stick-and-poke tattooing. Unlike tapping, this method involves

manually pushing the pigment into the skin dot by dot using a single needle. This form of inking dates back to ancient times and requires a steady hand as well as a lot of skill (Marsh, 1977). In India, hand-poked techniques existed among communities such as the Toda of the Nilgiris, the Santhals, and the Bhills, who used thorn needles and homemade inks composed of soot, charcoal, or plant extracts (Dutta, 2021). As documented by (Elwin, 1959), these methods were intimately connected to concepts of beauty, fertility, social belonging and tribal cosmology. However, the transformation of tattooing tools began alongside processes of modernization; urbanization marked a fundamental shift from slow ritual labour to the invention of the electric tattoo machine. The invention of electric tattoo machine by Samuel O'Reilly, adapting Thomas Edison's design for an electric pen, O'Reilly created a tattoo machine patenting his own self-named apparatus in 1891. After he replaced Edison's single needle with a cluster of five needles to improve shading, definition and ink distribution, the machine was used decisively for the inscription of tattoos, which was faster and less painful than personally conceived hand poked designs (Unwin, 2019). This mechanization allowed for faster application, greater precision, and stylistic experimentation, gradually shifting tattooing from ritual spaces to commercial studios (Atkinson, 2003).

3. Statement of the Problem:

It is observed that many youths in Guwahati, Assam are having tattoo art onto their body whether as an expression of freedom, creativity, and social identity, or as a practice fraught with stigma and generational conflict. The increased numbers of college students, young urbanites, professionals in Guwahati have inscribed their bodies with tattoos, which implies that it is gaining wider acceptance in the society. There have been limited studies particularly on the growing trend of tattoo making and changing perceptions in modern Assamese society. Of late, there has been the rise of tattoo industry, in North-East India. In this context, there is need to find out the shift from traditional indigenous practice to a widely accepted form of youth expression in urban centres. The study is believed to be a pioneering work on body modification process on tattooing and intends to contribute to the discipline of Sociology in general and to the sociological literature on socio-cultural change in particular.

4. Objectives:

1. To study the changing perceptions on tattoo making.

5. Methodology:

For this research paper, empirical data were collected through fieldwork by using observation and interview technique. The total number of respondents who were selected through simple random sampling technique and snowball sampling technique. 30-respondents from senior citizens, 20 tattoo artists have been selected for the study.

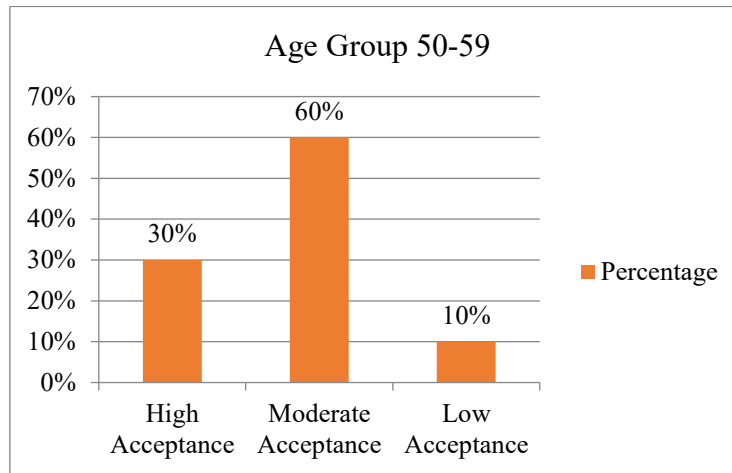
6. Results and Discussion:

Acceptance of Tattoos (50-59 Years)

Age Group 50-59

Level of Acceptance	Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
---------------------	---------	-----------	------------

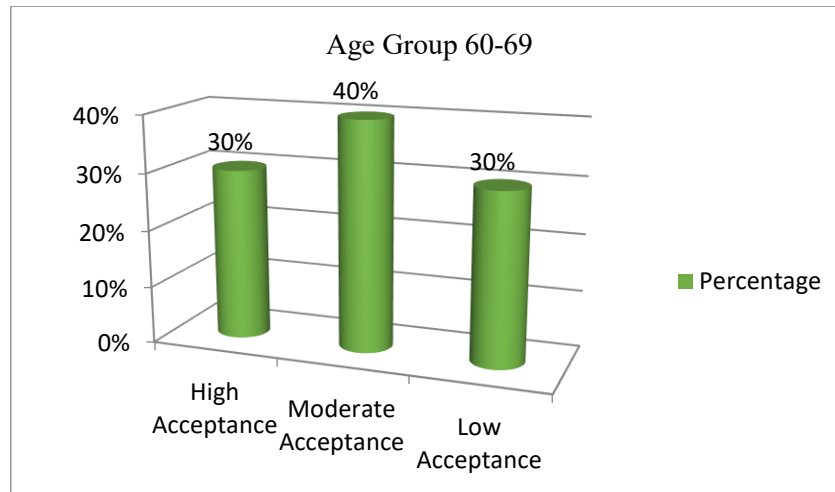
High Acceptance	Tattoos are seen as fashion, self expression, modern thinking and influence of youth culture	3	30%
Moderate Acceptance	Acceptable if meaningful or spiritual	6	60%
Low Acceptance	Still viewed as informal or improper for elders	1	10%



The data presented in the table chart for the age group of 50-59 years indicates a complex socio-cultural setting where traditional values coexist with the advent of modern thoughts. It demonstrates that six senior citizens out of 30 that is 60% shows moderate acceptance within this age group. This group of people belongs to middle age group involved in everyday interactions, because these respondents are homemakers as well as active participants in various social activities and public engagement. Their frequent exposure to diverse people such as neighbors, working professionals, and members of different social organizations broadens their understanding of changing cultural practices. For them, tattoos are based on intention, demonstrating a selective adaptation to changing body practices. These three participants out of 30 are affected by the fact that they are working professionals who are constantly exposed to modern work environments and cultures. Their work environment introduces them to the changing social attitudes, especially among the young ones who consider tattoos as a symbol of individuality, creativity, and confidence. Because of this exposure, traditional stigma associated with tattoo making has been reduced and it has encouraged a more liberal understanding of body art. Meanwhile, the remaining 10% respondent signifies the conventional Assamese social norms where any form of visible body modification is inappropriate for social appearance.

Acceptance of Tattoos (60-69 Years)

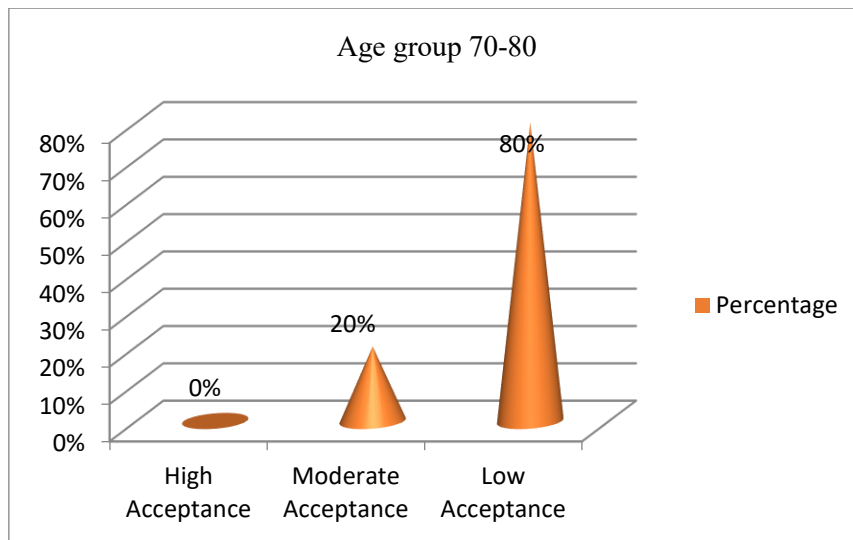
Age Group 60-69			
Level of Acceptance	Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
High Acceptance	Exposure through children	3	30%
Moderate Acceptance	It depends on the intention behind tattoo	4	40%
Low Acceptance	Seen as unnecessary body modification and vulgar	3	30%



This figure reveals a transitional generational attitude toward tattoo acceptance among individuals between the age group of 60-69, reflecting both traditional social conditioning and emerging openness shaped by changing cultural exposure. The 40% moderate acceptance evaluates that contemporary tattoos often carry personal meanings attached with it. For them tattoos such as 11:11, 444, or any family related motifs symbolizes individuals attitude, belief, protection or emotional connection. As such within this age group of senior citizens reflects a shift in perception where tattoos are increasingly interpreted as symbolic extensions of personal narratives. These 40% respondents recognize tattoos as carriers of emotion, memory or identity- especially when seen on their children or younger family members thereby bridging generational differences within contemporary Assamese society. Significantly, the other 30% each showing high acceptance and low acceptance respectively signifies generational transition in perception of tattoo making. The high acceptance level influenced by exposure through children demonstrates how intergenerational interaction in Assamese families can reshape perceptions of parents and grandparents. As such, it normalizes body art within family space and reduces earlier stigma. On the other hand, an equal 30% continue to hold low acceptance, perceiving tattoos as unnecessary, vulgar, or improper forms of body modification rooted in long-standing cultural norms and improper behavior. In this case, the researcher was able to identify the coexistence of these conflicting attitudes within the same generation that emphasizes a society’s struggle between traditional values and the influence of modernization. In this regard, the conflicting views of the senior citizens indicate that the society is undergoing a cultural transition where tattooing is becoming less stigmatized and more accepted as a means of self-expression among the Assamese community.

Acceptance of Tattoos (70-80 Years)

Age Group 70-80			
Level of Acceptance	Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
High Acceptance	NIL	0	0%
Moderate Acceptance	Acceptable if it is related to spirituality	2	20%
Low Acceptance	Fear of social judgment and old stigma	8	80%



The table chart for the age group of 70-80 states a distinct pattern of cultural exchange shaped by traditional Assamese norms and generational perceptions on the display of human body. From a sociological perspective, the absence of high acceptance indicates that people of this age group grew up in an era where tattooing in Assam was largely associated with tribal communities, or marginalized groups. For mainstream Assamese society this people believed that the body is pure and any kind of body modification and display of visible body were rare and considered as impure, stigma and social deviance. This aligns with Erving Goffman’s theory of stigma, where certain forms of body alteration are socially discredited. Significantly, the 20% moderate acceptance, which is related with spirituality, reflects that the traditional Assamese society sees body as a vessel of cultural and religious meaning. Tattoos made of traditional motifs, or sacred symbols are perceived as legitimate. This ideology is related to Durkheim’s idea of collective conscience, where symbols tied to spirituality reinforce social solidarity. Moreover, the acceptance arises among the senior citizens only when tattoo aligns with culturally sanctioned moral codes. The 80% is associated with low level of acceptance driven by fear of social judgment. Members of this age group internalized values where maintaining a “clean” body represents respectability and adherence to social expectations. When compared with today’s generation youths who are influenced by media and global subcultures, the older generation relies on inherited cultures rooted in social discipline and community reputation. The above-mentioned chart thus demonstrates how tattoo culture in Assam is evolving. It captures a cultural negotiation where older Assamese individuals selectively accept tattoos with moral boundaries but resist adopting contemporary interpretations of tattoos as fashion or self-expression.

Thus, the responses received from the senior citizens illustrates how contemporary Assamese society is undergoing a slight shift as they are beginning to reinterpret these modern practices through changing social values, urban exposure and intergenerational influence.

Perception of Tattoo Artists

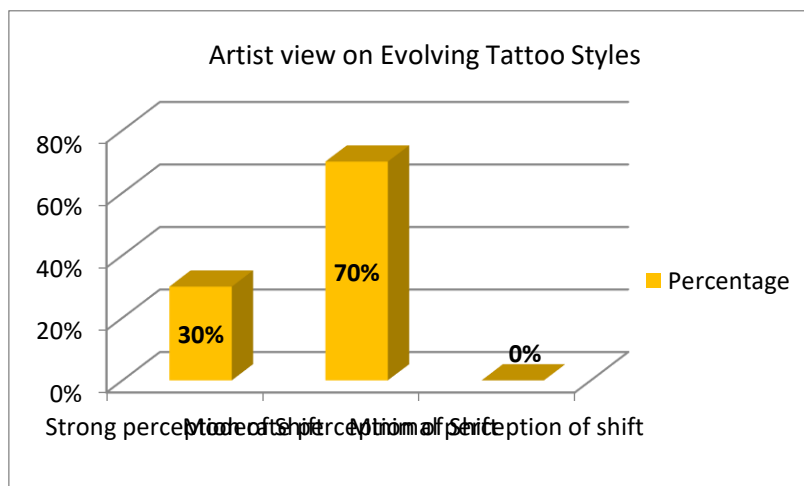
In this section, the researcher tries to discuss on the perception of tattoo artists regarding the survival, transformation and decline of tribal tattoo motifs in contemporary Assamese society. This shift reflects broader socio-cultural changes brought by modernization, urban migration, global media and the reorientation of identity from collective to individualistic forms.

Therefore, based on the conversation with the tattoo artist, the following table presents the understanding of tattoo artists whether modern tattoo choices still reflect elements of totemism or they have shifted

towards purely aesthetic and individualistic expressions.

Artist view on Evolving Tattoo Styles

Artists view on Evolving Tattoo Styles				
Category of Perception	Response Type	Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Strong Perception of Shift	Yes	Social media trends, minimalist aesthetic, western influence	6	30%
Moderate Perception of Shift	Yes	Mixing of fusion style, cultural revival	14	70%
Minimal Perception of Shift	No	NIL	0	0%



This figure reflects a clear socio-cultural shift in the perception of tattoo making within contemporary Guwahati Assamese society. The researcher while having the conversation with 20-tattoo artist from Guwahati reveals that the predominance of moderate and strong perception of shift undergoes an active redefinition shaped by wider cultural forces. 14-artist that is 70% who observe moderate perception of shift points towards hybridization of styles in which clients demand for tribal art mixed with contemporary design. As per the artists, their clients are increasingly looking for tattoos that not only imitate traditional designs but also reinterpret them by combining tribal designs with modern designs such as geometric designs, fine lines, and global artistic influences. This is in line with reflexive modernity, where people are constantly redefining their heritage by transforming cultural symbols into modern forms. In addition, the increasing demand for customized tribal tattoos is not an indicator of a lack of tradition but an indicator of people redefining cultural symbols on their own terms. Significantly, 6-tattoo artist that is 30% who observe a strong shift associate it with global cultural flows, especially the minimalist aesthetics and westernized visual cultures that align with Anthony Giddens’ notion of globalization influencing self-identity and lifestyle choices. According to the artist the growing demand of individualized aesthetics, the younger generation youths come with designs circulating all over digital platforms. Understanding from a sociological lens, it reveals that how globalization has influenced personal choices related to body modification.

7. Conclusion:

The findings show that the conflict between traditional moral codes and modern forms of selfhood is a key concern of sociology. Although it is found that religious tattoos are tolerated as expressions of religious belief, personal or fashion tattoos are delegitimized, which shows that social tolerance is linked to who has the right to interpret the body. The conflicting attitudes of older generations are not based on any conflict between tattooing, aging, and spirituality but on historically determined moral values. The findings show that there is a shift in attitudes, particularly in the workplace, where tattoos are strategically managed to reconcile personal identity with the need for acceptance and respectability.

References:

1. Allen, T. (2006). *Tattoo traditions of Polynesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006.
2. Atkinson, M. (2003). *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*. (2001). *Flesh Journeys: Neo Primitives and the Rediscovery of Radical Body Modification*. *Deviant Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 22, 117-146.
3. Atkinson, M. (2003). *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*. (2001). *Flesh Journeys: Neo Primitives and the Rediscovery of Radical Body Modification*. *Deviant Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 22, 117-146.
4. Docena, T. L. (2018). *One Art Two Fates: A Comparative Study on Thailand's Sak Yant and the Philippines' Batek* (Doctoral dissertation, Ateneo de Manila University).
5. Durkheim, E. (2016). *The elementary forms of religious life*. In *Social theory re-wired* (pp. 52-67). Routledge.
6. Dutta, S. (2021). *Tattoo: An Inquiry into its Different Dimensions*. PhD Thesis, Jadhavpur University, Kolkatta.
7. Elwin, V. (1959). *The Art Of The North-East Frontier Of India*.
8. Fedorenko, J S; Sherlock, S C; and Stuhr, P L. *A Body of Work: A case Study of Tattoo culture*, *Visual Arts Research*, Vol. 25, No. 1(49) (1999), University of Illinois Press.
9. Ferguson-Rayport, S. M., Griffith, R. M. and Straus, E. W. (1955). "The psychiatric significance of tattoos". *The Psychiatric Quarterly*, 29(1-4):112-131.
10. Furer-Haimendorf, C. V., & Furer-Haimendorf, E. V. (2016). *The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh*.
11. Gell, A. (1993). *Wrapping in images: tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford University Press.
12. Hembram, D. (2021). *Santhal.com*. Retrieved from *Preserving Tribal Heritage*.
13. Konyak, A. (2014). *Tattoo and a changing society: A Study of Konyak Community*.
14. Krutak, L. (2020). *Therapeutic tattoos and ancient mummies: the case of the iceman*. In *Purposeful Pain: The Bioarchaeology of Intentional Suffering* (pp. 119-136). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
15. Marsh, M. A. (1977). *FAVORLANG-PAZEH-SAISAT: A PUTATIVE FORMOSAN SUBGROUP*. Washington State University.
16. McDaniel, J. T. (2011). *The lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: Practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand*. Columbia University Press.
17. Meyer, D.S (2022). *JOURNALEXARC*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363611593_Examining_the_Physical_Signatures_of_PreElectric_Tattooing_Tools_and_Techniques.
18. Roenigk Jr, H. H. (1971). *Tattooing--History, Technics, Complications, Removal*. *Cleveland Clinic Quarterly*, 38(4), 179-186.

19. Rubin, A. (1988). *Marks of civilization*. Los Angeles, California: Museum of Cultural History.
20. Savitha, A. S., & Lakshmi, D. V. (2017). *History and Epidemiology of Tattoo*. TATTOO-The Invaluable Compendium for Dermatologists.
21. Tambiah, S. J. (1984). *The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets: a study in charisma, hagiography, sectarianism, and millennial Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press.
22. Unwin, P. (2019). 'An Extremely Useful Invention': Edison's electric pen and the unravelling of old and new media. *Convergence*, 25(4), 607-626.
23. Zelyck, L. (2005). Under the needle: An ethical evaluation of tattoos and body piercings. *Christian Research Journal*, 28(6), 1-8.