

## [The Tale of Tattoos](#)

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### CUSTOMS

## The Tale of Tattoos

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While tattoos among sailors and motorcycle clubs might seem the most obvious to someone living in the West, many cultures, including that of the Hindus, have long regarded tattoos as essential aids in life and even as passports into the world beyond death.

So why tattoos? What does a symbol embedded under the skin have to do with the spirit? In part, it is related to self-mortification, which has a long history in religion. Whether it's a Buddhist lama drawing a blade across his tongue, a Lakota warrior hanging for hours by

hooks puncturing his chest or a sadhu piercing his cheeks and tongue with small spears, nearly every culture has a sect that regards physical suffering, or an apparent indifference to it, as just another step in spiritual development. Tattoos are believed to have begun as cuts in the skin to form scars, a decidedly painful process. The color, from soot or plants, came later. Anthropologists believe tattoos are part of the evolution of a tradition that views the voluntary endurance of pain as a way to tap into a primal urge for meaning and belonging. And sacred symbols, from cave paintings to mandalas, are as old as the struggle to understand our world.

Tattoos are nearly as old. Archeologists have found instruments in Europe that were

probably used for tattooing that date back as far as 40,000 years ago. In 1991, when a German couple hiking near a glacier in the Italian Alps stumbled upon the remains of a 5,300-year-old man, they discovered more than a Neolithic iceman. "Otzi," as scientists dubbed him, was frozen evidence that the practice of tattooing predated earlier tattoo discoveries by more than 1,000 years. Anthropologists speculate that Otzi's tattoos a cross on the inside of the left knee, six straight lines six inches long above the kidneys and numerous parallel lines on the ankles must have been personal symbols, not identification

marks, since they would have been covered by his clothing. No one can be sure what Otzi's tattoos meant to him. Some scientists have observed the marks found on Otzi correspond to acupuncture points and speculate his tattoos show he had been treated for pain or illness. It is certainly no coincidence that acupuncture involves rite needles under the skinakin to the practice of tattooing. Anthropologists believe that tattoos have always had a religious and spiritual significance.

## Devotional Tattoos:

Religious tattoos can be viewed with two levels of devotion: there's the ordeal of receiving the tattoo the tedious and painful process of injecting pigment into the flesh and then there's the symbolism and color of the design itself.

Among the most devoutly tattooed groups

anywhere is the community of Ramnaamis. Scattered across the Indian states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, this sect of untouchables found refuge from harm in their distinctive tattoos the name "Ram" repeated in Sanskrit on practically every inch of skin, even on the tongue

and inside the lips. Ramnaamis began their extraordinary custom during the Hindu reformist movement of the 19th century when they angered the upper-caste brahmins by adopting brahminical customs. To protect themselves against the brahmins' wrath, the Ramnaamis tattooed the

name of Lord Ram on their bodies. About 1,500 strong today, the Ramnaami community still practices this painful rite, which is as much a demonstration of devotion as a talisman against persecution.

With a rich tradition and thousands of



Deities, Hinduism itself is today the source of countless tattoo designs. Tattoos depicting popular Gods such as Siva, Ganesha and Kali or sacred symbols like "Om" adorn the flesh of Hindus and non-Hindus alike. Some of the most

elaborate tattoo patterns anywhere are on the women of the Ribari tribe of Kutch, the very region in northwest India just devastated by an earthquake. It is one of the places to which the Pandavas were exiled during the Mahabharata. The

members of the nomadic Ribari tribe live as their ancestors did; their tattoos being tangible symbols of the people's strong spirit and concern with faith and survival.

Today, many people

choose a particular design not because of its power or religious significance, but because they simply like the look of it. Tattoos are borrowed from other traditions as well, including Native

American and Buddhist. These tattoos for fashion, of course, should not be regarded as religious and are often offensive to those who understand that spirituality is not simply a decoration.

And beware of getting a tattoo designed in an unfamiliar language. Last year a man in England had a tattoo artist inscribe his wife's name on his arm in Hindi. Local Hindi speakers spotted the tattoo

and informed the  
man there was a  
spelling error.

Tattoos and the

afterlife: As cultures focused more on spiritual issues, tattoos took on an active function, especially in the Pacific Islands and North



America. The  
Maoris believed  
that a spirit would  
recognize their  
elaborate facial  
tattoos after their  
death and give  
them the vision  
to find their way

to the next world.  
The Dayak tribes  
of Borneo  
thought their  
hand tattoos  
would illuminate  
the darkness of  
the afterlife as  
the soul searched

for the River of  
the Dead.  
Maligang, the  
spirit guarding  
the river, would  
check for the  
tattoo, which  
earned the soul  
the right to cross

the river. This is similar to the Lakota tradition, which teaches that the soul of the dead starts its journey to the other world on the starry spirit

road (Milky Way).  
Along the path, it  
will pass Owl  
Woman, who  
inspects it for the  
tattoo. If she  
can't find it, she  
prevents the  
soul's passage.

The Inuits of Alaska also tattooed themselves in preparation for death rituals. Small dots were applied to the pallbearer at

various joints  
along the body  
to protect  
against evil  
spirits.

Some believe

that the soul  
resembles the  
body that  
houses it and  
retains this  
appearance  
even after  
death, including



the person's  
tattoos. In other  
cultures it is  
believed that  
death changes  
the person's  
appearance so  
drastically that

your tattoos  
were the only  
form of  
identification  
that will be left  
to you. Without  
tattoos you are  
doomed to

wander forever  
in the  
afterworld.

"In all ancient  
societies  
religion and

ritual were a part of every activity," says Steve Gilbert, author of *Tattoo History: A Source Book* (New York:

Juno Books,  
2000).

"Religion was  
an integral  
part of all daily  
activities, so it  
was not that  
tattooing in

and of itself  
was religious,  
but all activity  
was defined,  
controlled and  
limited by  
taboos, and  
overseen by

spirits.

Tattooing must  
have served as  
a symbolic  
connection  
between the  
individual, the  
group and the

Gods. I think it  
was especially  
potent in this  
regard  
because of the  
letting of blood  
and the  
permanent



changing of  
the body. The  
designs, of  
course, were  
strictly  
prescribed by  
tradition."

Tattoos for  
Protection:  
Many cultures  
regard tattoos  
as protective  
amulets, and  
such magical

applications  
are closely  
linked to  
religious  
beliefs. AINU  
women in  
Japan, for

instance,  
tattoo  
themselves  
with images  
of their  
Goddess,  
which is able

to repel evil  
spirits and  
thus protect  
from disease.

Iraqis  
commonly  
tattoo a dot at

the end of a  
child's nose to  
guard against  
illness. A  
tattoo of  
Hanuman is  
used to

relieve pain  
among  
Hindus.

Aborigines in  
Australia  
believe  
tattoos on

their arms  
allow them to  
dodge  
boomerangs.  
Soldiers in  
Burma tattoo  
their thighs to



be  
invulnerable  
in war, and  
Cambodian  
men cover  
themselves in  
tattoos to

make  
themselves  
impervious to  
harm, even  
from bullets.  
The use of  
tattoos in

Cambodia  
may have  
come  
centuries ago  
from Indian  
settlers who  
practiced

# Vedic rituals.

# Sacred Buddhist texts are a

favorite  
tattoo in  
Thailand,  
where they  
are believed  
to have  
magical

power. In an  
initiation rite  
known as the  
"Krob Kru,"  
the devotee  
lights  
incense and

prays in  
preparation.  
The tattoo  
artist uses a  
special rod to  
inscribe the  
sacred text

on the chest,  
back or arms.

A shaman  
then tests  
the tattoo's  
potency by  
giving each



tattoo three  
or four strong  
swipes of a  
sword. Tattoo  
recipients  
often enter a  
state of

ecstasy or  
burst into  
violent  
trances.

The snake  
clan of  
Pakokku,  
Burma, has  
made a  
science of  
protection

tattoos. For  
centuries  
these  
Buddhist  
snake  
handlers  
have

tattooed  
their bodies  
to protect  
themselves  
against the  
vipers and  
cobras that

share their  
town. But  
they hold  
these deadly  
snakes in  
high  
esteem:

Buddhist  
legend tells  
of a giant  
cobra  
sheltering a  
sleeping

Lord Buddha  
during a  
rainstorm,  
and there is  
even a  
snake



pagoda in  
nearby  
Mandalay.  
The town  
also regards  
the snake

as its  
fertility God.  
Currently  
about a  
dozen  
members

strong, the  
snake clan  
of Pakokku  
claims that  
no member  
has ever

been killed  
by a snake  
no small  
feat  
considering  
these men

are  
responsible  
for  
capturing  
snakes by  
hand and

releasing  
them  
unharmmed  
miles from  
town. Their  
secret is the

tattoo. Each  
member  
undergoes  
weekly  
tattooing, a  
ritual that

involves  
prayer, a  
very large  
metal  
needle and  
black ink



mixed with  
snake  
venom. The  
venom,  
collected  
from snakes

found in  
town, acts  
as an  
inoculation  
against  
snakebite.

Arms, legs,  
chest, back,  
face and  
even the  
scalp are  
tattooed

with  
Buddhist  
symbols,  
each mixed  
with venom  
cobra

venom for  
tattoos on  
the upper  
body, viper  
venom for  
the lower

body to help  
build the  
bearer's  
antibodies.

The  
Hawaiians  
are  
prominent  
among  
peoples

who have  
specific  
tattoo  
Gods.  
Called  
'aumakua,



these  
family or  
personal  
deities can  
be  
protective

when  
properly  
honored, or  
destructive  
if  
neglected.

Like Native  
American  
spirit  
guides, the  
'aumakua  
can take

the form of  
animals,  
inanimate  
objects or  
even  
natural

phenomena  
, like  
lightning  
and  
thunder.  
Many

Hawaiians  
adorn  
themselves  
with special  
tattoos  
honoring

their

'aumakua.

A tattooed  
row of dots  
around the  
ankle, for

example, is  
considered  
a charm  
against  
sharks  
thanks to



an ancient  
story in  
which a  
woman  
swimming  
in the

ocean was  
bitten by a  
shark, her  
'aumakua.  
When the  
woman

cried out,  
the shark  
let go,  
saying, "I  
will not  
make that

mistake  
again, for I  
see the  
marks on  
your ankle."  
In Hawaii,

the images  
of the  
tattoo Gods  
are kept in  
the places  
of tattoo

priests.  
Each tattoo  
session  
begins with  
a prayer to  
the tattoo

Gods that  
the  
operation  
might not  
cause  
harm, that

the wounds  
might heal  
soon and  
that the  
designs  
might be



handsome.

Like most  
of the

Pacific  
Islands,  
Samoa also  
has a rich  
tattoo  
tradition.

"In ancient  
Samoa,  
tattooing  
played an  
important  
role in both

religious  
ritual and  
warfare,"  
writes  
Gilbert.  
"The tattoo

artist held  
a  
hereditary  
and  
privileged  
position.

He  
customarily  
tattooed  
young men  
in groups  
of six to

eight,  
during a  
ceremony  
attended  
by friends  
and

relatives  
who  
participate  
d in special  
prayers  
and



celebration  
s  
associated  
with the  
tattooing  
ritual." The

tattoos of  
Pacific  
Island  
natives  
made an  
impact on

English  
explorers  
notably  
those who  
sailed with  
Captain

Cook late  
in the 18th  
century  
and they  
returned  
home with

bold new  
designs  
and helped  
resurrect  
the tattoo  
art in

# Europe.

# Western Tattoos

Dispite  
tattoo's  
growing  
popularity  
, one of a

mother's  
worst  
nightmare  
s remains  
her



15-year-old  
daughter  
coming  
home one

day and  
saying,  
"Hi mom,  
check out  
my new

tattoo."

Througho

ut

American

and

European  
history,  
tattoos  
have  
mostly

been  
considered  
just for  
sailors,  
criminals

and, most  
recently,  
gangs.  
One  
exception

was a  
short  
vogue in  
the  
English

upper  
classes in  
the late  
1800s.  
Another



revival  
started in  
the  
1990s,  
bringing

back  
interest in  
both  
traditional  
and

nontraditi  
onal  
tattooing  
for both  
ethnic

groups  
and  
tattoo  
fans.

# Temporary Tattoos

Though  
tattoos  
are by  
definition  
painful

(the  
word  
comes  
from the  
Tahitian

word  
"tatau,"  
which  
was the  
sound



their  
tattooing  
instruments  
made),

some  
tattoos  
are  
applied  
without

pain and  
last only  
a short  
time. A  
popular

tattoo art  
in India is  
mehendi,  
a  
plant-based

ed  
temporary  
tattoo  
involving  
thin lines

for lacy,  
floral and  
paisley  
patterns  
covering

entire  
hands,  
forearms  
, feet  
and

shins. In  
Hindu  
weddings  
the bride  
often



decorate  
s her  
palms  
and feet,  
believing

that the  
slower  
the color  
fades  
away,

the more  
she is  
loved by  
her  
husband.

Archaeologists  
have  
discovered  
ed

mehendi  
orhenna  
on the  
hair and  
nails of

Egyptian  
mummies  
s. There  
is  
evidence

that the  
Neolithic  
people of  
Catal  
Huyuk

(in  
central  
Turkey)  
used  
hennain



the 7th  
century  
BCE to  
adorn  
their

hands in  
connecti  
on with  
their  
fertility

Godddess.  
Their  
Godddess  
worship  
was the

predeces  
sor to  
the  
religions  
in the

ancient  
Middle  
East, and  
henna  
seems to

have  
been  
used  
througho  
ut this

region.  
After  
1500,  
henna is  
depicted

on

women

in

paintings

in India



and is  
also  
present  
on Kali  
and

other  
Hindu  
Deities.  
The first  
known

Indian  
queen to  
have  
been  
painted

with the  
paste  
was  
Mumtaz  
Mahal,

the wife  
of  
Empperor  
Shah  
Jahan, for

whom  
the Taj  
Mahal  
was built.