

[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

nontraditional
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.

Archaeol
ogists
have
discover
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.