Tattoos and religion
Noah Scheinfeld, MD*

Department of Dermatology St Lukes Roosevelt Hospital Center, New York, NY 10025, USA

Abstract Tattoos play an important role in many religions. Tattoos have been used for thousands of years as important tools in ritual and tradition. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have been hostile to the use of tattoos, but many religions, in particular Buddhism and Hinduism, make extensive use of them. This article examines their use as tools for protection and devotion.

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Introduction
The word tattoo comes from the Tahitian “tatu,” which means, “to mark something.” According to Tahitian mythology, the 2 sons of the god of creation, Ta’aroa, taught the art of tattooing to humans, this being a “tapu” or sacred art form. Shamans (tahua) were highly trained in the religious ritual, the meaning of the designs, and the technical aspects of the art. Tattoos have always had an important role in ritual and tradition.1-9

Background
Archeologists have located instruments in Europe that were probably used for tattooing, dating back as far as 40,000 years ago. In the Steppes, other natural mummies up to 7000 years old have been found to have tattoos. Pazyryk mummies were found in the High Altai Mountains of western and southern Siberia and date from around 2400 years ago. The tattoos on their bodies represent a variety of animals. The griffins and monsters are thought to have a magical significance, but some elements are believed to be purely decorative. Altogether, the tattoos are believed to reflect the status of the individual. There is evidence that the Neolithic people of Catal Huyuk (in central Turkey) used henna in the seventh century BCE to adorn their hands in connection with their fertility goddess.

In 1991, when a German couple hiking near a glacier in the Italian Alps stumbled upon the remains of a 5300-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 1000 years.1-4 Anthropologists speculate that Otzi’s tattoos, a cross on the inside of the left knee, 6 straight lines 6 in long above the kidneys, and numerous parallel lines on the ankles, must have been personal symbols, not identification marks, because 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 that his tattoos show he had been treated for pain or illness. It is no coincidence that acupuncture involves riles needles under the skin akin to the practice of tattooing. Anthropologists believe that tattoos have always had a religious and spiritual significance.

* Tel.: +1 212 523 3888 (Office); fax: +1 212 523 3808.
E-mail address: scheinfeld@earthlink.net.
Egypt provides the earliest evidence of the earliest tattoos during the time of the construction of the great pyramids. When the Egyptians expanded their empire, the art of tattooing spread as well. The civilizations of Crete, Greece, Persia, and Arabia picked up and expanded the art form. Around 2000 BCE, tattooing spread to China.

It was once a very sacred and respected art; only the most prestigious were privileged to adorn their bodies in such a permanent way.

**Judeo-Christian view of Tattoos***

Judaism and Catholicism banned tattoos. This is based on a single verse from Leviticus: “You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh on account of the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the LORD.” Leviticus 19:28.

Christian tattoo opponents also like to stress these words of St. Paul:

> Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

This prohibition of tattoos is probably related to the use of tattoos by religions that the Jews opposed, for example, the cult of Baal, the Egyptian pantheon, and religions that the Christians opposed, for example, the cult of Isis. In addition, brand marks are what Roman slave owners tattooed on their chattel slaves to display ownership, and early Christianity found converts and support among Roman slaves.

There are references to body marking in the old and new Testaments.

> And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. (Exodus 13:9)

> It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes; for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt. (Exodus 13:16)

> This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’s,’ another will call himself by the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, ‘The Lord’s,’ and surname himself by the name of Israel. (Isaiah 44:5)

> Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. (Isaiah 49:16)

> And the LORD said to him, ‘Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it’. (Ezekiel 9:4)

Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the brand marks of Jesus. (Galatians 6:17)

Then I saw another angel ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads’. (Revelations 7:2-3)

On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords. (Revelations 19:16)

Despite these textual references, the Judeo-Christian religions opposed tattoos. This is unsurprising as their opponents, that is, idolaters, used tattoos in their worship.

There is a debate whether Christians are allowed to tattoo themselves. In 787, the Council of Calcuth redefined the church’s policy on tattoos, and tattoos that were worn to honor God and to bear witness to his glory were then said to bring heavenly rewards.

**Purposes of tattoos**

Mark Hawthorne in the tale of Tattoos written for *Hinduism Today* summarized the purposes of tattoos. His discussion is reproduced with permission in a substantial fashion in the following discussion on the purposes of tattoos.

**Devotional tattoos**

Religious tattoos possess dual modes that manifest religious devotion. The first ordeal is the imprinting of the tattoo, which is painful and seemingly endless, as particulate matter is injected into the skin. The second ordeal involves wearing the tattoo that is alteration of a person’s visual appearance that is wrapped up in the symbol, shape, form, and design of the tattoo itself.

**Ramnaamis**

Among the most devoutly and uniformly tattooed sects in the world are the Ramnaamis. Sparely populating the Indian states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, the Ramnaamis are members of the caste of untouchables. The Ramnaamis believe that their tattoos furnish a refuge from harm in the form of their distinctive tattoos, the name “Ram” repeated in Sanskrit, which cover their bodies. These tattoos even appear on their tongues and on the inside of their lips.

The Ramnaamis started their stunning and whole encompassing practice at the time of the Hindu reformist movement of the 19th century. At this time, the Ramnaamis infuriated the upper-caste Brahmins by adopting brahminical
Tattoos and the afterlife

Hinduism whose polydeism and use of coloration and physical transformation is perhaps the religion that most uses tattoos today as tools of devotion. Tattoos that picture the major deities that include Siva, Ganesha, Lord Ram, Krishna, and Kali are commonly used. Other tattoos replicate sacred symbols like “Om.” Hindus and Buddhists and others use the Om, which is a scared word for Hindus and Buddhists.

Among the most ornate tattoos in the world, the tattoos of the women of the Ribari tribe of Kutch, the very region in northwest India, stand out. The Kutch is a region in which the Pandavas were exiled during the Mahabharata. The Ribari are nomads. They use tattoos of the gods to reify their devotional symbols on their bodies. These tattoos are as mush a demonstration of devotion as a talisman and a totem against persecution and harm.

There are only 1500 Ramnaamis left today. They still use tattoos today as tools of devotion. Tattoos that picture the gods are used by the Ramnaamis, a cousin of the Brahmins, the Ramaanmis tattooed the name of Lord Ram over all skin areas. This has not been a totem against harm, and the numbers of the Ramnaamis have dwindled. Without the identification, which a tattoo provided, a soul existing in a state beyond recognition would wander in the afterworld finding no peace.

Tattoos for protection

Many cultures regard tattoos as protective totems, wards against evil, and power amulets. These functions are linked to magical powers attributed to the tattoos. In many cases, the tattoos are at the center of religious rituals and tenets.

In Japan, the understanding that tattoos have power is common. Ainu women, as an example, tattooed their bodies with images of their goddess. The image of this goddess possesses the power to cast out and keep away evil spirits. In so doing, the goddess tattoo is an aegis from evil and disease.

This practice is even common in some places in the Middle East, wherein the religion is Islamic. Iraqis in many cases tattoo a dot at the tip of a youngster’s nose to guard against illness. Hindus use a tattoo of Hanuman to alleviate them from pain and disease. Likewise, the Aborigines of Australia think that tattoos on their limbs permit to dodge and avoid boomerangs.

In Asia, the countries wherein Buddhism was dominant have a strong belief in the protective power of tattoo. Soldiers in Myanmar (Burma) tattoo their thighs to be invulnerable and as shield from the effects of battle. Cambodian men encase their bodies in tattoos to make themselves impervious to wounds, even from bullets, knives, and missiles. Cambodian use of tattoos could have originated from Indian settlers who practiced Vedic rituals or from Buddhism itself. This idea that the tattoo can give a warrior the quality of Achilles impervious to wounding is common among subject people and has been used by guerilla and rebel movements in situations where the American Indians opposed United States forces, and among some Africans who opposed their European colonial masters.

Sacred Buddhist texts commonly are tattooed to Thai peoples. The texts are thought to possess power and magical potency. In a Thai initiation rite called the “Kroob Kru,” the devotee offers up incense, a devotional offering, and prays to become ready. The tattoo artist uses a special rod. The tattoo artists etch the sacred text on to the torso and extremities. A shaman at this time evaluates the tattoo’s potency by exposing each tattoo 3 or 4 strong sword blade swipes. These Thai tattoo recipients can fall into a state of ecstasy or burst into violent dream-like states or fervent trances.

The snake clan of Pakokku, Burma, has extensively explicated protection tattoos. Over hundreds of years, these Buddhist snake handlers have tattooed their bodies to shield their persons against the poisonous snakes and cobras that
live in the vicinity or are under their care. The snake clan of Pakokku hold these deadly serpents, and potent snakes are held in elevated regard. Buddhist legend recounts the tale of a giant cobra sheltering a sleeping Lord Buddha during a rainstorm. In the same vein, in Mandalay, there is a pagoda that pays tribute to the snake. The snake clan of Pakokku used the snake as fertility god. This is a small group because only a few dozen of the snake clan of Pakokku still live in Burma. They state that no one in the tribe has ever been murdered by a viper. This is an astonishing fact because the men of the snake clan of Pakokku are responsible for capturing snakes by hand. Later, again by hand, the snakes are set free unharmed kilometers from where they live.

The snake clan of Pakokku, Burma, believe that the tattoo provides them with potent ability and secret power. Each member of the snake clan of Pakokku partakes in weekly tattooing, a ritual that involves prayer, a very large metal needle, and black ink mixed with snake venom. The venom, collected from vipers located in town, acts as an inoculation and antidote against snakebite. The entire body is covered with tattoos of Buddhist symbols. In every tattoo, there is venom. Cobra venom is used for tattoos on the upper body. Viper venom is used to prepare the tattoos for the lower body to aid in fortifying the bearer’s antibodies.

The Hawaiians worshipped specific tattoo Gods. Called ‘aumakua, these family or personal gods can be protective when properly honored. However, if the gods were not obeyed or were ignored, they were destructive. In a fashion akin to Native American spirit guides, the ‘aumakua can take the form of animals, inanimate objects, or even natural phenomena, like lightning and thunder. Many Hawaiians affix on their bodies special tattoos honoring their ‘aumakua. A tattooed row of dots around the ankle functions as a charm against sharks. This is based on myth that recounts the tale of a woman swimming in the ocean bitten by a shark. The teeth touched her ‘aumakua, and the shark saw this. When the woman cried out, the shark freed her and noted, “I will not make that mistake again, for I see the marks on your ankle.” In Hawaii, the images of the tattoo gods possess a prominent location in the places of tattoo priests and practitioners. Each tattoo session starts with an invocation to the tattoo gods. 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 participated in special prayers and celebrations 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.

Tattoos have an important role in religious life in Cambodia. The following discussion is excerpted from the book, Yantra et Mantra, by Olivier de Bernon, a member of the Ecole Française d’Extéme-Orient. The book is published by the French Cultural Center of Phnom Penh.

The origin of the tattoo in Cambodia, however, can be traced to Buddhist or Brahmanist formulas, or it could have been inspired by the religion of errant hermits (“Muni Ey-Sey” in kmer). The use of magical implants in the body has in existed in Cambodia for along time. In the 13th century, the Chinese envoy Zhou Daguan wrote that the body of king Jayavarman, who was then the ruler of Angkor, “was inlaid with a piece of sacred iron in such a way that even knives and arrows, hitting his body, could not wound him.”

In a way that we have discussed above, the powerless use tattoos to protect themselves from the potency and ascendancy of their enemies. In the war against North Vietnam, Khmer soldiers wore tattoos in the belief that they had magical power to ward off misfortunes and bullets. Each implant was made of a small blade of lead, silver, or gold, on which was engraved yantras and which was then melted into a small ball and introduced under the skin. Today, small metallic strips, on which pali formulas are engraved on small strings knotted and tied around the waist, replace them.

The origins of tattoo in Cambodia can be traced to the northern Thais. However, it underwent transformation under the Khmer civilization, the most significant change being the adoption of the “round” Khmer alphabet (“Ak-sor moo”) for the composition of the mantra.

In Cambodia, anyone who wears a tattoo has to be initiated into the rites. The relationship between the master (Kru in Khmer) and the disciple (Kohn Sess in Khmer) is intrinsic. The disciple or the person who wears the tattoos has to strictly observe and follow closely all the rituals, rules, and rites as stated by the master or the tattooed.

Tattooing rituals (“sack” in Khmer) take place where the master lives: in a monastery if the master is a religious person or in a private home if the master is a layperson. If the ritual is performed at a home, an altar is set up, and the place is consecrated: offerings of folded banana leaves of golden papers. A total of 5 candles and 5 Buddha representing the kalpa of 5 “elements,” that is, water, earth, fire, wind, and space, are made.

Conclusions

Tattoos have helped people to remake themselves in their eyes and in the eyes of their god or gods. Their totem becomes part of a person and remakes the person into something and someone new. The pain engendered by their creation facilitates entrance into an initiated group. Their appearance sets the wearer off from men who have not been remade. The rise to dominance of the monotheistic faiths Judaism, Christianity, and Islam lead to a decline in the use of tattoos. For the Christians, even the act of circumcision,
which remakes a man, was to great a recasting for what God had created. Although now tattoos are the purview of the Japanese gangster, the Russian inmate, and the American motorcycle user, tattoos have an ancient and holy history that deserves and needs explication.

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