



Tattooing as a non-performing art in Tamils – An ethnographic study

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Abstract

Tattooing in ancient tamils represents a unique blend of tradition and modernity. Historically known as “Pachai Kuthuthal” (பச்சைக் குத்துதல்), tattooing was practiced among rural and indigenous communities as a cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic activity. Over time, this traditional practice has undergone significant transformation due to urbanization, globalization, and technological advancements. Today, tattooing in tamils is not only a cultural symbol but also a growing form of contemporary body art among the youth.

This article explores the historical roots, cultural meanings, techniques, gender dimensions, health concerns, and the evolving role of tattooing in Tamils. It also highlights the need to preserve traditional tattoo knowledge while embracing modern artistic developments.

Keywords: Tattooing, Pachai Kuthuthal, body art, Tamil Culture, tribal tattoos, identity, modern tattooing, cultural heritage, self-expression

Introduction

Tattooing, a non-performing art which was prevalent and popular among the Kani Tribes of South Travancore. Art provides least to the eyes. It is aesthetic in nature "Muruku" in Tamil means beauty. The Tamil God, Murugan was called so, because he was most handsome. As art is also beautiful we may say it is related to God. So the truth is that art is a feast not only to the eyes but also to thought. Of the innumerable kinds of art, tattooing is one of the medically famous art. It exists in Tamilnadu from ancient times. As the primitive man began to grow civilized, he covered his body with leaves. By drawing on his body with the juices of fruits and leaves he sought to hide his nakedness. Humans began to decorate himself by applying colours to his body, dabbing sandal powder, giving a coating of turmeric and saffron, smearing red cotton paste, drawing by picking the skin, streaking the body with unguents, dyeing with the aves of flowering shrub, scarring the body etc...

Tattooing was widespread among folks in the ancient times now this practice is going out of use. But it is still popular among primitive tribes. Tattooing is a kind of decoration of the body, which subsist still one's death. The pre-historic man, who began to apply colours to his body, which subsists till one's death. The pre-historic man, who began to apply colours to his body as a permanent symbol to escape from magic tricks must also have begun this rare art of tattooing. It began as a practice of decorating the body. Later it came to be intricately connected with many kinds of beliefs.

Explanation of Tattooing

It means decorating the body or making symbols on the body. The village folk believe tattoo will wipe out sin and bring prosperity. Tattooing is also one way of bringing in fertility in one's life. When we learnt that tattooing was practiced when a girl attain puberty or before or after she goes to her husband's home or when she becomes pregnant, the tattooing ceremony was thought of as a symbol of procreation too. So we may say that tattooing is related to our culture and it has taken deep roots in Tamil Nadu, especially in the villages.

Definition

Tattoo is a work in Polynesian language. It is derived from the word Tahaitian tatu. Tattooing is a proof to continue blood letting, an ancient belief and ceremony. Letting out blood thus, people believed that it would strengthen the body and would serve as a good medicine to drive away ghosts.

Origin

Tattooing would have followed the people's practice of colouring their bodies, scarring them and mutilation of their parts. People in the villages believe even today that colours would drive away ghosts and flight of the eye. They believe that the evil spirits would take flight if they make a vermilion mark on the forehead or put a mark of red sand on the forehead of a just-born child. The exorcist who indulges in the art for warding of evil spirit use colour patterns. This goes to show the truth that ghosts fear colours. The village people in Tamil Nadu believe that ear-boring, blood-letting and mutilation of parts of the body would help of them from the God of death.

The Period between 4000 B.C.-2000 B.C

Encyclopaedia Americana also says that tattooing must have been done first in Egypt. Encyclopaedia Britannica says “Tattoos have been found in Egypt in Mummy's dating from about 2000 BC. From these facts we understand that tattooing was practiced in Egypt earlier than it was done in Siberia and Britain. Encyclopaedia Britannica States further, "In the Americas, many Indian tribes customarily tattooed the body"

Tattooing must have been introduced into Tamil Nadu from foreign countries. Puranam 16 and 68 in Sangam Literature which reveals of the glory of the ancient Tamils Kuratti, whose job is tattooing does not refer to tattooing at all. Tattooing which is a folklorist art is rarely mentioned even in the folk literature. In the folk songs of the Tamils collected by N. Vanamamalai the following lines refer to tattooing attaiyinmakalaiyinnu Pacchai kutti valarten (As she is my aunt's daughter I tattooed and brought her up).

The Purpose of Tattooing

Many people think that tattooing is done to cover up the defects and the changes in the body. In addition to that, it is done to raise one's social status too. Those who cannot afford to by golden ornaments like bangle, ring, nose-ring, chains worn around the neck etc., get their desire for wearing these satisfied by tattooing these forms on their bodies. The folks believe that (i)tattoos are the only things that they carry to the god of death after their death, (ii) they remove the flight of the eye, (iii) ghosts won't approach them and (iv) they will be cured of their diseases. So, the purpose is to preserve the religious ceremonies, the cultural excellence and the social status.

Tattooing is practiced to a large extent in the villages, especially in the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu and among the primitive tribes of India. But people in Foreign countries like Egypt, Polynesia, New Zealand, Iran, Fiji Islands, Arabia, America, Britain, Siberia. Tonga, Hawai Islands, Samoa Island, Pacific Islands etc, also tattoo their bodies the tattooing method and the instruments used turmeric powder and "Akatti" (a leguminous tree) green leaves are placed on a horizontal grinding stone for macerating and then the ground fat is spread on a thin piece of cloth and made into a wick It, burnt on a lamp burning with castor oil. The burnt wick and the lamp are covered in a new mud pot Then the wick burns resulting in the deposition of ash in the inner part of the pot. The ash is scratched and mixed in either water or mother's milk. Instead of "Akatti" green leaves, either 'arunkam' grass or 'Karicilankanni (a medicinal plant) may be used.

Tattooing is done with stitching needles. Two or three needles are tied with thread. The above-mentioned wick is immersed in an ointment with a stick. This stick is used to draw the figures desired by the tattooed person and the needles for pricking them. The places thus pricked will be cleaned with cool water Ointment is coated over them. Oil will be smeared over them to alleviate pain. Some turmeric powder is rubbed over them to prevent swelling.

Tattooers

Tattooers in Tamil Nadu mostly belong to the low caste, Kani tribes in Perunchani hills of Kanyakumari District practice this art as profession Kurattis practice this as their occupation. In the Coimbatore region mostly, the people belonging to the 'Paccaikkara' caste have this as the occupation of their caste. Only in a few place Uppiliyak Kuravas do tattooing. In Tamil Nadu mostly the nomadic Narikurattis practice tattooing. Some Coimbatorens say that Toda woman in the Nilgiris mountains are tattooers. Susi Ganesan says that 'Kattoviccis' tattoo in the village areas in Tamil Nadu in earlier times generally people got tattooed in the Aadi month in front of the deity and under the cool shade of the greenwood tree Wages:

In Tamil Nadu grains like rice and old clothes were offered for tattooing (wages were paid in kind as in the barter system). Some gave food items like gruel, rice etc., tattooers ate them and went satisfied Beauty. Many Tamilians tattoo their bodies for the sake of beauty. The colours drawn on the face and the "marutani" (the juice of the Leaves of a flowering shrub used as dye) pasted on the hands and legs appear beautiful but they become dim and vanish after a few days. But the tattoo is not only beautiful but also eternally so.

As a mark of Identification

Tattooing is done to serve as a mark of identification. Many informers say that many years before, the village panchayat branded tattoos on the culprits so that they could be identified later. Tattooing ceremony is done to a pregnant woman are tattooed they shed fear and they deliver babies well. If Kolam (ornamental design or pattern) is drawn with ghee and saffron in front of the pedestal of Garbaratchagambaal near Thanjavur, delivery is believed to be good.

As a fertility Symbol

In the village areas in Tamil Nadu, especially in Coimbatore region women are tattooed as soon as they attain puberty. The woman on attaining puberty is kept aloof, as she is considered a stigma. It is done to ward off the flight of the eye spirits and ghosts would haunt the woman, who attains puberty the truth tattoo is a fertility symbol is seen when we find the women attaining puberty, the pregnant women and the women just delivering babies are tattooed.

To Prevent Diseases

Folks believe that tattoo gives one the power to resist disease. If we tattooed the poison of snake, centipede and scorpion would not affect us much. Doctors say that those who eat "Agatti" leaves bitter fruit of a kind of garden-plant 'pakarkay" and neem leaves. Have more power to resist poison". Tattoo relieves bodily pain; removes like; cures skin disease; tattoo on the knee relieves the trouble caused by the collection of foul liquid in the feet etc., it cures rheumatist tattoo on the center of the forehead cures even chronic headache.

As a religious practice

Mostly the Hindus are tattooed. Some Christian converts are No tattooed. Among the Hindus in Tamil Nadu. Nadars, Harijans, Thevar, Konar, Gounder and Naicker tattoo to a greater extent. Different forms of God crawling, flying and walking creatures, plants, creepers, trees and flowers, ornaments, geometric forms, and other forms these are all Tattooed.

Other Figures

Now a days tattooing has percolated into politics too. Partly flags and party leaders are largely drawn. Cine star also find place Politics and cine world have captured the place of gods. Now mostly men get tattooed. Figures of lady lovers and their names and heart-like form pierced by an arrow and blood oozing from it symbolizing their failure in love are more popular. Now machine-tattooing has gained more popularity.

Thus, though the folks forget in slow stages the basic traditions of tattooing, people still continue to tattoo various kinds of figures by machine-tattooing. Traditions tend to vanish, but not the excellences. Though we place our steps in the new path, we should not forget the old path. It is having immense meaning in the society. It is our cultural Tradition.

Conclusion

Tattooing in Tamils reflects a rich cultural heritage that has adapted to modern influences. While traditional Pachai Kuthuthal practices are gradually disappearing, modern tattoo culture is flourishing among the youth. The challenge

lies in preserving traditional knowledge while embracing contemporary artistic innovation. Tattooing, therefore, stands as a powerful symbol of cultural continuity and creative expression in Tamils.

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