



Tattoo Culture among the Wancho of Longding District, Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Tattoos have been practiced in all over world and this tradition is continuing in human society from the Neolithic period. Some of the oldest tattoo discovered from Austria and Italy date back more than 3000 B.C. Tattoo is a form of art and fashion in human society. In most of the Indian society, people liked to ink on them under some cultural influences, as their identity marks. In North East India various tribes are responsible for bringing the tattoo art in this region and they are specially related with their clan identity, gender identity and bravery. The Wancho tattoo of Longding, Arunachal Pradesh has strong relation with their culture and identity. Modification happened with the Wancho traditional tattoos after the introduction with western as well as modern practices. As a result, fusion came out and more than half of Wancho's young population has been adopted modern tattoos in their society. Some traditional Wancho tattoos are still remaining among the aged population of Longding district, Arunachal Pradesh.

Key Words: tattoo, Wancho, Longding.

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Introduction

A tattoo is a noticeable appearance of body art completed by inserting pigmentation under the human skin to develop a permanent design. According to Cambridge Dictionary, 'tattoo is a permanent image pattern or word on the skin that is created by using needles to put colors under the skin.' 'Tattooing has been practiced across the globe since at least Neolithic times, as evidenced by mummified preserved skin, ancient art and the archeological records' (Deter-Wolf, 2013).

Archaeological evidences and prehistoric art suggests that the tattoo culture in human society was developed during the last phase of Palaeolithic Culture i.e. Upper Palaeolithic period to decorate human skin along with Palaeolithic

art. 'Some of the oldest evidences of tattoo culture are come from Austria and Italy, which are dating back to 3370 BC and 3100 BC respectively. However, direct evidence for tattooing on mummified human skin extends only to the 4th millennium BC (Deter- Wolf, 2016).

Although tattoos are flourishing in personal meaning for the wearer and they are often imposed in cultural practices, folk stories, folk songs and myths. Hence the design and size, colors of the tattoo and location of the body will all be symbolic of life experiences and identity marker of a particular society.

Tattoo Culture in India

The archaeological evidences discovered from different sites in India exposed that the tattoo culture in India has been here since the prehistoric time and it does reflect through the tattoo marks of different communities as well as tribal societies of India. Many tribal community of Central India still has maze like curving tattoos on their bodies and through the study of their tattoo marks we can assume that, they borrowed their tattoo design from the prehistoric rock shelters of Central India, which have maze like curving on the walls or continuing this process from the prehistoric time of India. In India tattoos are not only use for decoration but also for diverse reasons by different communities across the country. In South India, *pachakutharathu* is a type of tattoo used by the Korathi people. These Karathi people have the concept of 'life after the death' in their society and they imposed tattoos on their bodies as a mark to connect with their ancestors after their death. The tattoos present among the Dhanuk of Bihar are related with their sexual life and they inked on their females to keep them safe from powerful sex predators. The Munda of Jharkhand once used to ink on their bodies permanently to record their historic events in past. Still few of them continue this tradition and Munda men tattoo vertical lines on their foreheads as a symbol of their bravery. In Western India, the women of Rabri Community tattoo on their necks, breasts and arms, which signifying their strong faith on magic.

Besides this permanent tattoo art in India, some temporary tattoo arts are also present in India. One of the famous temporary tattoo art is *mehendi* art and it has a deep connection with the Indian culture and many communities in India applied this temporary tattoo or *mehendi* art traditionally in festivals and marriages.

Tattoo Culture in North East India

North East is famous for its diverse culture and society. Earlier many tribal societies of this region used to beautify their body parts through tattooing and

still some of them continue this art in their societies. The most famous tribes know for their body art are the Apatani of Lower Subanshiri, Arunachal Pradesh and the Konyak of Mon, Nagaland. Moreover, tribes like Nishi, Hrusso, Nocte, Tangsa and Wancho tribe of Arunachal Pradesh also used tattoo in different parts of their body as a means of body art or personal decoration, as well as an important part of their religion and society.

The Ziro valley of Lower Subanshiri district; Arunachal Pradesh is famous for its Apatani tattoo and in their society both the Apatani men and Women have traditional tattoo marks on their facial part. Tattooing on their facial part helps them for group identification. The Apatani women of Arunachal Pradesh used to have tattoos (*tippei*) on their face with nose plug. The used to tattoo a straight long line from their forehead to nose tip and five smaller parallel lines on their chin. The Apatani men have small T shaped tattoo on their chin.

According to Verier Elwin, 'Most of the Naga tribes have been reported to have their faces tattooed with distinctive marks with which one can identify what region of the hills they belong' (Elwin,1969). The Konyak of Nagaland was remained as head hunters during pre colonial period and their tattoo had a strongly connected with that cult. In past after every successful raid, their warriors were decorated their faces with some specific tattoo marks as a symbol of braveries. After that, they got ink on their neck, chest and other body parts which also indicated about their braveries. The more the number of their enemy heads they collected, the more tattoos they got on their body as a symbol of victory and courage. The women of Konyak Naga get their tattoo marks in different stages of their life like puberty, marriage and motherhood. The women of Ao Naga practiced tattoos in past and they were also achieved those marks in different stages of their life through some rituals.

After the arrival of British administration and missionaries as well as due to the modernization and urbanization in North East India, the traditional pattern of tattoo culture has shifted significantly and they are replaced by the modern tattoo art. But the motive behind the tattoo marks has not changed much, in past the Wancho regarded tattoos as a symbol of power and courage and still they regarded it as it was, because of the pain and courage associated with it and still those tattoo marks help them to know about their past culture either directly or indirectly.

Aims and Objectives

This paper sincerely attempt to highlights the tattoo art among the Wancho people of Longding district; Arunachal Pradesh. Like the Konyak of Nagaland,

Wancho were also head hunters in pre colonial era and tattoos were deeply connected with their head hunting cult. However, through this study, it helps to understand the various types of tattoos for both males and females among the Wancho of Arunachal Pradesh as well as its changes and continuity throughout the colonization, Christianization and modernization.

Methodology

The present study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected through anthropological field work method- interview and observation method. The field visit was carried out in March, 2018 and October, 2021 and through the necessary approvals taken by the village chiefs and village head men of Kanubari, Banfera, Zedua and Pumao village of Longding district, data are collected for study. In interview method, the researcher selected the elder persons of these four villages, including their queens and former head hunters, as they have depth knowledge of their long past. Observation is done to find out the designs and differences between the male and female tattoo marks. Non participant observation method is also applied to collect data from *Oriah* festival of Kanubari and Pumao village of Longding district, Arunachal Pradesh. For secondary data- books, articles and internet are used to study about the Wancho and their tattoo culture.

Tattoo Art among the Wancho of Arunachal Pradesh

Wancho is a major ethnic community in Arunachal Pradesh. They mainly reside in Longding district and they have very colorful and rich traditions including tattoo culture also. Today, though the young generation do not show their interest to get their traditional tattoos but they still they are following some taboos regarding their tattoo art, as the Wancho society still follow the 'monarchy' rule since past.

Wancho are notably known for their head hunting cult, which they practiced in past and also for their tattoo art. The characteristic feature of the Wancho men are that, earlier they tattooed on their chest and face and of women on the arms, chests, hands, abdomen, knees and calves. For men folks their tattoo designs are usually geometric in shape like- diamond, triangle, criss cross and star. In case of women, apart from face, they had both criss- cross and straight lines along with some dots under their necks, shoulders, arms, naval parts, thighs and calves.

Basically the tattoo culture of Wancho community had relation with different stages of life, i.e. childhood, adulthood and parenthood. Besides

these, they had distinctive tattoos for their chief and his family and also for their brave head hunters. The chief's family has special type of tattoo marks on their body, and commoners had prohibition to get tattoo on their body like them.

Tattoos are known as *hu* among the Wancho of Longding district. Earlier, tattooing on bodies was a common practice in their villages and it had a strong connection with their past religion and rites of passage. Tattoo was compulsory for both male and female and each tattoo had definite significance on definite parts of their bodies. Tattooing on different parts of the body had different names and they are like; for face- *thun hu*, chest- *kha hu*, neck- *dino hu*, back- *tock hu*, thigh- *baton hu* and so on.

Process of Tattooing

In past, only their village *raani* (queen) could played the role of tattoo artist and nobody was allowed to mark tattoos on their bodies except their *raani*, as they believed that if any male person of their village took responsibility to make it, it would bring bad premonition to their society, like they would lost their hunting, fishing and fighting capacity forever.

The ink which was used for making tattoo was collected from their nearby jungles and it was prepared through the sap of a special kind of tree, which is locally known as *zing*. After that it was mixed with charcoal to get thicker and darker color. To insert the ink into the skin, they fixed some thorns of lemon or rattan cane on a bamboo shaft and through this 'tattoo comb' they scraped the design by inserting that primed black ink.

Tattoo for Chief and his family

The Wancho society still followed the monarchy rule and their chief is the supreme one. Earlier, their chief had special tattoo marks on his chest and it was known as *Khuh huh*. Their chief and the male members of his family had some extra ordinary tattoos on arms and chest, and commoners were not allowed to make such type of patterns on their body, as they believed them as royal marks as well as sacred too. The chief's wife i.e. *raani* had also specific type of tattoos and she had more tattoos than the other females of her village. In case of *raani*, after her marriage, she got extra ordinary tattoos on her joints like shoulder, hand and knee joints as a wife of their chief. The females who were belonging to chief's family had also special type of tattoos on both of their forearms and it also helped to distinguish them from the others.

Tattoos of Head Hunters

For the Wancho head hunters, tattoo marks were like their identity proof and it helped other people to recognize them as a head hunter. Wancho of Longding district were warriors in nature and they believed that any skulls i.e. either animal or human, had magical powers and cause of this belief, they captured their enemies head to bring good prosperity to their village. As a result, they got tattoo on their upper body and face as head hunters or as well as symbols of their braveries during *zamwakzam* festival in past. This festival was basically related with their head hunting cult.

During this *zamwakzam* festival, first of all the heads of their enemies were boiled and cleaned with the help of *zampa* (local priest). The *zampa* put together those enemies' skulls in a specific place for performing ritual and purified them by pouring chicken blood and rice powder. After the festival was over, those heads were placed into a stone box i.e. *zamzing long* and the tattoo marks were done by their *rani* to signify the bravery of the head hunters. Those warriors, who were not head hunters but escorted their head hunters during a raid, also got facial tattoo as a prize. Neck, back and chest tattoos are for those, who beheaded their enemy's heads and returned to their village with those cutting heads after a successful raid.

Tattoos of Wancho Women

As per the Wancho culture, the Wancho women did not tattooed on their faces but they did on their other body parts. In comparison to their male members, females had more tattoos on their bodies. Earlier, female tattoo was compulsory for them and it was considered as a sign of disrepute without these marks. Girls are generally got their first tattoo at the age of 6/7 years on their navel parts. After their puberty, i.e. between the ages of 10-14 years they got their second tattoos on their calves. They also got tattoo on their thighs after marriage and the last tattooing was done over their breasts during the seventh months of pregnancy. Hence, for the Wancho women, tattoo marked an alteration of their lives from childhood and through teenage to motherhood in past. They had some special type of tattoos for the wives of their head hunters also and those actually help them to confirmed their husbands achievements and bravery.

Their *rani* (queen) selected a particular day i.e. *chatu*, for tattooing young girls of their villages. In this particular day she used to gather them in front of their *paa* (youth dormitory) and the families of those young girl's offered rice, beer and pork meat to their queen as a gift. A feast was also arranged by the

family members of those youngsters and they invited all the villagers for that feast.

Tattoos of Wancho Men

The tattoos of men were played an important role in their society. Apart from the head hunting, they had tattoos on one side of their upper chest and back and the patterns were made according to their clan. Earlier, the first born male of a family got two tattoos on both sides of his chest as a symbol of his seniority as well as a part of Wancho tradition. .

During their 1st day of *Oriah* festival, the male youngsters gathered in the front of their youth dormitory and their queens make those permanent lines on their bodies as a symbol of their adulthood. Each and every clan of Wancho society had separate tattoo marks on their body and it helped them to recognize each others on the basis of clans. A feast was also arranged by the family members of those male youngsters for their chief's family as well as for the villagers in this particular day.

Conclusion

Tattoos played the most important cultural representation for the Wancho society of Arunachal Pradesh and still with the help of these tattoo marks we can study the entire life cycle ritual as well as braveries of the Wancho, which they had in past. They were head hunters and their tattoos helped us to remind of this tradition that ended around 30/40 years ago after the arrival of Christian missionaries in their areas. Few of the tattoo headhunters of Zedua and Pumao are still alive and they have the vast knowledge knowledge of their past culture along with their head hunting cult, which they practiced once.

The head hunters had special designs on the face and body parts such as chest, arms, back, belly, thighs and calves and they considered these parts as the bravest and important parts of their body. Besides this, the male had clan based tattoo marks on their upper chests and backs. In addition to head hunting, tattoos were also coming of age and an integral part of the marriage ritual for the females. They got tattoo marks before and after teenage years and those were secret language of their maturity. They also got tattoo after their marriage and pregnancy as a symbol of their fertility and parenthood. They had and still have faith on life after death and earlier they believed that tattoo marks are necessary for their ancestors to be able to recognize them after their death.

After the accepting of Christianity and left head hunting cult forever from Wancho society, the women folks tried to maintain their tattoo art somehow and

made tattoos on their body for long. But, all of their effort goes in vain, as the present female age group shows less interest to get inked on their bodies. And so the tattoo art of Wancho people of Arunachal Pradesh, increasingly fading from sight, by both factually and symbolically. Since British administrations and Christian missionaries arrived in this North East region during the first half of 19th century and through modernization, head hunting as well as tattoo culture has been gradually dispatched to history in Longding District. Although the traditional tattoo is no longer practiced, but in course of modernization, the present Wancho generation are interested to get modern tattoo on their body and many of them have modern tattoo on their arms and other body parts. According to them, these are less painful and trendy one and cause of these reasons; they are interested to take it.

Hence, as the external influences begin to enter in Wancho society at a growing amount and modernization begin to grab the entire Arunachal Pradesh, the art of tribal tattooing among the Wancho of Longding district, gradually beginning to fade away, which once played a vital role in their society. At present, the tattoo culture of the Wancho, only reflects through the tattoo of their elders (both male and female) and the head hunters, who are still alive in some villages with their tattoo marks. In addition to this, we might consider them as the last generation as well as the last witness of their past tattoo culture and head hunting cult among the Wancho of Arunachal Pradesh.

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