

**GETTING INKED BY A MAMBABHATOK:
THE TRADITIONAL TRADEMARK OF KALINGA**

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ABSTRACT

The Kalinga province is one of the numerous places which is known for the practices of the skin piercing or tattooing. This descriptive-qualitative study explored the tattoo designs and its meaning based on the perspectives of the informants who were tattooed by a Mambabhatok, the process of tattooing and the reasons of the informants for being tattooed. A total of 18 informants from upper and lower Kalinga were identified thru snowball sampling. Information were gathered thru interviewing. The results revealed that there are similarities of the tattoo designs but has differences on the meanings based on the motifs and perspective of the informants in terms of its designs. Moreover, Mambabhatok from different localities in Kalinga have different styles, techniques and materials in creating traditional tattoo. On the other hand, the process of tattooing was all done manually thru hand tapping. The study also revealed that traditional tattoos of Kalinga, marks an individual's identity and sense of belongingness in the community.

Keywords: *Mambabhatok, Kalinga, Tattoo*

INTRODUCTION

Tattooing was the first form of scarification in which the skin was the first canvass and sticks and other pointy objects were the first paint brushes. It exist within a varied geographical location where it holds a rich cultural practice across human beings (Merritt, 2014). Rather than having a good looking and blemishing skin, tattoos can be easily identified as permanent art that enriches the beauty of the human body. It is also seen as people are also wearing such kind of art (Kosut, 2013).

Historically, scarification and piercing are other form of body modification which is regularly practiced by variety of cultures. The primary function to most of societies appears to be decorative and some tribal cultures used piercing to symbolize important social positions such as marital status or sexual maturity. Tattoo is a powerful symbol of identity and affiliation, for convicts, sailors and others. It serve to position individuals within communities, relationships and to express personal and collective identity (DeMello, 2000). It is also one of the identities of a person that marks a personal story. It is a remembrance from the past that allows other people to recognize a person with a remarkable personal history. Tattoos often have historical and cultural contexts that serves as their basis in connecting the past to present lives (Alcina, 2009).

However, tattooing nowadays is beginning to start popularity especially to young people. According to tattoo specialist, getting a tattoo is not anymore related to religious, traditional complications or by means of identification, but became an art that is to be appreciated (Ankirsy, 2014). Tattoos were created for fashion and aesthetics. It is acquired for body beautification. People get tattoos because they were driven by what is the trend; they just get tattoos for self-satisfaction (Yamada, 2009).

Tattoos nowadays are seen in two concepts – contemporary and traditional. The first one is seen in the business world as the tattooists have undergone trainings and have knowledge about fine arts while the latter one is seen in a cultural history. The tattooists were said to be taught from their forefathers of their native land to carry their symbolism as part of the community (Kosut, 2013).

Traditional tattooing is known in the Philippines, but very little is known or written about the practice. There are studies about traditional tattoos in the Northern Luzon but it is very inadequate and merely makes vague statements on the functions and symbolic meanings of the tattoos. In the Cordillera Administrative Region, there are six (6) provinces that compromise it. From among these provinces, they have their own term for tattoo. For the Ifugao and Benguet, they term it as “fatok”; “fatek” for Bontoc and Mt. Province; and “batok/batek” for Kalinga Province. These were believed to be taken from the tapping sound “tek” (tik) from the tattoo instrument, meaning “to hit slowly”. The very main purpose of tattooing to these groups of people lies on the context of headhunting of the mai’ngors, or the warriors, the concept of beauty, and the belongingness to the community (Salvador-Amores, 2007).

This study recognizes the importance of traditional tattooing in the context of cultural practices. Hence, it aimed to explore and understand traditional tattooing and the overall function of tattoos in terms of its designs and purpose.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore and document the designs and the symbolic meanings of the tattoos of the Kalinga people. Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the tattoo designs of the Mambabhatok and its symbolic meaning?
2. What are the materials used and the processes of tattooing done by Mambabhatok?
3. What are the reasons of the informants for tattooing?

METHODS

This study utilized the descriptive-qualitative research design to explore the experiences of the informants in partaking of the traditional tattooing, and the phenomenological idea of the designs of the tattoos. The study was conducted at Tabuk City, Kalinga Province which contains 42 barangays. It was conducted at Tabuk since most of the elders tattooed by a Mambabhatok and their family reside in the place.

The informants of this study were the people from Tabuk City who were personally tattooed by a Mambabhatok. Eighteen informants were purposely selected through snowball sampling. Twelve of the informants were from Tabuk and six were from the upper Kalinga province. There were only limited informants being selected and interviewed since the other tattooed people were not living at Tabuk City, Kalinga. Also, the informants’ safety and security were considered.




The study utilized an in-depth interview technique to gather data describing the experiences of individuals that choose to be tattooed by a Mambabhatok. Prior to the conduct of the study, the researchers sought an approval from the concerned officers or persons. Once approved, the researchers sought help from the NCIP office which is located in Bulanao, Tabuk City, to know the whereabouts of the tattooed people living within the city who were tattooed by





a Mambabhatok. The researchers also used audio recordings of the interview conducted. Finally, descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data gathered.






RESULTS


Tattoo Designs and Symbolic Meaning

Tattoo designs appear in various forms which reflect the Kalinga Culture. The following presents the tattoo designs of the Mambabhatok and its symbolic meanings.

Tattoo Designs	Descriptions and Symbolic Meaning	Cultural Implications
 <p style="text-align: center;">BUKAW (Eagle)</p>	<p>This tattoo design has several lines that starts on the belly and move upwards and outwards across the shoulders and down their arms.</p> <p>The Bukaw is a chest tattoo which was a mark of a true warrior. It is the most important tattoo any Kalinga man could own.</p>	<p>According to the informants who have this kind of traditional tattoo, they were once warriors who were active in headhunting practices.</p> <p>This traditional tattoo was given to a warrior with an unsurpassed bravery with an unidentified number of head taken.</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">BATOK OF WOMEN (Bhatok ji babai)</p>	<p>This symbolizes the beauty of a Kalinga woman. The tattoo runs down from the collar down to the arms of a woman. The tattoos are commonly ginay'gayaman or inagit-agit.</p>	<p>According to the informants, having this kind of tattoos are very important to them because this serves as their identity and sense of belongingness in the community. In addition, if they do not have any tattoos on their body, they are considered lazy, undressed, and ugly, and they will not be danced by the boys.</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">GINAY'GAYAMAN (Centipede)</p>	<p>Centipede was considered to be one of the "friends of the warriors" or powerful spiritual and protective guides especially during wars. When they were tattooed upon a man's skin the warrior was believed to gain the insect's attributes. In addition, this tattoo design signifies speed and agility of a person.</p>	<p>According to the informants, this tattoo designs is believed to be a good omen of warriors who are going to a war. It is believed that centipede will evade them from defeat or losing.</p>

 <p style="text-align: center;">INAGIT'AGIT (Rattan Fruit)</p>	<p>The design of this traditional tattoo has a resemblance to that of the snake skin. However, by looking closer unto it, the rattan fruit is more circular in form. At some instances, this tattoo design is interchanged with the <i>inob'ofog</i> (net-like in form), but the latter one has its hexagonal patterns when observed properly. This traditional tattoo design can fortify the body since it resembles to snake skin.</p>	<p>According to some informants, this tattoo design is for decoration only that can be seen in the tattoos of girls to strengthen their bond in their community.</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">NATURE (Pappayaw)</p>	<p>This traditional tattoo includes three motifs: top part is the rice field which modifies the primary source of their living at Kalinga, middle part is the water which is essential to their life, the bottom part is the fish which is also a need to survive and is part of the bodies of water which is connected to the second motif.</p>	<p>The informants having this tattoo design believed that they can prosper more in their living. This kind of design is also given to the royal blood of the society.</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">CRAB (Agama)</p>	<p>This is one of the most favored traditional tattoo designs especially to the people who really love to go somewhere else. Crab which means traveler, was patterned to the characteristics of a crab in which, it goes anywhere from time to time and from one place to another.</p>	<p>According to the informants, they interpret it as a traveler same with its original meaning, wherein they compare the characteristics of a crab that goes from one place to another to their selves which they also love travelling.</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">UROB/ TINAB-TAB-BAD (Snake)</p>	<p>A kind of traditional tattoo design with multiple diamond-shaped connected with the other and on its end, it has a curvature that serves as the tail. It is believed to fortify the body with a kind of protective armor that gives the bearer long life and healthy skin.</p>	<p>The informants shared that this tattoo design signifies guidance and protection especially when involved in war and strengthens his faith to win the victory.</p>

 <p>SNAKE SKIN (Kudjil ji Oflyog)</p>	<p>This traditional tattoo is believed to fortify the body and can bring a healthier skin. This motif has a multiple small diamonds connected to each other with two linings at the top. This tattoo design is somewhat a friend of the warriors which give them a set of omens during the war.</p>	<p>The informants who has this kind of tattoo motif believed that they carry the good omen in their everyday and even in wars. Moreover, the bad spirits cannot go nearer to the person who has this kind of tattoo.</p>
 <p>SUN AND MOON (Init kan Buflion)</p>	<p>This tattoo is seen as a circle with plenty of arcs inside of it. This can be tattooed not only to Kalinga people but also to others. The tattoo design (Sun) signifies strength. The moon, means it can brighten up one's life.</p>	<p>The informants said that, the tattoo design, sun or the moon. It guides you from the darkness and the sun gives you strength.</p>
 <p>COMPASS</p>	<p>This design is said to be a travelers track mark because it shows the four directions we can encounter in our ways. it is designed as a cross like with arrows at its tip signifying the right direction we can go.</p>	<p>According to the informants, the meaning of this design is also the same with the meaning of the crab which is traveler. Because of the arrows which represents the north, east, south and west. It is a modern tattoo design but is tattooed in traditional process.</p>
 <p>WINGS (Payak)</p>	<p>This tattoo was designed to have a downward arc with arrows that goes with the arc. Moreover, it has a center arrow that points to downward direction. This tattoo design can be tattooed on any part of the body based on the individual personality or interest of the tattooed.</p>	<p>According to the informant who has this kind of tattoo, this was a personalized tattoo design that resembles the features of bird. For them as a Christian, they interpret it like it brings them closer to God.</p>
 <p>ZODIAC SIGN</p>	<p>This tattoo design was personalized by the informant, which depicts her zodiac sign (Gemini). It was designed by her as a total human born in the birth of June. This tattoo was placed at the back of her neck.</p>	<p>One of the informants said, that every traditional tattoo design has a story to tell and every design is a significant one. A tattoo design has a connection to people who have it.</p>

	<p>This tattoo is traditionally designed in the form of horizontal straight 3 dots which signifies the signature of Whang-Od.</p>	<p>According to the informants, being tattooed by Whang-Od is an honor. And with these 3 dots, it is like the brand of Whang-Od because she became popular.</p>
<p>THREE DOTS</p>		

The table presents the tattoo designs, symbolic meaning and the informants' perspectives of tattooing. It can be gleaned on the result that the informants have different tattoos depending on the motif they want to have and tattoos should have. The results showed that the tattoo designs have its own role in Kalinga culture and the informants patterned the meaning of tattoo yet they visualize it as a fashion and as for self-characteristic. The results also showed that the informants have different reasons and purpose in getting a tattoo such as the tattoo designs that has a cultural meaning and tattoos that are personalized by the informants. In addition, there are tattoo designs that can be found on nature such as the pappayaw; animals like the bukaw, ginay'gayaman, agama, tinab-tabbad; celestial bodies like the sun and moon and zodiac sign; fruits such as the inagit'agit, the signature of the Mambabhatok which is the 3 dots and the motifs like the compass and the wings. Also, there are tattoo designs that describes the characteristics of the informants. Lastly, the original meaning of the traditional tattoo designs cannot be indicated since it is the known purpose of getting a tattoo to identify the status of a person.

Materials Used and Processes of Tattooing

Materials Used for Tattooing

The Mambabhatok used materials which are found from nature that makes it really traditional. The materials used are gisi/ thorn, charcoal, soot from the bottom of the pot, coconut juice, sugar cane juice, water, needle and a stick to tap in the skin.



The pictures show the different materials used by a Mambabhatok from different generations of different places in Kalinga. The most common materials used by a Mambabhatok were the pomelo thorn, charcoal and the stick including the water to moisten the crashed charcoal.

On the other hand, the informants also revealed that the Mambabhatok also used other materials such as the sugar cane juice, coconut oil, and the 4-7 needles used to penetrate the skin. However, the latter materials were not usually used since those materials were used by the Mambabhatoks from different geographical area of Kalinga region.

Process of Tattooing

The process of tattooing was learned by the Mambabhatok through observation and was thought by their forefather and passed on their family who have interest in making a batok (tattoo). On the process of tattooing, the Mambabhatok scrap the soot from the pot or make a powdered charcoal that will serve as the ink when mixed with water or coconut juice and sugar cane juice. After preparing all the materials that will be used in making the tattoo, the Mambabhatok will then shave the part of the body that will be tattooed, the skin must be cleaned before tattooing begins. The patterns of the tattoo designs were created using the broom stick dipped into the crashed charcoal powder mixed with the water. When the design of the desired tattoo has been made, the Mambabhatok then starts to pierce the skin using the stick with a thorn attached to its tip and tap it with another stick. To leave a permanent mark on the skin, the Mambabhatok repeatedly pierce the skin and put an ink to the thorn and tap in again. After the painful process of having a traditionally made tattoo, the finishing touch will be an oil or coconut oil to protect the fresh pierced skin from dust and dirt that might create an infection.

Reasons for Tattooing

The informants shared different reasons for tattooing. They shared that the primary reason of getting a tattoo is taking into consideration in the description of the tattoo designs. They also shared that beauty and belongingness one reasons to be tattooed. Otherwise, they will be looked down by the people in their community and will be considered as undressed, ugly and will not be danced by the boys. Another reasons mentioned by the informants was the context of headhunting. That the boys will be tattooed when they will get into a tribal war and killed an opponent. This is already a part of the practice of Kalinga as it was passed down from our generation to another. On the other hand, peer pressure and curiosity was also included as one of the reasons of getting a tattoo as this is a kind of fashion that the informants can permanently have.

DISCUSSION

Designs and Meanings of Traditional Tattoos

This study aims to determine the tattoo designs and its meanings, the process of getting a tattoo, and the reasons of the informants in getting a tattoo. It can be gleaned from the results that the tattoo designs of the Mambabhatok appear in various forms but the purpose and practice remained the same. This implies that the tattoo designs are shown depending to the person who wears the tattoo either for cultural practice or fashion identity. Most of the informants considered the symbolism of the tattoo designs and its meanings. Lastly, most of them stick to its cultural meaning despite that they have different purposes and reasons in getting a tattoo.

Tattoo designs appear in different motifs which reflect the Kalinga culture. As gleaned from the results the tattoos Bukaw, bhatok ji babai, and inagit-agit , are the most important tattoo that a Kalinga person can wear as it is their primary identity from other cultures. This affirms the study of Salvador-Amores (2002) and Alcina (2009) that these designs serves as their garment paired with the tapis as their skin as it is a part of their culture. This implies that tattoo designs are worn in its appropriate context of action and must be rooted on one's locality or place. Furthermore, the results also revealed that men should have the Bukaw tattoo when they can involve in tribal wars and who have killed many opponents. This marks that they are

true Kalinga warriors. On the other hand, the women must also wear tattoos as this symbolizes the beauty of Kalinga woman. Furthermore, Kalinga people exclude these woman in their community who do not have any tattoos on their body. Also, they are considered as ugly and undressed. Lastly, they are always looked down by other people in their community when no tattoos can be seen on their body.

Consequently, the results also revealed that there are tattoos showing the personality of the informants. These tattoos are the crab, compass, zodiac sign and payak. This affirms the study of Oksanen, Turtiainen (2005) that one purpose of tattoo is a form of self-expression in the community. It implies that tattoos are not only patterned to one's culture but it is already becoming a trend in the community. With this people visualize the different tattoo motifs as an art. The first tattoos the crab. The crab means a traveler. It can be gleaned in the results that the informants who has this kind of tattoo also loves to go somewhere else. Also, the results showed that crab goes from one place to another. The second traditional tattoo is the compass. The compass is the indicator of the for directions where the informant is currently at. It can be gleaned on the result that the informant wearing this kind of tattoo is also a traveler. In addition, the crab and the compass has similarities in terms of its meaning. This can be attributed designs that people perceive to other people who have these kinds of tattoo that they are travelers of different places. In addition, the third tattoo designs is the zodiac sign Gemini. The tattoo symbolizes the birth month, June. It can be gleaned in the result that the informant marks her birth month as it is well known on the horoscope that June belongs to Gemini group. Lastly, the payak (wings). Payak can be seen to the feathered animals. It can be gleaned on the results that the informants believe that she can be closer to God wearing this kind of tattoo. This implies that having wings like birds can soar you high. Furthermore, the informant interpreted that soaring high can bring you closer to God.

Moreover, in terms of being a helper of a person, these tattoos are the *init kan bufiyon*, *ginay-gayaman*, *tinabtabbad* and *kudjil ji olfyog*. This affirms the study of Merritt (2014) that there are many views of meanings of tattoos as to what it represents and what its shows in regard to the wearer. It can be gleaned from the result that the informants have strong beliefs on their culture that tattoos are guide, protection and a good omen they can carry all throughout. Lastly, the distinct tattoo that an informant can receive from a Mambabhatok is the three (3) horizontal dots. This marks that the tattoo design was made by the last Mambabhatok of Kalinga.

Generally, the traditional tattoo designs symbolize bravery, dignity, and protection of Kalinga people. Their tattoos proved their bravery from beheading enemies in tribal wars. On the other hand, their tattoos also holds their dignity as it is a part of their culture to be tattooed to consider them as part of their community. Otherwise, a person without tattoo is looked down by other people within the community. Furthermore, Kalinga beliefs are very sacred and important to Kalinga people. They believe that tattoos can serve as a protection from evil deeds due to the presence of sourness of the penetrated gisi into the skin.

Process and Materials of Tattooing

The results of the study revealed the different materials used in traditional tattooing. It can be gleaned on the result that the informants experienced different materials used in tattooing such as the sugar cane, coconut oil, soot of the pot, 4-7 needles, pure water, charcoal ink, and 1 torn. In addition, the stick for tapping was also used for penetrating the torn on the skin.

However, the use of sugar cane juice, coconut oil and the soot of the pot revealed the results of the skin especially on both arms, on the chest, and on the collar. It also showed that the tattoos are firm and still visible to our naked eyes. Also, the tattoo lasted for many years since the informants are already old and their skin are already wrinkled and becoming effort.

Meanwhile, the result also revealed that 4-7 needles were not used anymore as mentioned by the informants. In some reasons, the informants who already tried these many thorns experienced painful effects of the tattoos and it took them days and weeks to wait for the tattoo to be healed. The informants also have low tolerance of being numb due to the number of needles being used in tattooing because they want to be tattooed on what is currently used by the Mambabhatok. This affirms the study of Salvador-Amores (2002) that tattoos are done manually thru hand tapping to produce a permanent mark on one's skin. This implies that the materials used are commonly found in our nature and are helpful in leaving a permanent mark as an identity in a community.

In terms of the tattoo process, the Mambabhatok prepares first the materials dipping the attached thorn on the charcoal ink ready to pierce the skin. In addition, the Mambabhatok made use also of the stencil forming the detailed patterns and ensures that the final work is clean and has the correct measurement and proportion. With the use of the attached thorn on tip, the Mambabhatok repeatedly taps the stick until it leaves a permanent ink on the skin. This painful process is done manually where it numbs the skin because of the repeating taps of the pomelo thorn. There were also varied number of needles used since the informants were tattooed by different Mambabhatoks and it took them days and weeks to wait in healing the tattooed arms or chests. Moreover, the tattoos have different concepts either for religious, social groups or for fashion. It can be gleaned that the tattoos differ in its appearance due to on how the Mambabhatok did during its tattoo session, probably the strokes and the intense tapping of the stick. This affirms the study of Calimag, Carbonel (2015) that the geographical location of the Mambabhatok also has an impact to how the tattoo was made but still have the same purpose and process.

Reasons of Tattooing

There were many reasons told by the tattooed people in terms of its designs and purpose in getting their tattoos. But despite of their varied reasons, the informants were motivated, contented and inspired by having a positive mind towards their tattoos that it can help them recognize their status in their community, have a self-expression, and an outlook of their personality based from their tattoos.

In terms of the tattoo descriptions, the result revealed that the informants considered what the tattoo means. This affirms the study of Calimag and Carbonel (2015) that the tattoo designs differ from one culture to another, thus, allowing the informants to have a distinct purpose in getting a tattoo. This implies that having a tattoo have different purposes to an individual either for cultural purpose or for an identity in a community.

Meanwhile, the result also revealed that beauty is one reason of the informants in getting a tattoo. This affirms the study of the Kosut (2013) that it is seen as a kind of art worn by the people. It implies that people are considered not only in terms of accessories but also the permanent designed marks tapped on their body. Same is true with the study of Kappeler (2007), it claims that beauty cannot only be equipped with fashion accessories, but piercings are more used as one's accessory and mostly prefer as a piece of art on their on their body. In addition, it also affirms the study of Kjølgaard, et.al (2005) that it attracts people for which it is a permanent art and an irreversible identity. This implies that the beauty of the design came from

the painful penetration of the gisi on the skin to come up with the desired result. Moreover, it also showed that belongingness was included as a reason in getting a tattoo. In the context of Kalinga culture, women who do not have tattoos on their body are looked down by their community and considered as undressed, ugly and will not be danced by the boys. On the other side, men should own a tattoo as this marks his bravery. This affirms the study of Demello (2000) that expresses their relationship to their community are expresses their personal and collective identity. It also affirms the study of Kosut (2013) that having a tattoo carry one's symbolism as part of the community. Furthermore, the study of Salvador-Amores (2007) modifies a tattoo motif from other culture as a sign of belongingness to the community.

CONCLUSION

The current study explored the different traditional tattoo designs, materials and processes of tattooing and the reasons of the people in getting traditional tattoos with different perspectives. Furthermore, it can be gleaned from the study that a new perspective was developed from tattooing which is for fashion and presenting their identity to other people yet their tattoos are culturally-inclined and traditionally-made tattoo design.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

People who are coming to Kalinga who wish to be tattooed should be educated first to have a clear understanding about traditional tattoos and have a proper briefing on the different meanings of the designs they would like to be tattooed to their bodies.

Strategic plan should be developed by the Local Officials in Tabuk to define programs and activities especially to the youths in order to re-emerge tattooing as fine arts and as traditional discipline and to encourage the community and the youth not to make tattoo as a way of commodity.

Preserve and promote the traditional way of tattooing and the traditional meaning of every design to understand the usage of tattoo in one's community.

Future researchers are encouraged to do similar study for them to appreciate and have an in-depth understanding why traditional tattoos are given due respect to one's culture.

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