

AFRICAN TATTOO TRADITION AND THE MASCULINE TURN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Body modification, which involves body tattoo, was basically used for identification as well as for aesthetics purposes in traditional African culture. In the decades preceding the turn of the 21st century, body modification aesthetics had been mediated essentially through manual technology, which women nevertheless were content to patronize almost exclusively. At the turn of the new century, however, the aesthetics of body technology has taken a liberal dimension in which the complexity associated with gender discourse is implicated. This way, accounting for body modification dynamics, the paper considers the peculiarities of male and female body modification. It examined the masculine turn in tattooing as body modification and interrogated the radicalization along gender line which today places men ahead of women. Drawing upon ethnographic data collected over a period of time in Ibadan among its residents whose tattooing patronage has redefined their understanding of body aesthetics, the paper posits that the evolutionary processes culminating in the radical gender transposition of tattooing, engages new meanings and emerging forms of knowledge in the understanding of tattooing as body aesthetics, together with the hierarchies of values that ascribe radical importance and recognition to a previously feminizing social practice.

Keywords: African Tattoo, Tradition, Masculine Turn, Feminized social practice, Twenty-first Century

Introduction

Body modification, which involves body tattoo, in most culture globally, was basically used for identification, beautification and at times aesthetics. In the decades preceding the turn of the 21st century, body modification aesthetics had been mediated essentially through manual technology, which women nevertheless were content to patronize almost exclusively. Body modification, on a general note, can be said to be the adding or removal of some things on a person's body, mostly intentional and not for any medical reason. It is practiced universally and varies across societies and cultures. It is dynamic for its forms do change over time and the justification for engaging in it differs. Body modification is as well an important form of human identification (Hanley and Porath, 2020) for it is widely recognized not only in developed societies but in African cultures and spans through different ages. The elderly and young ones do engage in one form of modification or the other. The youths in recent times also use them as means of self-expression or identity (Roberts, 2019).

In African societies generally, and in traditional Nigeria in particular, there were various forms of body modifications (Temilola, 2013). Though over the years, tattooing tend to deviate from the traditional norms of most societies. According to Schildkrout (2004), this continues to reflect in the dynamic form involved in body decoration such as the use of wigs, make ups, and even the patterns of the tattooing. Schildkrout (2004) further explained that modernity and globalisation seem to influence the new materials used for body decoration. Body modification comes in various forms, including *Scarification*: which is done anywhere on the body such as the face, hands or legs by both men and women (Ifekhar, 2020). It is used to identify members of certain tribal families, ethnic groups and in some cases for cultural and social acceptance. It is widely performed in Africa and transmits complex messages as well as social status. In addition, it was used to represent different stages of maturity. Others include *piercing* which might be on the ear, lips, nose and even eyebrow; teeth filling and at times, mutilation of some parts of the body. Reasons for such acts also vary, ranging from being complex, modest or simple, emotional or even practical. The paper however would focus on body tattooing which in recent time have taken a new turn.

Conceptualizing Tattooing in Traditional Societies

According to Smith (n.d), a tattoo is a mark made by thrusting colouring or tincture into the skin. Rasmanauskes (2020) observed that it involves the insertion of a black substance into the layer of the skin below the epidermis, through a series of markings or inscriptions of the skin bringing out different designs, which create a permanent mark. In technical terms, tattooing is a kind of micro-pigment implantation. They come in form of pictures, writings, designs or other markings made on the skin by pricking it and staining it with dyes. Quellele (2012) describes tattoo as a type of body adornment that is permanent as needles are being used to make designs underneath the skin using a kind of ink prepared for that purpose. In addition, the design is made in the dermis part of the skin with a needle that is driven over the skin.

Body modification is a global practice that is culture bound and has been in existence as long as societies exist. Tattooing, in its various forms has a very rich historical past with diverse meanings and cultural significance assigned to it. It is also imperative to mention that tattoos have been used for diverse purposes which include among others, means to identifying slaves, ethnic or tribal identification (Roberts, 2019). It first gained popularity in the western worlds and extended into other parts of the world as the situation demands. In these traditional societies, tattooing was somehow not as attractive and complicated as it is now, though it is also inscribed into the skin on any part of the body. However, among the Yorubas' who are predominantly found in the Southwestern geo-political zone of Nigeria, tattoo started with slaves in the *Oba's* (king) palace who needed to be marked to be identified and differentiated from the kings' children. Oral tradition also gave an account that the women in the palace admired the designs on the tattooed slaves which they eventually imitated, however for beautification purposes.

Within the last two decades, the marking of tattoos on the various parts of the body has been on the increase as an international trend, taking a new turn with emerging patterns. In addition, the different styles and forms of tattoo have been gaining popularity cutting across the different class groups and status of the society. The acceptance of inscribing tattoo has also been on a very high side in recent times and has entered the realm of normality by those who like it and to some extent, the society. Today, tattooing has become the in thing, most especially among adolescents and young adults. Although there has been nearly as much research in many societies worldwide as in the Global North, tattoos are becoming more popular in every society, across gender and social class. This is the case as there seems to be more males than females of different ages and

socio-economic backgrounds that get a tattoo inscribed on their bodies daily with newer designs compared with those in developed countries (Ghosh, 2020). In some other societies for instance, among the Maori of New Zealand tattoos known as *ta moko* are part of normal adulthood instrument (Diamond, 2007).

Tattooing is a kind of micro pigmentation that involves a permanent make up in different parts of the body which includes amongst others, tongue, arm, waist, buttocks, stomach, laps and legs (Elghblawi, 2020). The use of tattoos as a form of body modification has long been established in many cultures around the world from time immemorial and cannot be said to be peculiar to any particular group. It is done by people of different populations depending on the tattoo pattern and the context in which it is done and perceived. In short, it cuts across the different age range, gender, sexual orientation as well as economic status. Researchers have traced the origin of body modification to ancient Egypt, South and North America, Europe and among the Tahitians, Marquisans and Maoris of the Pacific Ocean region where it is very common (Krutak, 2013). In Africa, tattoo is inscribed on any part of the body. This is done in different ways cutting across the different cultures in the society using different instruments and substances. The main methods used in inscribing the tattoo are cutting deep into the skin which Ifekhar (2020) referred to as scarification, as a result of the scar that will eventually be formed on the skin. The scar most times sends a kind of message to those who understand it or belong to the same cultural or social group or even if it is for beautification and it can also be used for other purposes. In addition, it is also used for healing process for an illness known as *Udeh*, which is associated with the infection of the spleen (Palmer, 2015). According to Serup *et al.* (2015), many myths and unanswered questions surround the use of tattoos. A claim by Jefferson (1974) suggests that tattoo might also be used for ritual or some purpose in some societies.

Tattooing unlike hair styles or clothes is not worn on the body but inscribed into any part of the body to decorate and permanently modify it. Tattooing to Kosut (2006: 1041) can be conceptualized as an *ironic fad*. This to her is a popular cultural trend due to its permanent nature. Zelyyck (2005), attests to the fact that having tattoo in any part of the body is deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs of most societies, and each design inscribed on the body has a very strong cultural implication or meanings. In short, there is no society in the world that tattoo is not worn. What makes the difference is that each design is likely to be unique and have a cultural underpinning with explicit explanations.

In contemporary times, tattoos seem to be part of a dominant age group especially among youths and or celebrities of different social classes, age groups, but with the large prevalence owing to media influence and show businesses among other factors. Whatever purpose tattoos are meant to serve, they appear to be basically connected to fashion in contemporary times. This is in a way contrary to the view of Ghosh (2020) who thinks that tattoo is a knowledge transmission in the form of a visual language where culture is inscribed in a special way. He studied tattoo in India where it is seen as a cultural heritage as it forms an important custom of tribes with myths and stories associated with it.

According to Adepeko (n.d), the peculiarity of the Yoruba society as regards tattooing in traditional societies is on marriage ceremonies whereby before a young maid gets married or even after the traditional marriage ceremony, she must have marks on certain parts of her body. This is to enhance her body for societal appreciation as well as husband's admiration. The Igbo women also inscribe tattoo mainly for beautification as well as the rites of passage ceremony. This according to Aniakor (2005), is used to reaffirm their beauty, social status and even wellbeing especially in the case of the rites of passage ceremonies. In addition, he stated that the aesthetics

involved relays important messages during the rites that transits them from puberty to womanhood. Inscription of tattoos on the different parts of the body among the Tivs of Benue state is an accepted norm. It is also an accepted practice as the majority are seen to have scars since it also serves as a means of beautification.

Tattooing in contemporary Nigerian societies as in other cultures in the developed societies has now taken a new turn in recent times. What is thought of to enhance women's body and make their appearance appealing is now being embraced more by the men. There seems to be a sort of new turn in tattooing and has become an emerging trend of Western culture which has now become visible in Nigerian societies. Though the older women who have tattoos on their bodies seem not to like it any longer, the younger generation now feels more comfortable having different tattoo designs on any part of their body, especially their arms, backs, laps, and legs. The drawing of tattoos has become more sophisticated with electric tattoo machines being used for this purpose, powered by a rotating electric motor. In recent times, there are improved technologies for the different designs, which makes the tattoo either temporary or permanent (Serup *et al.* 2015).

Tattooing in recent times has now transcended from among rural and uneducated women and male slaves to educated elites, professionals and the younger ages. There is also a kind of expansion, for the artists, students and even married men and women of different age group are seen to have tattoos. Madfis and Arford (2015) referred to this expansion as a *post tattoo renaissance* for more men than women are being tattooed and it has now transformed from being artistic to a practice. This increase along gender lines according to Wohlrab, (2006), is as a result of *cultural commercialization in the media*.

Motivations for getting Tattoos

There seems to be various reasons for getting tattoos. In the research conducted by Wohlrab *et al.*, (2006), the motivations for getting tattoos for many appears to be fashion. The need to recall a significant past, group membership and or indicators of individuality. In their analysis of motivations for getting tattoos, other researchers identified the following as reasons for getting tattoos:

For beautification, aesthetics and fashion: Stirn (2004) identified adorning the body, fashion and, or for aesthetics as one of the reasons for getting tattoos. Also, Leonard (1998) believes liking the way tattoos looks on the body encourages some people to wear it, wearing of tattoos is seen by many as a fashion trend and that anyone who wishes to look stylish should wear them.

Individuality: Some get tattoos to create a peculiar identity. They do it for the sake of maintaining self-identity or being distinctive from others. Tiggerman and Golder (2006) showed in their research that tattooed individuals always see themselves as unique.

Media: The media in contemporary times has been used to portray tattoos as desirable and not necessarily a body modification that categorizes the bearer to a particular group (Pitts, 2003). In addition, Demello (1995) was of the view that the unpopular sub groups who wore elaborate tattoos were at times ignored by the media. A tattoo can also be a status symbol, depicting them as wealthy, to having a good job or highly placed in the society. This is mainly because wealthy, highly placed celebrities show the world their tattoos through social media, an indication that it is trendy (Oosterzee, 2009).

Group affiliation and commitment: According to Pitts (2003), in some cases there are pressures to want to belong to a particular community or group. The sense of belongingness especially amongst adolescents to a particular social circle, friendship or love symbol is a motivating factor.

Resistance: Some people get tattoos to provoke or protest against parents or societal norms. Delazar (2005) in his study of college students found that adolescents use tattoos to protest against the generation of the parents who are tagged as old fashioned or old school.

The use of Technology in Tattooing

In Adepeko's analysis of the process of making tattoos, five processes were identified. They are:

- i. The client chooses motif or design to be drawn either from a catalogue or his or her own initiative.
- ii. The client pays for the tattoo
- iii. The tattooist washes the part of the body to be tattooed in a bowl of water. Thereafter, s/he traces the chosen design with a fowl feather and the already made solution made from soot.
- iv. The tattooist uses needle or knife to cut out the traces
- v. After the traces have been cut out, to darken the tattoos, substances such as soot, powdered charcoal, juice from a special vegetable are usually rubbed on it.

This method is obviously a crude and primitive one and is peculiar to the South-Western part of Nigeria. Nowadays, there are newly improved means by which tattoos are drawn. These improved means employ different electric tattoo machines which can make varieties of designs on any part of the body.

Methodology

The paper employed an analytically enhanced qualitative research design. This is because it is not unlikely that issues such as tattooing can be best explained by respondents' direct description of the processes and their experiences. It seems imperative as people inscribed with tattoos easily and freely want to talk about them. Thus, the use of open-ended questions to advance discussions. In-depth interviews were conducted with the following people: five older men, five older women, five male youth and five female youths on tattoo wearing. These individuals were selected along two clusters. First with young males and females between the ages of eighteen and thirty- five and secondly, older individuals from ages 36 and above. The respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques through respondents' interpersonal social networks to find interview participants. The data obtained were thematically content analysed.

Presentation of data

Ten themes emerged from the data collected on the new turn in body tattooing. Five themes relate to what actually motivated the respondents in having the tattoo on their bodies. Responses vary from imitation, just wanting to be unique, to contemporary individual perception of this form of body modification. There is a general theme that emerged from respondents as regards those people who wear tattoo in recent times. The younger men were of the view that tattooing is a contemporary global trend which is done by people of different age and status. A lot of celebrities are imitated as well as the youths ranging from students in higher education institution to those who had to drop from schools. In the specific case of young ladies, there seems to be a trend in tattooing the bride's body and her friends during her traditional wedding.

Motivation(s)

Intentional: Most of the respondents were of the view that they opted for the tattoos they have on them out of their own free will. They asserted that nobody forced them in any way to have it inscribed on their body. This stance was a common trend across all the interviews. In the words of one of the respondents, “I just wish to draw it. I like it whenever I see people wearing it”. Other motivating factors include:

Expression of uniqueness: Some asserted that they “just want to be different and unique”. In addition, wearing of tattoo is seen as a *status symbol*. Through wearing certain designs of tattoo, they get to identify with successful celebrities.

A new trend in fashion: For some, it is seen a new trend as these young respondents see it as quite different from what was obtainable in the olden days. To them, “There is great difference between the traditional tattoo designs and the modern ones, which is more of fashion”. From the findings, it can be asserted that most people who wear tattoo now are not forced to do so as it was in most traditional societies where the consent of those to be tattooed were not sought. In most cases these tattoos were inscribed on them when they were very young.

Culturally accepted practice: The elderly women interviewed were of the view that tattooing in traditional societies was culturally accepted. It was used to inscribe names, dates of birth and even designs to beautify the body. It was also mentioned that these tattoos were means of ethnic identification. A woman who had hers in 1956 was of the view that it was a cultural practice in her time with different intent. She further explained, “It is for beautification and for others, it is for identification. In the olden days, it was the practice to write our names in our hands or legs as well as our date of birth because our mothers were not literate. As such, they don’t keep records”. Others opined that in some communities, apart from the fact that we write our names and draw different patterns to beautify our bodies, tattooing was also used for ethnic or slave identification’. Moreover, a female respondent noted that, though rarely mentioned, it is also used for spiritual purposes such as having incisions for protection. These explanations reveal that tattooing in the olden days was a culturally accepted practice driven by different purposes.

According to a young lady in her late 20s who is originally from Ilorin, Kwara State, North-Central Nigeria, but now resides in Ibadan, tattooing is an accepted culture in the Ile Oba community of Ilorin Kwara State. The practice is deeply embedded in their tradition when it comes to marriage ceremony and it is compulsory to be worn during the ceremony. In her words, “the girls inscribe the tattoo for beautification, though it is now extending and becoming more common among celebrities who have it inscribed on their laps, backs [sic]”.

In an attempt to investigate the type of instruments used in engraving the tattoo on their bodies, it was realized that in the olden days, the main instrument used was needle or blade and camwood. However, in recent times a machine is used to bring out different designs which is done deeply into the skin and takes less longer time to heal. All respondents who had the tattoo in recent time mentioned that “electronic machine was used”.

The use of electronic machine is a newer and modernized way of inscribing tattoos. It is a result of development in technology to make it look neater and done in a more hygienic way compared to the instruments used in traditional societies. It is pertinent to note that in rural societies, where tattoo is still being inscribed, the traditional way of drawing tattoo is still very much in practice. This shows that no matter how developed the societies tend to be, traditional practices cannot be easily eroded.

For the men and women who had theirs done years back, the instruments used were needles: eight needles were tied together, the needles were then used to pinch the flesh until blood comes out. A black substance was then applied. Though these instruments and methods are traditional and seem to be archaic, they are still in use in most traditional societies because they are tied tenaciously to their cultural implications.

In an attempt to get a clear view on how respondents experienced the tattooing process, a common theme emerged. They all alluded to the fact that it was a painful experience. Though the traditional methods as well as the machinated methods are painful and the process takes a longer. They further explained that, “they will put that thing on the flesh, write out the design and then use needle to trace it”. In short, those that were tattooed with modern machines and technologies expressed they felt more pains.

Whether or not respondents felt attractive with the tattoo(s) was another theme for query. Responses differ across the age differences and sex. The young men opined that their tattoos do catch the eyes of a lot of admirers. According to one of the respondents, “there is no time I go out that people don’t commend that if fits me. [However], there are others who expressed that I look more attractive than when I was not wearing any tattoo. I loved it. I used to show my hands to people with pride”.

Very few of the respondents gave diverse responses ranging from outright *no*, while others belief that Some people like it on them while some dislike it. When further asked if they liked the tattoo as they had it inscribed on their body, different responses emerged which are:

I love it
I used to show my hands to people with pride.
I was extremely happy with myself having it on my body
because I looked so different from other people.
I really gained popularity when I have any tattoo on me

Respondents were further asked if they really have any regrets. The elderly men are indifferent, they did not express any regret as they were of the view that it was done for reasons well known to their parents. However, some elderly women expressed regrets. When asked if she has any regrets about her tattoos. A respondent revealed in her words, “Yes, because I am a child of God now. Some people use to think that I come from a herbalist home which is not true”.

In the same vein, another elderly woman explained bitterly that she regrets having it because most of her contemporary do not have it down in the city here. According to her, “as at now [sic], ‘I’m regretting it because out of 100%, few people accept me. So many people don’t like it”. This feeling can be alluded to the fact that most so called middle class working women do not have tattoo on them. She further expressed that in her residence people don’t like it. On the other hand, two of these elderly women expressed that they never have any regret having being tattooed.

In an attempt to identity who wears tattoo(s) more in modern times, responses slightly favour males. However, respondents acknowledged women’s heavy patronage of this trend as well. Besides, the elderly men and women believed that in their own time, the women had the tattoos on their bodies more than the men. According to the men, it is mainly slaves or strangers who had their bodies tattooed as a means of identification. But for the elderly women, it was for the beautification of their body. They noted that their husband usually

admired it. It was more of a competition. But now, Men do it more and it is also popular among artistes. In all, both men and women wear it these days, and in fact more men than women are seen wearing tattoos now.

When asked whether the practice has always been like that, different responses emerged. According to the elderly men and women, before now, women primarily use it for recognition or identification. In the words of one of the respondents, “during the Biafran war, it was the mark that saved me from being killed by the Hausas in Jos Girls High School in the North”. Another elderly woman was of the view that, ‘Some people write their date of birth and their names so that they won’t be kidnapped.

The different responses show that there are very strong reasons which in a way are tied to the different cultures of people, ranging from identification, recognition, beautification and age distinction. This seems to differ from the new form of tattoo inscribed in recent times which ranges from status symbol or fashion. On the other hand, the younger male and females have the different types of tattoos inscribed on their bodies for reasons that differ a lot from the elderly one. These reasons range from identification with a particular celebrity that wears a particular tattoo that they have imitated. In addition, some of them see it as a status symbol because it is not just anybody that can afford to have it on their bodies. To others, they wear these tattoos to earn respect and instil fear on people, since they perceive them to be cultists or fraudsters.

Respondents were asked on how their tattoos have been perceived by friends, families, neighbours or who ever they come into contact with. Different responses emerged also along gender lines. According to the elderly women, having mixed with women who are of different religious and social background, I would not want to have anyone wear a tattoo. The reason is that we should be a true Godly child. With my position with God, I will never encourage it. Others were of the view that it is negative. In the words of a respondent “Can’t you see the long sleeve I am wearing? When I was in service, people do ask me about it. Some think I belong to a secret society. Another elderly woman stated that her grandchildren do ask her questions about it or what is the essence and I tell them that it is olden days beauty. “I had it in 1956”.

For the younger males, most not well read and exposed men and women do have a negative perception about them because they do not understand the patterns of the tattoos. It is been negatively perceived. Statements such as “people take me for a bad person or razz”; people think I am a tout; I will advise the people out there not to draw or wear tattoos; I can’t encourage anyone to wear Tattoo’ emerged intermittently.

Discussion of Findings

Tattooing as a means of body modification was mostly worn by women, especially those who are not well read or exposed. Though there were no restrictions in terms of gender or class, it was not common to see men wearing tattoo except as slaves. In addition, these tattoos were worn to beautify the bodies, with different designs on the hands, legs or bodies; or for identification whereby, facial marks are inscribed on the face representing different ethnic groups or tribes. These forms of tattoo were accepted in the society without any one frowning at those being tattooed or the design or pattern they are wearing. In fact, the designs had a lot of meaning for they were relaying lots of message or information to people around.

In recent times however, males of different age, social class, and status especially amongst the educated and well exposed youths are seen to wear tattoos with diverse designs. One main reason for this seemingly new turn is not unconnected to modernization as well as globalization.

With this, a lot of people would want to adapt new trends in fashion and would always want to be like or look like someone they admire. With a lot of celebrities becoming famous and rich by the day, they are seen to wear different types of tattoos ranging from simple to sophisticated ones.

In addition, compared to traditional societies where mostly not well read and people with low status get tattooed. In recent times, there are more people who are well read, consisting of undergraduate and graduates, working class men and women, and celebrities such as musicians, actors and actresses who are increasingly seen to have tattoos. However, there are also more people who are out of work or engaged in the informal economy that inscribe tattoo (Stirn, 2007). They are very likely to get these tattoos for diverse personal reasons, coming up with designs they perceive to fit them. In addition, tattooing is now seen as a status symbol as well as expression of uniqueness.

Conclusion

Tattooing, a form of body modification has been on the increase in recent times. However, it has taken a new turn as a result of globalization. Though it was highly popular among women and some categories of men especially slaves in traditional societies, at the turn of the new century, there emerged a masculine turn in tattooing in such a way that men today are placed ahead of women. This work has attempted an ethnographic insight into the evolutionary processes culminating in the radical gender transposition of tattooing, bringing to fore the new meanings and emerging forms of knowledge in the understanding of tattooing as body aesthetics, especially with the new forms involved and technologies utilized. It is pertinent to note that this new turn has given way to hierarchies of values that ascribe radical importance and recognition to a previously feminizing social practice.

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