

Fatek (Tattoo): An Ethnic Bontoc Marker in the Northern Philippines

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Abstract: The Bontok Igorots of Mountain Province, in the Cordillera Region, are one of the Philippine tribes that practiced traditional tattooing. The reasons and meanings of their tattoos could be better understood through the traditional context of Bontoc culture. To determine the cultural significance of tattoos to the Bontoks, the descriptive survey investigation was used to explore the tribe's physical and socio-cultural practice of tattooing (fatek); discover the changes in the practice and perceptions of tattoo as well as its implication in the traditional and contemporary Bontoc society. The study's primary informants included Bontoc elders with first-hand experiences and knowledge in the practice of traditional tattooing and young people with tattoos.

The findings of the study showed that the traditional tattoo in traditional Bontoc society conveyed symbolic meanings, especially among the male members of the tribe. The chaklag is a symbol of status and at the same time a part of the rite of passage. On the other hand, women's tattoos in Bontoc had no significant meaning but purely for decorative purposes and social acceptance. This study unfolds many unique and indigenous tattoo symbols which contribute to the development of local art. The changing attitudes and perceptions toward tattoos by the contemporary Bontoc community is a tug of war between the older and younger generation. The advancement of technology made tattooing more convenient thus, attracting many young people in Bontoc to have tattoos. Further, tattooing has become part of the health and beauty industry and many young professionals and teenagers are having positive attitudes and perceptions toward tattoos. Today, the impact of tattoos in the Bontoc society is closely felt in the loss of their cultural and symbolic meanings and thus ceased to be an ethnic marker for the Bontoc tribe. In the area of economy, it is beginning to draw clients from young professionals and teenagers. It has likewise become an established career and business causing the development of innovated creative art.

Keywords: ethnic marker, fatek, tattoo, art, Bontoc, symbolic meanings

I. INTRODUCTION

Tattooing is a practice among several cultures in many parts of the world. Tattoos are forms of communication through the body used as a cultural text bearing artistic images and semiotics. Recently, the tattoo system has been a popular study read in scholarly journals of anthropology, history, sociology, newspapers, and magazines. Common among these works of literature is a relative marginalization of tattooing which is perceived as part of a deviant subculture and not a topic of serious intellectual interest. Although these studies bear significance in the development of scientific knowledge,

many authors romanticize the practice of tattooing such that their analyses do not generally correspond with their findings. Even though the practice of tattooing in the Philippines was prevalent since the sixteenth century, very few accounts were written about it in the Cordillera, especially in Bontoc. At present, *fatek* is a dead traditional practice in Bontoc, thus, it is no longer seen today except for those inscribed on the bodies of our grandparents which serve as living evidence of this lost art. Since this custom has ceased to be practiced, traditional tattoos will also cease existence in the coming years. Thus, the conduct of this in-depth study on the cultural and social significance of *fatek* was very timely. This study explored the social practices of tattooing in the traditional Bontoc society; the changes in the tattoo practice and perceptions; and its impact on modern Bontoc society.

Conceptual Framework

Underlying the discussion of this study is the concept that the body is best read as a "text culture". As proposed by Michael Atkinson (2003), a sociologist, the body has a multitude of foci and different interpretations. This approach can precisely study the body, its meaning, and the motivations of corporeal marking. Reading the body as the text of culture involves the understanding of tattoos about their cultural context. Tattoos are forms of language that transmit ideas. On the cultural level, interpretations can only be done within their context. Meanings have been constructed by the social group which can only be understood solely within them. On a personal level, tattoos have immediate meaning to the bearer. Like language, tattoos are dynamic; they change every society. Under this framework, tattoos in Bontoc were investigated to trace if the semantics of symbols are still the same, to determine the changes, their present status, and their impact on the life of the contemporary Bontoc society.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study made use of the qualitative and descriptive method of research and adopted individual and small group interviews in the gathering of data. Purposive sampling was applied to the three barangays of Bontoc which were involved in this research namely, Bontoc Ili, Samoki, and Guina-ang. There were two sets of interview guide questions that were used in this study: Set A for the elder informants and Set B for the young people with tattoos. Photo documentation and video recordings were likewise done.

Presentation And Analysis Of Data

The Traditional Fatek (Tattoo) in Bontoc Society

The Bontoks, an ethnolinguistic group of the Cordillera in Northern Luzon, Philippines is the focus of this study. "Fatek" is a local Bontoc term that generally refers to traditional tattoos or the practice of traditional tattooing. Three classifications of *Fatek* according to placement and function namely: *Chaklag*, *Pong-o*, and *Faytong* shall be discussed further in this paper. The *fatek* practice can be traced as far back as the existence of inter-village wars which was one of the reasons for the traditional practice of tattooing. It had existed years back even before the birth of my oldest informant, *Ina Fanayan Lumaang*, 112 years old from Barangay Guina-ang. No one remembers how the tattoo was first started in Bontoc. Nevertheless, all informants confirmed that the practice already existed even before they were born. Moreover, *Ama ay Filog*, 73 years old and an elder of sitio Chakalan explained that the tattoo practice was neither a foreign influence nor a craft taught by somebody since it is believed to be a gift destined for someone "*Siya akhes chi nan nigwa ay fiyang na*" meaning, that is his or her role in life.

Traditionally the practice of tattoos in Bontoc's cultural context is part of the rite of transition to manhood. Hence the Bontoc *fatek* cannot be fully appreciated and understood if it is separated from its ritual context of a man's rite of passage. It is a symbol that one has advanced from a boyhood state to a higher level of manhood having proven his courage and strength in a tribe's head-hunting expedition (*faloknit*). The unwritten code of the *ato* requires a *chaklag* tattoo to a man who was able to defend his family or his people against other tribal groups that brought peril to the community; or have avenged a member of his family or community who was killed earlier by other tribes; and one who had courageously fought in a tribal war. Any man who was victorious in warfare and had taken head as a proof is known as *namaka*, which means a taker of head/s. To mark the victor's graduation, the tattoo known as the *chaklag* is permanently bored on the chest as a badge of honor. This is usually accompanied by the appropriate ritual. His female relatives and female members in the *ato* could also be tattooed if they wished to. The *chaklag* was a symbol of power because it meant he had passed the test required to become an adult and was ready to be given his political, social, economic, and religious rights in the community. It was a plus factor in becoming a full-fledged, participant-member of the traditional *ato* (smallest socio-political unit in Bontoc society). It also symbolized courage and manliness since tribal warfare itself was a means to test the courage and virility of the Bontok man. Not all men in Bontoc who wanted this tattoo can have it because it is solely ascribed to one worthy of the medal. *Ama* (elder) *ay Filog* articulated that a man with *chaklag* was a male "lalaki" in Bontoc. Added to this male notion is Jenk's observation that there was no doubt that the desire to be considered brave and manly had become an important factor in Bontoc ideology, particularly with the tribal headhunting

culture. He further noted that in his presence, an Igorot once told a member of *ato Ungkan* that the men of his *ato* were like girls because no male had ever taken heads (Jenks 1905). Relative to this, it may be said that although the taking of a head and acquiring of *chaklag* were not requisites for marriage, and did not win special favor from women, it made them manly and brave in the eyes of their fellowmen and may also be a plus factor in courting women. *Ama Foman-eg*, an *ato* elder likewise added that anyone who bore a *chaklag* but did not deserve it was teased and humiliated by one's peers and by the people in the community. They would contemptuously say "*Ngag nan enka aped enpachaklag ay? Maid met ammo mi is nangamongam sinan takho?*" ("What reason do you have for having a *chaklag*, when there was never an occasion that you caused a gathering in the community?") This is the main reason why only a few men in Bontoc wear the prestigious *chaklag*. At present the researcher does not know of a single man with the *chaklag* on his chest. Informants all affirmed that these warriors of the past were gone because the early practice of tribal war and headhunting expeditions as cultural practice in Bontoc gradually ceased. The existence of *pechen* (peace pacts), intermarriages among warring tribes and the new form of centralized government structure and regulations are other reasons for the death of the traditional tattoo.

As mentioned earlier, the *chaklag* tattoo is one of the steps to be attained in the Bontoc man's rite of passage. Thus the *chaklag fatek* cannot be isolated from the ritual context of Bontoc culture. According to elder Alfonso Kiat-ong, before a *namaka* is tattooed of the *chaklag*, the rituals and celebration in the *ato* were first strictly and completely performed. The ritual involved the threshing of rice *palay* by the women (*enpag-pag* or *entar-tag*) in a long wooden trough called *Libkan* in the Bontoc language. Women in one accord use wooden canes to thresh *palay* as they sang a native melody in a rhythmic pattern that complemented the regular sounds of the pestles. The event moreover, included the butchering of pigs or carabaos enough to feed the people in the community. For some consecutive days and nights, there was non-stop dancing and playing of the gongs. A *tengao* or rest day/holiday was declared and no one was allowed to go to the fields to work so all the folks joined in the celebration that would last for a month.

The *chaklag* consisted of a series of geometric markings running upward from the breast near each nipple and curving out on each shoulder, where it ended on the upper arm. The accompanying plates give an excellent idea of the nature and appearance of the Igorot tattoo. The main design of the *chaklag* originated from the *khayaman* (centipede). Further, the size of the *chaklag* is directly proportional to the number of human heads taken.

There were also cases in which men were tattooed on the face aside from the chest tattoo. According to *Ama'y Kangao*, an *ato* elder, any tattoo marked on the face is called *faytong* and was a part of the *chaklag* although it was not a

common practice. However, there were only two men who were seen with *faytong* in the past. It was usually characterized by a cross sign on the cheek or forehead. It is interesting to note that *faytong* tattoo is much akin to the facial tattoo on Maori (aborigines in New Zealand) warriors known as *moko*. Juniper Ellis wrote that a *moko* was an announcement of warrior status. He said, "It proclaims the inherent right of the bearer to wear said tattoo. These warriors went into battle naked and the hereditary designs acted as a coat of arms. They were a visible sign that one had achieved status, endured the pain with courage, and confronted the possibility of death" (Ellis 2008).

The *chaklag fatek* moreover, has its psychological implications. Any member of an *ato* who had slain a person whether it was made to avenge the death of a relative or fellow member or by accident killed somebody is first advised to sit down with the elders at the *ato* before going home. Thereafter elders perform a ritual known as the *chaw-es*. This is a healing ritual believed to maintain the sanity of the *namaka*. Usually, the *namaka* stays inside the house while the elders outside the house chant and play the gongs sending out mournful slow rhythmic sounds. Furthermore, the performance of the ritual will assure the *namaka* and the tribe that the spirit of the person killed has become an ally of the tribe.

In the Bontoc culture, avenging the life of a relative and fellow member of an *ato* may be a normative ground to take the life of another human being. Legally, in modern times, one may be allowed to kill a person because of self-defense. Nevertheless, it is ingrained in man's conscience that murder is considered to be universally immoral whether it is culturally or legally sanctioned. This is evidenced by the "war shock" syndrome experienced by soldiers who killed an enemy in war or directly saw their comrades being killed. To ease the feelings of guilt about why they have to kill or why should they be alive and their comrades have to die, soldiers usually let their bodies be tattooed bearing the name or figure of their comrades who died in battle. Enduring the excruciating pain of being tattooed somehow lessened the guilt of having to kill a human being in times of war.

The female counterpart of tattoo has no direct relation to headhunting or warfare but more on the aspect of aesthetics, social and peer acceptance. The practice of traditional tattooing evolved from one era to the next. The regulations and reasons for tattooing among women seemed to have been modified over time. It was noted that tattooing among the succeeding generations of females in the 1900s became a craze so that every girl in Bontoc who decided to be tattooed could have it. Jenks had witnessed that in barangay Tocucan the elders made some of their women be tattooed in May 1903, even though no heads were taken there (Jenks 1905). In a dialogue with a couple in Guina-ang, namely Mr. Peter Po-or (71 years old) and Fen-ak Po-or (79 years old), they narrated that most of the ladies in Guina-ang including Fen-ak who was then 18 years old went to Bontoc to acquire a

tattoo on her arms after the Japanese soldiers were defeated by Filipino soldiers and some local men. This incident called for a celebration in the locality because it is a period of rejoicing "*tay sya nan chinmakaran si lagsak*" said Mr. Po-or. Most men who participated in the battle with the Japanese infantry also acquired their *chaklag*. This account was confirmed by the statement of Hon. Alfonso Kiat-ong Sr. when he said that it was after WWII when tattooing among women was seen as a fashion during that time thus many ladies acquired tattoos on their arms. Ina Wanay Sianen, 69 years old, an elder from barangay Guina-ang said that arm tattoos were considered a fashionable accessory in their generation so most girls wished to obtain this permanent arm tattoo "*Ap-aparan mi na (fatek) man ad kasin unto mamagkit kami.*" ("Long ago, the tattoo was a valuable cosmetic among young ladies like us.")

Primarily, women's *fatek* which was specifically called *pong-o* can prove their femininity at the time of puberty. Ina Kang-it said, "*Kanan cha en lalaki ta mo adi ta mafatkan*" ("They say that we look like boys if we do not have tattoos.") This kind of statement proved that tattooing also served as gender identity. It was also a form of cosmetics or a way of modifying the body because women with tattoos were considered beautiful. Hence tattoos were acquired to enhance a lady's appearance. Females without tattoos were described as *lokmug nan lima cha* (their arms are like boiled camote) as told by Ina'y Fen-ak. The reason why women had a tattoo on their arms was that they served as beautiful props to display when they danced the *sagni* whenever the *ato* conducts a feast.

The Bontoc *fatek* is comprised of organized symbols that are linked together to form a design. The designs are geometrical consisting of lines and shapes arranged creatively to suit the arms of women and the torso of men. The symbols that are typically tattooed on women's arms are *inab-afek* (symbol resembling a net), *inar-alam-am* (fern), *sinik-sikaw* (scales/stone walls), *finab-alatong* (black beans), *tinik-tiko* (crooked vertical lines), *inun-unas* (sugar cane), *tokwifit* or *tinanat-alaw* (star), *finab-fab-a* (teeth), *tiney-tey-tey* (ladder), *tinag-takho* (man), *kag-ayaman* (centipede) and *soklub* or *payak* (wings). The design represents symbols that are common in the daily lives of the Bontoks. The designs may not be identical but the symbols used to form them are the same. Moreover, the researcher noticed that symbols such as *soklub*, *tinagtakho*, *inun-unas*, *sinik-sikaw*, *inab-afek*, and *finab-fab-a* were generally adorned on the upper arm while the other symbols were commonly seen on the lower arm like the *finab-alatong*, *tiney-tey-tey*, *tinik-tiko*, *tinat-alaw*, *kag-ayaman* and *inar-alam-am*.

Here are photographs of the various *fatek* symbols and designs which are commonly used in the Bontoc tattoos.

Soklub or Payak (Wings)



Tinat-alaw or Tokwifi (Star)



Inab-afek
(Something resembling a net)



Tiney-tey-tey (Ladder)



Tinag-takho (Man)



Tinik-tiko
(Crooked Vertical Lines)



Sinik-sikaw
(Scales/Stonewalls)



Finab-fab-a (Teeth)



Finab-alatong (Black Beans)



Inal-alam-am (Fern)





The practice of traditional tattooing in Bontoc ceased because people's cultural life changed. Reasons given by the informants are as follows: a) The tattooists are gone "Maid cha et nan en-fatek", b) traditional tattooing is a painful experience, c) educational and religious influences, d) headhunting which was the basis for the *chaklag fatek* was banned by the government, and finally, e) people tend to avoid the stigma attached to tattoo.

The last tattooist of Bontoc is *Lakay Vicente Fugnay* from *Chak-chakan* and a member of *Ato Fatayan*. According to *Ama'y Kangao*, Fugnay was a very capable *fumafatek* (tattooist) and a skilled weaver of baskets *lumalakha* (skilled weaver). His death on February 28, 1979, marked the end of traditional Bontoc tattoo *fatek*.

Changes in the Practice of Tattoo and the Changing Perceptions towards Tattoo in Contemporary Bontoc Society

The changes in the practice of tattoos were due to the entry of technological change and ideas of modernity all over the world. Developments in the Cordillera after World War II introduced scientific technology and modernization making possible the social interaction between lowlanders and the people of the Cordillera. The Bontoc community was no exception to said the developmental change that affected the people's culture and which led to the change in attitude and perception towards the tattoo. At the onset, the old folks resisted cultural change but gradually, the educated younger generation ceded to the lure of new ideas and the western way of life. This led to the disintegration of the Bontoc traditional society followed by the transformation of the people's culture.

Changes in the attitudes and perceptions towards tattoo in contemporary Bontoc society is a tug of war between

the older and younger generation. This is evidenced by the responses made by young people who were interviewed. It is noted in this study that tattooing in Bontoc is now taking a renaissance at present as revealed by the growing number of youngsters and professionals getting interested in tattoos and the offering of tattoo services by skilled tattoo artists in this capital town. Nevertheless, modern tattoos vary from the Bontoc traditional tattoo in some ways. First, the Bontoc traditional tattoos were done by using ethnic procedures and crude tools like sharpened implements used in pricking and pigments made out of available materials such as the fruit of the *waterfall* tree or soot while modern tattoos are done using a tattoo machine, known as a gun, and are administered by paid experts. Furthermore, the introduction of tattoo machines to modern tattooing made it easier and faster and blood-free making it friendly to those who are afraid of pricking. Moreover, the Bontoc traditional tattoos used plain black pigment only while modern tattoos can use a wide variety of colors. Traditional tattoo designs were more organized and customary, unlike the modern ones which are personalized aside from the use of varied designs. The traditional mode of tattooing was painful while the use of the machines and advanced technology at present makes tattooing less painful.

Ashley Bagwan, 27 years old, a businesswoman said that most elders who saw her tattoo said, "*kag ka falud*" ("You are like a prisoner"). Likewise, Coie Coto-ong, 15 years old, a third-year student at the Mountain Province General Comprehensive High School shared his experience with people who saw his tattoo. When some people saw his tattoo on his left arm they uttered the word, "addict" however, young people like him would say "astig". Earlier, it was once a pride for a Bontoc to have tattoo marks on his or her body, but now a tattooed Bontoc woman has to undergo the feeling of shame because of her tattooed arms to the extent that she has to wear a long-sleeved blouse to conceal her tattooed arms. However, it was observed that postmodern art now includes tattoos as a genuine art form of expression. In the Philippines, Tribal Gear Philippines holds an annual "Dutdutan Festival", a celebration of body art and ink whose clientele come from the upper-class Philippine society. This reflects that the status of tattoos as a stigma is fast fading. Tattooing in the postmodern age is not only art or symbol but a business industry and a profession. Tattoos had adorned the arms and chests of criminals and construction workers but now it is enjoying a renaissance since it has become the vogue of the counterculture.

At present, the reasons for individuals getting tattooed are personal and varied. I have interviewed five tattooed young people whose ages range from 14-to 38 years old and all of them considered tattoos as a form of body art and fashion. Tattoo today is becoming a commodity as well as an art. Even adults who want to have permanent eyebrows and lips usually let their face be tattooed. Tattoo is now part of the fast-growing health and beauty industry and is a popular modern cosmetic. With the foregoing data and observations,

the Bontoc young people are the ones whose perceptions and attitudes towards tattoos are fast changing. Although the majority did not yet shed off their prejudice against tattoos as a sign of social deviance, the influence of the commercial advertisements with role models having tattoos is gradually making them acceptable as modern art. Moreover, the tattoo is now a commoditized body art that can be appropriated with less pain. The aforementioned reasons discussed above lessened the stigma associated with the practice of tattooing.

Significant Impact of Tattoos on Contemporary Bontoc Society

The traditional practice of *fatek* in contemporary society is now considered a thing of the past. Young people do not have to undergo a ritual process to get a tattoo as in the *chaklag*. Tattoos at present are not meant to fulfill religious functions and hence absolutely dissociated with their original network of meanings. Severed from its ritual connections, anyone can get a tattoo for personal or decorative reasons. Foremost, tattoos ceased to function as ethnic markers for the Bontoc tribe and other ethnic tribes in the Cordillera.

The *chaklag* tattoo served to inscribe an achieved status but it had lost its significant meaning when the traditional tattooing stopped as a practice. Changes in the tattoo designs that Bontoc young people have are far from the symbolic meaning of the *chaklag*. Thus, it likewise ceased to be a cultural identity. Nevertheless, this study believes that culture is always subject to change and hence agrees with N. Thomas' argument when he said, "Ethnic identity is not a fixed construct but something that is constantly reinscribed as members of ethnic groups deals with the changing circumstances of their individual and collective lives. Such renegotiation requires new expressions, or reconfigurations of customary forms of self-representation, which assimilate elements from other cultures and at the same time maintain what Nicholas Thomas calls "profound differences that resist fusion" (Thomas 1999).

The modern practice of tattooing is beginning to have an impact in the contemporary Bontoc community particularly in the aspect of the economy. The influence of western culture made it possible for the tattoo to become an object of commerce. The invention of the electric tattoo machine made the process of tattooing a less painful experience which is attracting many young people of Bontoc to have a tattoo. Many designs are becoming patented and are displayed on the internet and tattooing is now again a recognized profession and a career. Bontoc young people are becoming major consumers of the tattoo business. Almost every week the tattooist from Kalinga comes to do the tattoos and his clients generally come from young professionals and teenagers of Bontoc. Payment for having a tattoo ranges from six (6) thousand to twelve (12) thousand pesos. The tattoo has become a lucrative business and it will not be surprising if the art of tattooing will become one of the courses offered in the fine arts department of the college.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The traditional *fatek* (tattoo) in traditional Bontoc society conveyed symbolic meanings, especially among the male members of the tribe. The *chaklag* is a symbol of status and at the same time a part of the rite of passage. Women's tattoos in Bontoc had no significant meaning but purely for decorative purposes and peer and social acceptance in the community.

The changing attitudes and perceptions toward tattoos by the contemporary Bontoc community is a tug of war between the older and younger generation. The invention of the electric tattoo machine is attracting more Bontoc young people to have tattoos because it is now less painful than the traditional mode. Tattoos have become part of the health and beauty industry and many young professionals and teenagers are having positive attitudes and perceptions toward tattoos.

The impact of tattoos in the Bontoc society today is closely felt in the loss of cultural and symbolic meanings of tattoos and thus ceased to be an ethnic marker for the Bontoc tribe. In the area of economy, it is beginning to draw clients from young professionals and teenagers. It has likewise become an established career and business causing the development of innovated creative art.

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