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Inking an Identity: Exploring the Cultural and Symbolic Significance of Traditional Tattooing among the Apatani Community

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Abstract

The Apatani are one of the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh of India. Customarily, they were traditional practitioners of permanent body modification by tattooing on their faces. The practice of tattooing was an integral part of their culture, which they accomplished after reaching a particular biological age. This practice, once integral to Apatani life, was given up in the 1970s when the Apatani Youth Association decided to ban it as it was against the spirit of modernity. Since then, traditional tattooing has been discontinued, and are now visible only among the elderly people. At the cultural level, traditional facial tattoos are still considered unique visual identifiers of the community and are regarded as an Apatani heritage. This study looks at tattoos as a form of body modification and designing that serves as a visual language for cultural communication, with the emphasis that the meanings and practices of tattooing are culture-specific. The paper aims to explore the cultural, social, and symbolic significance of tattooing among the Apatani community, as well as the social mechanism that could sustain the practice before the ban was enforced. Through this exploration, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the tattoo culture of the Apatanis with a view to establish its cultural significance.

Keywords: Apatani, Tattoo, Culture, Visual Language, Identity

Introduction

The word ‘tattoo’ denotes the mark or design on the body made by inserting ink or pigment under the skin. Since ancient times, tattooing was practised around the world and it has become an integral part of indigenous cultures according to the historical and

archaeological data available (Deter-Wolf *et al.*, 2016). Schildkrout (2001:1) points out, "There is no culture in which people do not, or did not paint, pierce, tattoo, reshape, or simply adorn their bodies." A tattoo is identified as a sub-type of body modification that constitutes dress and functions as a medium for communication (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992). It is not merely an act of adorning the body but a deliberate inscription of symbols and designs that articulate individual narratives and social affiliations. Tattoos act as a powerful mode of communication, transcending verbal language barriers to convey personal and cultural messages. As Schildkrout (2001) notes, tattoos are a visual language, requiring an understanding of the shared symbols, myths, and social values they represent. Studies on tattoos consider them to be symbolic and communicative. Krutak (2015**)** maintains that tattooing in Indigenous culture is rarely seen as an aesthetic practice; rather it acts as a visual representation of the community's social and religious life and is mandated by the cultural organization, and social groups like clan and family. Thus, tattoos can better be understood as intangible embodiments of cultural heritage and community identity. They serve both as markers of affiliation and mediums of communication within and across communities.

Research highlights that tattoos in society have been used for different purposes, and the meaning associated with tattooing differs from culture to culture. Tattoos can signify cultural identity, aesthetic value, social position, or therapeutic use and need to be understood within the cultural context. The present study aims to investigate the cultural significance of facial tattoos as practiced by the Apatani tribe and analyse the meaning and perception of tattooing among the Apatanis. The paper explores the origin, significance, and contemporary status of Apatani tattooing, employing an ethnographic approach.

The Apatani Community's Journey Through Tradition, Religion and Modernity

The Eastern Himalayan State of Arunachal Pradesh is well known for its rich biodiversity and ethnic plurality, consisting of different cultures and belief systems. The Apatani community is one of the most prominent and well-established tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh. The main concentration of the community is in Ziro, which is the district headquarters of the Lower Subansiri district. The Ziro Valley is famous for its scenic beauty and cultural landscape. The valley is surrounded by pine forest and, adding to its beauty, there lies the ecological subsistence economy markers in the form of bamboo groves and rice fields meant for paddy cultivation-cum- pisciculture. It is also included in the tentative list of UNESCO's potential world heritage sites for its cultural landscape (UNESCO, 2014). Apatanis have been inhabiting this plateau since time immemorial; in the absence of a written record, the specific time of settlement remains

unknown. The history of the origin and migration of the Apatani is revealed through oral accounts in the form of myths. The sacred oral literature traces the origin of Apatanis from mythical places[1] to the present settlement. The traditional villages of the Apatani Community are Bulla (Reru and Kalung, Tajang), Hari, Hong, Hiija, Dutta, Bamin-Michi, and Mudang-Tage. Every Apatani village has been organised as an independent unit.

The language of the Apatanis falls under the Sino-Tibetan family. The Apatani society is segmented into several clans and sub-clans. Their traditional marriage system enforces tribal endogamy and clan exogamy. Monogamy as a societal norm is widely prevalent. As a tribal society firmly entrenched into their natural habitat, their economy used to revolve around forest ecology, animal domestication, and agricultural activity. They were considered as one of the most efficient tribes, as they practised wet rice cultivation with the skill of using irrigation technique of making channels for water supply, when their neighbouring tribes still relied on Jhum cultivation. Besides remaining engaged in agricultural activities, they were proficient weavers and craftsmen.

They celebrate the annual agricultural festival, *Dree* for good crops and bumper harvest. Two other major festivals celebrated are the *Myoko and Murung; Myoko* is an annual socio-religious festival celebrated for the well-being of the community. It is hosted and celebrated by three groups of villages on a rotational basis each year. *Murung* is one of the grand individual ceremonial rites of the Apatani community performed in January. *Murung* is conducted for the well-being of the family as well as for the prosperity of the community and is a symbol of social status. It can only be conducted if the omen identified through the divination of egg or chicken liver by the *Nyibu* (priest) gives a favorable sign. Though it is hosted or conducted by the individual family, it also involves community participation.[2]

The Apatani society has maintained a traditional democratic system of self-governance through a village council named *Bulyang*[3], which had a socio-political role with respect to their community until the Indian administration took over the control of the valley. The Apatani community had minimal interaction with outsiders[4]: anthropologist Haimendorf (1962:2) in his description observed, "Many of the villages which I visited in 1944 and 1945 had never been entered by any outsider—European, Indian, or Tibetan—nor had the villagers any conception of life outside their immediate neighbourhood''. However, after the Independence of India, the valley came under the direct control of the Indian administration. This resulted in political and social developments connecting them with outsiders.

Apatanis have their indigenous religious beliefs. Their religion falls under the category of animism and nature worship, and is polytheistic. Presently, Apatanis have institutionalized and recognized their religion as '*Danyi Piilo*'[5]. *Danyi Piilo* religion emerged as a revivalist religious movement in 1968 and became a formal religion by the 1970s to counter the spread of Christianity among the Tani communities[6]. Alongside the traditional religion, the valley has, however, witnessed the advent and adoption of Christianity and other major religions in the last 50 years, with churches, temples, and mosques being built. In conformity with the changes in their religious belief system, there have been changes in Apatani cultural practices and norms in the post-independence period when traditional practices like tattooing have been abandoned to make way for new developments bearing the stamp of modernity.

Methodology Adopted in the Study

Fieldwork was conducted in Ziro, Lower Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh, between 2022 to 2024, and extended for months spread across different seasons to gather information on the traditional Apatani practice of tattooing at different periods of time. Information which could qualify as problem-related data were collected through various methods, including observation, narrative collection, focus group interviews, discussions with different community members, visual documentation (photographs of tattoos), and by tapping secondary sources. Interviews using unstructured and semi-structured questions were conducted by selecting informants from different villages of the Apatani community, which include Bulla, Hari, Hong, Hiija, Bamin Michi, Mudang Tage, and Dutta, with a view to collect get different versions of practising tattoo culture. As Kani (1993:43) points out, "religious performance, beliefs, observation of taboo, ceremonial gift obligation, and some other characteristic features. of the people of seven villages are slightly different from one another. The sacred lores also differ slightly from one village to another, but that does not affect their total belief system because the fundamentals are the same. The dialects and pronunciation are also slightly different, but are easily intelligible.".

The primary informants for this study were elderly Apatanis, both men and women and aged above 60 years, who still bear traditional tattoos and could share their experiences of getting tattooed. Community members without traditional tattoos, aged between 20 to 60 range, were also interviewed for supplementary information regarding the tattoo culture of the community. As an insider[7] of the community, trust and rapport could easily be established, which helped in conducting in-depth interviews with key informants. Additionally, participant observation was employed, focusing on daily life and cultural events such as festivals and beauty pageants, to gain insights into the current

significance of tattoos in the community. Secondary sources, including research studies, academic journals, articles, and books, were also utilized to support and enrich the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Permanent Body Adornment of the Apatanis: Tattooed Body and Tattooing Technique

Tattoos, as a form of body adornment, have been an integral and mandatory part of the traditional cultural practices of the Apatani. Apatani practised facial tattoos and used a unique method of tattooing. The local term used for tattoos is *tiipe*.

Apatanis adorned their faces with blue straight-line tattoos in different patterns according to their gender after reaching a particular age of 7 or 8. Men were marked with 'T'-shaped tattoos on their chins, as shown in Fig. 1.

Figure 1: Kalung Gambo (72), an Apatani Priest of Kalung Village

In contrast, women were distinguished by five vertical blue lines on their chins with one horizontal blue line above them and a vertical line stretching from the top of the forehead running down to the tip of the nose, bisecting the nostril as shown in Fig. 2.

Before being adorned with full-fledged tattoos, women first got tattooed with a single small, straight blue line on their forehead called a *panyo*; this was done before they would reach the age of attaining full-fledged tattoos. It is to be noted that Apatani women could undergo the process of facial tattooing only after piercing their nose and after having worn nose plugs on both sides of their nostrils made of cane for a year.

Figure 2: Nani Yami (82) of Reru Village Standing on the Right, with Traditional Tattoos and Nose Plugs. Hage Yapa (78) on the Left without Nose Plugs

Traditionally, the piercing and tattooing were performed during the winter season, a deliberate choice to expedite the healing process and ensure minimal discomfort for the individuals undergoing these bodily modifications. It was performed exclusively by female members of the family or female members of the community having expertise in tattooing. It was done at an individual level; there was no specific day or ritual to be followed for performing the tattoo art.

Natural instruments and materials were used for tattooing. A thorn found in the area called "*Lobyo Tare*" (*Cirsium hookerianum*) was used as a tattoo needle to puncture the flesh. A bamboo or cane stick was used to support two or three thorns that were tied together with a thread and the stick providing a greater grip for the thorn to work on. The "*empya yakho,"* a different type of bamboo or a cane stick, was used as a hammer to provide pressure on the stick that was attached to the thorn for piercing the skin.

The dark blue colour of the tattoo was attained through a mixture of natural ingredients. These include '*chinyu'* i.e, soot accumulated in the cooking pot, which was then mixed with lard or pork fats '*Hulyi'* and '*pilla allah'*, the cooked rice water. This mixture not only gave blue pigmentation to the skin but was also thought to have antiseptic properties. The tattooing process started by drawing the design of the tattoo on the face using the mixture with the help of a flattened stick called '*yabin'*. It was then pricked with the tattooing tool using the hammer and prick technique. As the skin was pricked, the blood oozing out of the pierced skin was dabbed using cotton or cotton cloth. The pricked skin was then left to dry overnight. The next morning, the dried wound was cleaned by splashing water over it and the mixture was reapplied. The wound was then allowed to heal, eventually resulting in a tattoo with blue pigmentation after a few days. During the whole tattooing process, the tattoo bearer was held tightly by others as the process was a painful one. As tattooing was a painful exercise, not all would willingly go for the tattoo. Still, some of the Apatanis got themselves tattooed twice using the same procedure to get darker and more prominent tattoos.

Since early times, the Apatanis had followed the tattooing tradition, which became a distinctive and significant cultural component of the Apatani community. However, this tradition was banned in 1974 and as a result of the ban, the tattoo tradition started fading away. At present, it is no longer in practice. However, elderly Apatanis aged above 60 and with the traditional markings of tattoos can still be found.

Unravelling the Myths, Beliefs and Origins of Tattooing in the Apatani Community

Tattoos are not just markings on the skin, but are also associated with myths and beliefs of indigenous societies that are held dearly by the community members. However, the myths and beliefs associated with such customary practices differ from one community to another.

The cultural beliefs and myths lying behind the Apatani tattoo culture can also give an insight into its origin. Although there are no literary sources for the origin of *Tiipe*, the oral history of the community reveals various folktales which may contribute to the knowledge of how *Tiipe* became a part of the Apatani culture. The diversity of stories reflects the varied nature of truth and different sources of traditional history.

One of the narratives, though severely contested and criticised in recent academia, describes how Apatani women were considered to be the most attractive of all neighboring tribes. Because of this, the neighboring tribe would frequently venture to kidnap them. The community, disturbed by these repeated kidnappings, decided to mark their women with tattoos to distinguish them from others; this helped them recognize

Apatani women and work for their protection. Tattooing young girls to make them unappealing to the neighbouring tribe may be the reason for its introduction. The practice, once introduced, has been continued by the community. This narration was repeated by many other Apatanis who also believed that the tattoo practice was aimed at making Apatani women unattractive and to protect them from abduction by neighbors during war expeditions and raids. Yapyang, an Apatani woman aged around 67, informed us that when she was young, she heard the community elders telling that as they (Apatanis) had a small population, tattooing women needed to be undertaken to protect them from abduction.

Similar to the popular narrative in circulation, another narrative for making Apatani women unattractive is present among the Apatanis. According to this narration, a community called "*Tanii tarii"* inhabiting alongside Apatanis the present-day Ziro, were known for their notorious activities. One of the informants, Otung, an Apatani woman aged around late 60, narrated, "As the Apatani plateau consists of different villages, the area of *Tanii tarii* had to be crossed to go from one village to another. *Tanii tarii* kidnapped the girls who passed by their area and tried to molest them. As the word spread about their activity, the Apatani men had gone to confront them and charged them with a penalty for their misdeed. *Tanii tarii* offenders cleverly avoided them, giving the excuse that they had been unwell and did not dare to go out of their homes. *Tanii tarii* thus escaped paying the penalty and continued with their notorious act. Utterly frustrated by the activities of *Tanii tarii*, the Apatanis chased them away from the area. While all these were going on, the Apatani girls were tattooed and noses plugged to make them look unappealing so that they could be protected from the misdeeds of *Tanii tarii*."

Both these narratives suggest that facial tattooing was intended for protecting women by disfiguring their faces, which also served as an identification marker for Apatani women. However, the narrative of tattooing used for disfiguring women did not address the reason behind tattooing among Apatani men. When this question was raised, often the answer was more like an assumption that the Apatani men tattooed because they felt the need to identify alongside Apatani women to foster the same group feeling.

Furthermore, both protection or disfigurement related narratives on the origin of Apatani tattoo have been contested within the community itself. While many informants agreed that *Tanii tarii* were indeed notorious and were eventually chased away for their misdeeds, they rejected the claim that tattooing was started because of them. They asserted that the Apatanis already practised tattooing before the *Tanii tarii* incident took place. Additionally , the disfigurement narrative was also refuted by the Apatani priests. They argued that the narrative was not included in the basic composition of the Apatani

sacred oral tradition, known as *miji migung*, and dismissed it as merely a hearsay story. Further, based on the informal conversation with the community members, this narrative was thought to be of recent origin, possibly when the Apatani youth began interacting with the outsiders and were influenced by external perspectives. It may also be an attempt to offer a simplified or more acceptable explanation of the tattooing practice to those outside the community. This suggests a possibility that the disfigurement narrative was presented in the light of emerging external or modern notions of beauty. However, this interpretation remains speculative, as the precise origin of the narrative is difficult to ascertain.

Apart from the disfigurement narratives, an Apatani priest revealed that in the Apatani mythology, in the form of *miji*, the tradition of *tiipe* or tattoo was said to have started at the time of *Iipyo* during the *Ronser Murung*[8] festival. Two people named *Iipyo Takhu* and *Uyi Tanyang* gave their own prescription that women should get tattooed starting from the forehead in the house of *Takhu or Takhu Nello* and men should also get tattooed on their chin at *Tanyang Nello* for the purpose of distinguishing them from women. *Abotani*, regarded as the forefather of Tani communities, is believed to have adopted this tradition of tattooing, and as the direct descendants of Abotani the Apatanis followed this practice. This narrative suggests that traditional Apatani tattoos have existed since the beginning of human history. However, this narrative can be debated as this tradition is missing among other Tani communities like the Nyishi[8] , Adi, and Galo who are also considered as the descendants of Abotani.

Another tattoo origin narrative claims that tattoo practice started during their migration to the present settlement. According to the Apatani migration story, the Apatanis initially migrated with other communities. However, during the migration, the Apatanis eventually got separated from other communities and settled down in *Siilo Supung* (also known as *Anii Supung*), the present Apatani valley.

The origin of tattoo practice is intertwined with the migration-related mythic story, as informed by a respondent Nani Diibo Yami, a women of over 70 years old. As they asserted, “In course of migration, Apatanis, along with people of other communities, had to cross rivers and dense forests, and as they were passing through the forest, they cut off the plants that came on their way. Apatanis followed the path cleared by other groups of tribes who led the way, but at one point, they saw that some new plants (*Kulu,* a banana plant) had come up. This made them assume that the other groups must have advanced leaving them way behind. Feeling that it would be too late for them to continue the long journey following the path of other groups, Apatanis decided to stop at the place, separating themselves from other communities; from there they migrated on their own to

settle in Ziro Valley. Having separated from other communities, they then decided to get tattooed as their unique identification marker creating a sense of belonging to their group." The realization of the need for making them distinct from other tribal groups prompted them to get their faces tattooed so as to identify themselves as Apatanis.

There is another origin myth in connection with tattoo practice of the Apatanis that revolves around beauty, divine guidance and fertility. The narration runs, "A long time ago, there lived a woman named *Ami Niido Biinyi* who was said to be beautiful and possessed the skills in all the tasks expected of a woman. Despite these qualities, she struggled to find herself a groom. Years went by, but no man came forward to propose her for marriage. With each passing day, as she grew older, she became concerned about losing her ability to become a mother. This worry disturbed her, causing her sleepless nights and making her more aged than she actually was. One day, unable to endure the suffering, she sought help from the God. She asked the God for finding her a way out to regain her lost youth and beauty to attract a husband. The God promptly responded and advised her, saying, 'To restore your youth, beauty, and ability to bear children, you must tattoo your face. Additionally, to ensure an abundance of poultry and cattle, you must wear a nose plug (*Yaping Hulo*), an ear plug (*Yaru Hukho),* and a large flat brass earring *(Ruting Yarang).*'

Following the divine guidance, *Ami Niidon Biinyi* tattooed her face and adorned herself with nose plugs, ear plugs, and a brass earring. These modifications miraculously restored her youth and beauty. Her new appearance captivated a man named *Miido Jindo Tajing*, who then proposed to her for marriage. She accepted his proposal, and they married, living happily ever after. Their union resulted in the birth of *Khalos*, supernatural beings (Kime Mamung, 2023), and they were blessed with an abundance of poultry and cattle. When *Pinsang Gyut,* one of the *Khalos*, was born, he noticed unique patterns on a pine tree and was inspired by them. He wanted to keep those designs with him and replicated them on his skin. The Apatanis subsequently adopted tattooing from *Pinsang Gyut,* which became an essential component of Apatani culture (Tado Pura, 2000)

However, the above narrative has also been contested by many who did not find any reference to the tattoo in the story related to *Ami Niido Biinyi*. According to them, she married many times, looking for a suitable husband to settle down with. Later, she married *Miido Jiindo Taji*, a wealthy man, and settled down with him.

Clearly, there are multiple contesting narratives behind the tattoo tradition of Apatani. Therefore, it is important to understand the underlying beliefs and values associated with the tattoo lying behind these origin stories rather than trying to search for

a single authentic origin story. Though the origin stories are multiple, the custom of tattoos has been collectively practiced and sustained for a long period of time. It seems important to consider the narratives of the lived experiences of people who were part of the time when the practice was prevalent.

Cultural Imprints: The Social and Symbolic Significance of Tattooing

Tattooing as a Cultural Practice

Tattooing was a collective tradition, practiced by the Apatani community, where all the members of the community had to get their face tattooed once they attained the age of 7 or 8, preceding the onset of puberty. It was a mandated cultural norm upheld through generational bindings and social enforcement. This is evident in the narratives shared by tattooed Apatanis, sharing about their experience of getting tattooed. The respondents recalled that upon reaching the appropriate age for tattooing, those who had hesitation in getting their face tattooed were often urged by their mothers or elders, who would say, "All your friends have tattoos now; you will be shamed to be around them. So, you must get the face tattooed to become part of your age group" [10]. The rhetoric of shame ensured compliance with the tradition of tattooing, which highlights the societal expectation that all members belonging to the community must get tattooed after reaching a specific age. It can be said that tattooing was a tradition of the Apatani community that served as a visual identifier of transition to adulthood, affirming an individual's place in the peer group as a constituent of the community. Since tattooing was done in the winter season, Apatani men were excited to flaunt their newly tattooed faces in the cultural procession as a part of the *Murung* festival held in January. For the boys, a tattooed face was seen as a mark of pride, a symbol of the journey towards attainment of manhood.

Furthermore, the tattoo was intricately related with their prospects of marriage. The mythology of *Ami Niido Biinyi* posits that women had to adorn their faces with tattoos to find a suitable husband. This belief signifies the cultural importance of tattoos in initiating a state of readiness for marital union. Personal narratives provide further insight into this practice. Bamin Risan, an Apatani woman aged 65, narrated, "I was not ready to get the tattoo as the process seemed scary and painful. I tried to run away, but my mother held me, saying, if you do not get it done now, you will find it difficult to get a good Apatani husband." This process of relating tattoos to the prospect of marriage was shared by most of the Apatani women adorned with tattoos. This reveals the societal pressure exerted on girls to undergo tattooing to secure a suitable husband.

It is clear that face tattooing among Apatanis was practised through generations exerting social pressure and displaying collective adherence. Tattooing in the Apatani community was not a personal choice but rather a compulsory cultural practice.

Tattoos as an Identity Marker

For both men and women, tattoos were a significant identity marker in the sense that tattoos helped the Apatani to distinguish them from other neighbouring tribal groups. This significance is rooted in their origin myth, which reveals that while migrating from a distant place to their current location of settlement, they were separated from other tribal groups when they felt the need to identify themselves as belonging to a single group. This sense of identification with a single group is embedded in their belief system that their forefather Abotani had tattoos on his face, which prompted them to adorn their faces with tattoos as a reminder of the fact that they were the descendants of Abotani. Elderly Apatanis sharing their experience of getting tattooed informed that they were tattooed because their parents told them that they should mark their face with a tattoo as a symbolic mark of Abotani's descendants. They recalled that in those days, tattooing was associated with and practiced as a manifestation of belief in their descent from Abotani. Further, the popular narrative of marking their faces to help identify and protect the women also reflects the use of tattoos for identification. Though the origin myth has diverse meanings, it all indicates that the tattoo was attached with community identification. Apart from the narrative on the origin of tattoo tradition, the tattooed Apatanis shared that when they resisted getting their face tattooed, they were told, "You will look like just any other person who may belong to any other tribe if you don't get the tattoo." This statement highlights the community's consciousness of group identification through the physical marker.

These narratives represent the idea of Apatani's identity creating a sense of ethnic belongingness by using tattoos to differentiate themselves from others. In addition, the tradition of tattooing was not merely a personal choice but a cultural mandate that could reinforce ethnic identity and promote social cohesion. A sense of ethnic pride was associated with it.

Tattooing as a Protective Measure

In the widely circulated narrative on the origin of tattooing in the Apatani community, tattooing was intended to function as a protective measure. According to a previously-cited narrative, Apatani women, known for their beauty, were frequently abducted or molested by the neighboring communities. In response, women's faces were marked with tattoos to make them less appealing and thereby safeguarding them from abduction.

Tattooing practices were strategically adopted as a deterrent against abduction, ensuring a sense of security within the community.

A similar protective function of tattooing is observed among the Dhanuk community of Bihar, where lower-caste women tattooed their visible body parts to protect themselves from the advances of upper-caste men (Pandey, 2015). When the question is women's protection, tribe-caste differences seem to be of little importance.

It may be suggested that tattooing among the Apatanis served the functional role of ensuring women's safety while at the same time acting as an identity marker that could ensure that Apatani women remained easily recognizable, discouraging any possibility of their further abduction by the neighboring communities.

Tattooing for Aesthetic Value

Contrary to the earlier observation, the tattoo culture of the Apatani community, apart from its significance in communicating as a visual marker of identity and adulthood, was practised with the idea of beautification. Some Apatanis considered that having tattoos would enhance their beauty, and so, despite the pain they had to suffer, they were willing to go through the tattooing process. A tattooed woman Tadu Yana, aged about 72 years, shared her experience of getting tattooed, saying that it was she who asked her mother to perform tattooing on her as she wanted to have a tattooed face to look pretty like her friends with the tattoo. Although the process of getting the tattoo was a painful experience, yet she endured the pain to look beautiful with the tattoo. Some Apatanis even went to the extent of getting their face tattooed twice to get the darker impression of the tattoo. They believed that darker tattoos would make their appearance more appealing. As a matter of fact, tattooing twice for beautification was a popular practice among the Apatanis.

Having a specific facial tattoo was an indicator of beauty as believed by the community members. Stories of tattooed Apatanis on their experience of getting tattooed revealed that they got tattooed after reaching a particular age. They felt that without the facial tattoo their look would remain incomplete, and would feel rather alienated from the group. It was uncommon to come across people without their faces being tattooed. Those who were hesitant and didn't get the tattoo were subjected to shame; eventually, they were convinced to get the facial tattoo. The reluctance to get the face tattooed was not because they thought the tattoo would disfigure their face but because of the pain it would inflict on the bearer all through the tattooing process. An aesthetic element in the form of morally elevated quality of beauty was loosely attached with the tattoo among the Apatanis. This inclination to beautify through facial tattoos reflects that it was not just a

personal choice of an aesthetic quality but one which involved broader societal norms and expectations of the community.

The practice of tattooing in the Apatani community was more than just an outward transformation of the body part serving an individual purpose. It was a cultural practice with social and symbolic significance. The significance of tattooing can be tied to their social structure. The association of marriage with the tattoo emphasizes the importance of tattoos in maintaining the Apatani custom of endogamy. Since they considered marrying outside their community a breach of their social custom, tattoos served a social cause, ensuring that they marry within their community. Apatanis performed tattooing as a consciously followed practice to distinguish themselves from other tribes, thereby maintaining their cultural identity.

The significance of tattooing for identity and aesthetics in the Apatani community generated a societal expectation to conform to this cultural practice. Though some Apatanis willingly got their faces tattooed, some were forcibly tattooed, reflecting that it was not merely a personal choice but a cultural mandate. Social pressure played a crucial role in perpetuating the tattoo tradition, such as getting tattooed to be part of the peer group. Those who did not conform were ridiculed and put to shame, and this pressure ensured widespread compliance, embedding the practice deeply within the cultural framework. The narratives of tattooed Apatanis about the pain involved and persistence displayed in achieving darker tattoos further emphasize the extent individuals were prepared to go to achieve the beauty standard and meet social expectations. This collective adherence to tattooing tradition highlights the profound impact of cultural and social dynamics in maintaining the practices.

The Intersection of Tattooing and Gender in Apatani Culture

In the Apatani community, tattoo patterns are gender-specific, with women typically having more prominent tattoos compared to men, as shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. Both men and women have tattoos on their chin, but to different degrees, with women having five vertical lines and men having only a single vertical line. The significance of the pattern of Apatani men's tattoos, resembling the English letter "T" (seen in fig. 3), can be linked to their important material culture known as "*Babo*" (Fig. 4).

Fig. 3: Sketch of an Apatani Man with a T-shaped Tattoo on His Chin (courtesy Hage Layang)

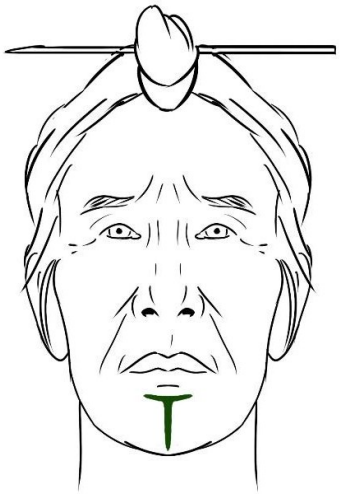

Fig. 4. 'Babo' erected near the sacred wooden platform 'lapang' and a smaller 'babo' erected on the front verandah of the house.

Babo is a T-shaped sacred wooden structure erected for the commencement of the *Myoko* Festival. There are two types of *babo* structures, namely, *akha babo*, the larger version, which is positioned in front of the sacred platform called *lapang,* while *hime babo* is placed on the front verandah of the household. In the past, *hime babo* was erected for each male child of the family, signifying male presence within the household. The whole preparation of the *babo*, from bringing the wooden log from the forest to erecting it, has traditionally been carried out by the male members of the community.

Takhe Kani pointed out that the constructions of *babo,* alongside *lapang* and *nago* (sacred hut), are markers of the male identity of the society. He further cited a lullaby that expresses the mother's hope for her son to lead the constructions of *lapang*, *babo,* and *nago* when he grows up and is recognized as a man in the society (Kani 1993:48). This lullaby is indicative of societal expectations placed on Apatani men and their role in maintaining these traditional objects.

Despite its strong association with men's cultural roles, many within the community perceive *babo* as a signifier of female due to its decorative elements, which resemble traditional female adornments. However, others argue that *babo* is not necessarily a female, as decorative elements are also worn by male priests. Regardless of different interpretations of the cultural practices surrounding *babo*, the tasks are reserved exclusively for men and *hime babo* is specifically erected for male members, making the whole exercise male-centric.

Thus, the cultural practices associated with the *babo* and the male tattoo having close visual similarity to *babo* may lead to the impression that the tattoo of Apatani men serves as a symbolic marker of the masculine role and the cultural identity of the community.

From identity to Heritage: The Transformation of Tattoo Culture among the Apatanis

Practice of the art of tattooing was discontinued in the 1970s when the 'Apatani Youth Association' (AYA), established in 1974 by enthusiastic young students, banned the practice with government support. The ban was successfully implemented by gaining support from the locals, raising awareness, and imposing fines. As such, the permanent body modification practice of facial tattooing is no longer in vogue. However, at present, only the elderly Apatanis above 50 are seen with these traditional markings. They now represent the last generation of Apatanis with facial tattoos.

The banning of tattoos among the Apatani people was influenced by changing perceptions correlated with political and economic transformations in the valley. The

integration of the valley into the Indian administrative framework led to significant developments, such as the establishment of communication networks, markets, and educational institutions. Consequently, many educated youths began to pursue higher education and employment opportunities outside the valley, which exposed them to diverse cultures and perspectives. This cultural contact led to a re-evaluation of traditional Apatani practices, including facial tattoos and nose plugs, which were once symbols of beauty and cultural identity. Many young Apatani individuals who left the valley for higher education and employment outside encountered stigma and shame due to their appearance. Some recalled their experience of being made an object of fun for their facial tattoos, which left them feeling ashamed. These experiences were commonly reported by those who had left the valley, highlighting the negative reactions they faced. The Apatani Youth Association (AYA)[11] played a crucial role in advocating for the discontinuation of these practices. A key member[12] of AYA argued that the ban was necessary to prevent future generations from facing difficult and disturbing situations associated with those traditional practices.

This shift in perception resulted in a change in the cultural values associated with tattoos. Practices once regarded as forms of beautification came to be viewed as mere disfigurement. As one of the tattooed women remarked, "Today, looking at the young Apatani girls without tattoos, I realize how the decision to ban the practice was correct. Girls look beautiful without tattoos, and we look hideous with these markings and nose plugs." This transformation in perception has been further evidenced by the reluctance of tattooed women to be photographed. They often questioned, "Why do you want to take my picture? I look hideous like a monster with this tattoos and nose plugs." The concept of tattoos as bodily disfigurement, initially adopted by the educated Apatani youth, has permeated the broader Apatani community, leading to a widespread reassessment of the traditional practice of body modification. This shift in perception suggests that the traditional practice of tattooing, which once served as an identification marker for the Apatanis, has been compromised within the larger socio-cultural context. The long-standing tradition of using tattoos to distinguish themselves from other groups has been abandoned in favour of getting assimilated into a global cultural tradition, adopting a more homogeneous appearance.

The present generation of Apatanis feel somewhat relieved that the forceful and mandatory tattooing has been banned, as they, more than fearing the physical pain involved, are scared of marking their face permanently, which would distinguish them from others. Still, they also look at tattoos as a cultural heritage of the Apatanis, which

played an important part in defining the Apatani identity. These give rise to a complex situation characterized by the interplay of respect for heritage and a desire for personal autonomy. As a reflection to that, during various occasions, such as Dree festivals, beauty pageants, or cultural occasions for traditional performances, they present themselves with fake facial tattoos. So, the presentation of traditional Apatani is still done with facial tattoos as a mark of celebration of the tradition. It serves as a collective bonding among the community members sharing the memory of a cultural identity based on tattooing.

Conclusion

The tattoo tradition of the Apatani was not simply a practice of inking the face or a decorative act, but one which was layered with meanings. It was rooted in myth, reflecting the community's sense of identity, aesthetic sensibility, and marking important transitional phases in life. The practice was upheld and transmitted through generations as a social norm tied to their cultural existence.

The traditional practice of tattooing, which once served as a significant activity of Apatani cultural life, has been abandoned with the spread of modernization. As modern ways of life have spread among the Apatani community, the practice of tattooing and its rich cultural significance have been lost. The younger generation, influenced by global cultural trends and modern aesthetics, started to see these traditional tattoos as outdated or irrelevant. However, the Apatani people in general still associate the facial tattoo tradition with their cultural past as a unique community identity marker. This is reflected in the community's efforts to reconnect with their traditional past by adopting traditional facial tattoos during cultural events using ink or paint, the impression of which may not last for a long time. This practice allows individuals to honor and celebrate their ancestral customs without going for the permanent impression of traditional tattoos. By doing so, they create a link between the past and the present, and at the same time, what they consider as their sacred duty, acknowledge and respect their heritage in an increasingly modernized situation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this study.

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End Notes

1. The Apatani oral tradition includes a timeline that traces the origin of the world, the birth of humans, and the settlement of Apatanis in Ziro. This timeline is marked by mythological places where significant events took place, leading to the present place of inhabitance. The mentioned places, such as *Kolyun Kolo*, *Uyi*, *Iipyo*, *Mudo*, and *Supung*, are arranged chronologically in the oral tradition. These mythological places are also referred to as periods or eras of Apatani history, where these events occurred.
2. It involves community participation where the clan members, distant relatives, traditional friends, and village members help in the conduct of the ceremony through manpower or financial help. It involves feasting, ritual procession and a huge number of animal sacrifices, with sacrificial meat being distributed in each household of the village or every village household of the Apatani, depending upon the scale of the ceremony**.**
3. *Bulyang* is a hereditary position held by men as a representative of a lineage at clan level, clan at the village level, and village at the level of community as a whole. They acted as a mediator to resolve disputes that required external intervention.
4. Outsiders mentioned here are people residing outside the region of the Apatani inhabited area and neighbouring tribal areas.
5. In the Apatani dialect*, the Donyi Polo* faith is denominated as *Danyi Piilo,* wherein *Danyi* corresponds to the sun and *Piilo* to the moon.

6. Tani Communities are the tribal communities that trace their descent from *Abotani*. *Abotani* is a mythological character who is considered to be the first human on earth and regarded as the forefather of Tani communities.
7. The researcher is an insider belonging to the Apatani Community
8. *Murung* is graded into two types: *Rontii* and *Ronser Murung*. The division is based on the offerings and sacrifices of animals made by the host family. *Ronser Murung* is performed on a smaller scale as compared to *Rontii Murung.*
9. Tado, Pura. 2000. Significance of Tattoo among the Apatanis. *Dree Souvenir*, Itanagar. Print. pp. 16-18. This article is based on the author's interview with Sri Takhe Piilo, a priest from Hong Village, on 11th May 1998.
10. Interview conducted with Nani Mali (68 years), and Duyu Halyang (80 years) on 18/6/2024.
11. The Apatani Youth Association was formed with the initiation of the first-generation educated Apatanis. AYA members were educated college youths, school students, and active youth of the village.
12. Interview conducted on 7/5/23 with Nani Mali, the first General Secretary of AYA,1974. He was a college student at Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, at the time of the formation of AYA.

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