Marked: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Tattooing Practices

The practice of tattooing, permanently marking one's skin through the use of needles or chisels, and pigments, is present in both the Maori and American cultures. In New Zealand, the Maori used tattoos to represent individuals' statuses and genealogies. In the United States, individuals mark themselves in a sort of rebellion against the mainstream culture, although rebellion is expected by the society because of its emphasis on independence. Through globalization, even the designs of one culture can be absorbed by another as "tradition", giving the symbols new meaning and purpose. Both cultural practices reflect the individual's need, as a human, to understand the world and establish him/herself in it.

The Maori of New Zealand originated on other islands of Polynesia and migrated to their current location using boats. Practicing a mix of horticulture and foraging, the Maori were able to create chiefdoms that survive off sweet potato-like tubers and the seasonal hunting of wild game.[1] Their subsistence method is more extensive than intensive, requiring a great deal of land (Gell 239). This need for populous hunting grounds and fertile lands for farming led the Maori to become highly territorial and put a premium on males, making the society into a warrior-based one. Raids on neighboring groups were common, especially during winter to acquire stored agricultural goods.

Descent in this society is bilateral with a "patrilineal bias" (Gell 241). For high chiefs, pedigrees are traced through the first-born sons, while ordinary chiefs trace their genealogies to the founder of the tribe or *hapu*. First-born women born from an unbroken line of first-born sons also have a significant amount of prestige, although their power cannot be conferred to their sons. These women often do not get married "because the public significance of their marriage could only be, at best, to concede equality in genealogical terms between the male line of the bride-giving *hapu* and the male line of the bride-taking one" (Gell 241). This complex system of descent and family organization leads to a fragmented and tumultuous political system that values fierceness and ambition.

Competition is a central part of Maori society. Competitive ceremonial exchanges were undertaken to gain prestige and, possibly, was used as a form of redistribution, a practice similar to that of the Kwakiutl of the American Pacific Northwest (Gell 240). Each group was lead by a chief, who was a "political animal", not just an imposing figure of authority (Gell 240). The legitimacy of leadership is often unclear, although genealogical ties are in theory the means of succession because of "the absence of unilineal descent groups and exclusive, non-overlapping, kin-corporations" (Gell 240). Thus, leadership succession is decided through competitive exchange. In addition, "chiefs are obliged to reinforce and if possible enhance their position through displays of competitive generosity" (Gell 240). The leader of a group is a representative of the values of the society he/she governs. The warlike ferocity and political prowess of Maori leaders points to the aggressive nature of the culture.

The tattooing practice, *ta-moko*, and the markings that result, *moko*, help to distinguish important individuals within the fragmented structure of Maori culture. The spiraling patterns that are etched into the faces of Maori males using a chisel convey the personal history of that individual. Lineages and personal achievements are literally carved into the skin and pigment is rubbed into the wounds. Two styles, one curvilinear and one non-curvilinear, have developed and represent an older design tradition and a newer, more progressive one (Gell 250). These designs are very intricate and are usually undertaken by specialized individuals who travel throughout

the islands. The tattooing of males begins when they reach adulthood and the tattoos are accumulated over their lifetimes (Gell 246). Males are also tattooed on their thighs and hips

[1] In addition, they were able to domesticate the dog, which was used more for hunting and companionship than as a food source (Gell 239).

using a comb-like instrument, which does not create the permanent grooves that the chiseling method does. Women are also receiving *moko* for similar reasons men do, only the placement is different. Using the comb method, elaborate designs are, most commonly, placed on their chins and lips, although more extensive tattoos have been accounted (Gell 246).

Although the majority of Maori men and women are tattooed, some remain unmarked for spiritual reasons. The priest-class of *tohunga* and very aristocratic women are not usually tattooed. The reasons behind this practice are best explained through the religious beliefs, which mix submission with hubris (Gell 243). The act of being tattooed separates the individual from the world of the divine, which to the Maori is equated with darkness, being divine was not something to be desired as it is seen in Western cultures (Gell 525). Tattooing is divine retaliation or revenge and "could be understood as a disfigurement or wound following a blow struck by a god", which is in keeping with their view of humans as "heroic victims of divine powers" (Gell 253).[2] For chiefs and secularly-important people, it is important to distance oneself from divinity. There are songs that are sung during the *ta-moko* ritual that "indicate that the aim of tattooing was not to sanctify or ennoble the patient, but to render them fit for secular activities, love and war" (Gell 247). By this logic, it makes sense that priests and highly aristocratic women are not tattooed. The priests must keep their strong connections to the supernatural realm and the women of high rank are not expected to marry because they had "the accumulated status of their male
ancestors...but [cannot] effectively transmit this accumulated rank" (Gell 263). The women will not participate in the secular activity of love and, therefore, have no reason to be prepared for it through *ta-moko*.

America is a state-level society that possesses a capitalist market economy. The territory is owned by individuals or the state and is fiercely guarded through laws and sometimes force. It is a class-structured society and although class mobility is asserted, it is virtually impossible for an individual to improve his/her status in the course of a lifetime, making mobility a well-loved myth rather than a reality. Neolocal monogamy is the ideal marriage practice, although serial monogamy is more prevalent. Families are organized in bilateral descent groups with a strong emphasis on the nuclear family and the children are raised to be competitive and individualistic through the practice of independence training, preparing them for the high-stress and ambition- absorbed workplace.

According to historical records, the practice of tattooing has been part of European culture since at least the time of the Greeks and Romans. Soldiers in both Mediterranean cultures wore tattoos as symbols of unity and fraternity among a regiment or legion. There were also Celtic groups in the northern parts of the continent that practiced tattooing, also symbolizing their membership in a group. Body art disappears from popular culture when Christianity sweeps through Europe during the Middle Ages. The religion preaches the sanctity of the body as it is a gift from God, while also forbidding any glorification of it. Tattooing, according to the Christians of medieval Europe, desecrates and shows a misdirected focus on the body, instead of the soul. The practice still functioned on the margins of the society, becoming seen as promiscuous and only being practiced by "the homeless bodies of the slaves, criminals, pilgrims, sailors, soldiers
and transported convicts" (Caplan xv). In addition to the low prestige of these individuals, they have in common their nomadic lifestyles, which shows the disdain of the society for the mobile groups who, aside from the slaves, either do not contribute to the economy or do not have enough prestige to not directly contribute, making them abnormal.

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[2] Interestingly, these beliefs are carried through in the actual operation process, where the patient is placed in a *tapu* or taboo position by being tattooed. Their dangerous state of *tapu* prohibits them from touching their own food for fear of contamination and must receive food and water through a ritual feeding-funnel. In addition, the artist must prevent any contact between himself and the patient's blood, which is a highly dangerous substance, even more so if the patient is from a noble household. Sacrifices of slaves or captives and ritual pillaging were necessary if the patient was a chief or first-born daughter because the state of *tapu* was so precarious to those involved (Gell 247).

When Europeans began to travel to the islands of the South Pacific during the eighteenth century, they were confronted by other cultures with the practice of tattooing; however, in these cultures, the practice was acceptable and common. These travelers brought sketches and stories back to Europe, reintroducing the practice back into mainstream society.[3] This sparked the reinvigoration of the preexisting tattoo traditions in Europe and the image of the tattoo in Western culture began to take on new meanings. America, being a product of rebellious Europeans, held a similarly negative image of the tattoo. However, in mid-nineteenth century America, the popularity of tattooing grew immensely among members of the military.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, tattoos were associated with thieves and lower-class people. Interestingly, extensively tattooed people became sort of sideshow attractions and even joined wandering circus troops. Bans came into effect prohibiting service members, mainly in the army and navy, from acquiring tattoos, calling them immoral, unhygienic, and even too erotic to be acceptable (Govenar 214). This would be the justification given by someone in the culture to explain the negative image of the tattoo. However, it can also be explained by the society's anxiety towards individuals who are nomadic, unsettled, and do not fit into the mainstream workforce and the culture's perception of normality. This fear of atypical mobile groups within the sedentary society is one possible explanation of not only the negative reputation of tattoos in America but also in Western culture as a whole.

Furthermore, during the first half of the twentieth century, tattoos became increasingly popular among teenagers. By the 1950s, when suburban living became fashionable, tattoos were once again labeled by the society as rebellious and low class (Govenar 230). More cultural propaganda against tattooing came in the form of scientific studies that connected the rates of deviant activity in the society with tattoo-sporting individuals (Govenar 231). Additionally, a law was passed forbidding the tattooing of individuals under the age of sixteen. This seems to be a measure to prevent the spread of the practice to the youth. However, in the following decades, tattoos become a legitimate art form as new contemporary artists move into the forefront and older practitioners move underground with their skills (Govenar 233). Design styles began to change as the practice became recognized as a form of art.

With the label of "art", the design and execution of the tattoo became more important than the wearer of it. The skin becomes a canvas on which the artist tries to express themselves. The wearer's choice of subject is also an expression of their identity, giving a history of their life of their body. "Tattoo designs during the early 1900s included the following: hearts, flowers, daggers, scrolls, women, animals, serpents, birds, ships, occupational emblems, military insignia, and Christian icons and scenes" (Govenar 218-9). While these designs are still prevalent in the twenty-first century, they are not seen as artistic as more elegant or expressive designs. "The basic...tattoo designs (such as "Mother" or "Donna" inscribed alongside a heart) have been relegated to the bottom rung of today's tattoo hierarchy in the United States. Such tattoos are now seen by middle-class artists and fans as too literal, too transparently obvious, and too grounded in everyday experience and social life to qualify as art" (DeMello 373). The evolution of design and the formation of a hierarchy of design shows the incorporation of the tattoo into American culture and its acceptance as an art form.

It is common for Americans who want to get a tattoo to consider the placement of it. Unlike *Ta-moko*, which has designated areas of placement, American tattoos can be put on any part of the body. However, a great number of people consider the perfect place to be one that is easily hidden. This is another contrast to the tattooing practice of the Maori because *ta-moko* is meant to be seen because of the prestige associated with it, while American tattoos, in general, are hidden as personal, private expressions of identity. Although tattoos are becoming more acceptable in American culture, the only individuals who expose their tattoos to other members of the society are those who are marginalized, such as celebrities, rock stars, bikers,

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[3] There is also evidence that the tattooing art returned to European society centuries earlier through the travels of sailors to places like North America and the Philippines (Caplan xvii)

and struggling artists.[4] The perception of tattoos has not only evolved to allow hidden tattoos, deemed "classy" or "tasteful", but also to divide the tattooed individuals of the society into two groups, one that is glorified, and one that is pitied. In the United States, a tattoo could negatively affect an individual's level of success and prestige, while for the Maori, *moko* signify power and accomplishment.

As groups of people move across the world, encountering other groups and different cultures, they absorbed ideas and traditions, making them their own. Tattoo designs and procedures are no exception to this pattern of incorporation. In the late 1800s, Gus Wagner, a man from Marietta, Ohio, became well-known as a tattoo artist in America. His travels as a sailor took him to Borneo and Java, where he learned the art and designs of those cultures. Bringing these back with him, the designs of the other cultures became part of the American tattoo scene. In addition to the designs, Wagner "relied on the hand-carved tools bound with needles that... were patterned after the methods used by the indigenous cultures" (Govenar 215). Not only were the designs of the South Pacific brought to the United States but also the instruments and procedures used in tattooing.

These traditional designs were co-opted and their original meanings changed to represent something meaningful to members of American culture. "An animal crest tattoo traditionally worn by Indians on the Northwest Coast of North America to signify clan membership may now be worn by a non-Native in Boston as an artful, often private, sign of rebellion against Western "coat and tie" consumer culture" (DeMello 373). This need for independence and the importance of the individual is a characteristic of American culture. While the crest signified group unity and was a mark of clan membership, the American version represents the loyalty of the individual to the independence training, with which they were enculturated, through the need to break away from what is accepted, standing out as an individual.

The curvilinear designs now seen on the biceps of a lot American male athletes, labeled as "tribal" design by the tattooing communities, are just one example of borrowed traditional designs that have sparked a variety of responses from people whose cultures influenced the designs. A number of the Maori have called it pillaging, just another way "of extracting the spirit of a tribal people to sate the culturally malnourished appetites of the decadent and industrial West" (Awekotuku 248). However, there are still more who believe the movement to be positive, seeing it as a means to preserve and pay homage to the Maori art, while sharing the art so that it can be appreciated by people in other cultures (Awekotuka 248). People of Maori heritage are not the only people who believe using *ta-moko*-influenced designs in western cultures honors the art form, Leo Zulueta, a noted tattoo artist, who studied the tattooing traditions of Polynesia, believes he is "'carrying a torch for those ancient designs'" (Awekotuka 247). As the world becomes increasingly more globalized and aware of all the people and cultures in it, ideas, technology, and art styles cross their original cultural bounds and enter a new sphere, acquiring new meanings and applications, even the facial *moko* of Maori women can be found gracing the chins of American male performance artists.

Although the operations, rituals, and social opinions surrounding the practice of tattooing differ between the Maori and the Americans, the two customs have much in common and help to explain what it means to be human. Tattoos, in both cultures, serve to establish individual identities. While other material possessions and roles can be destroyed or usurped, these identities are permanent and cannot be taken away. The marked members of these societies are separated from the rest of society, whether this singling out is a positive or negative effect is determined by the culture; however, even in the cultures where the societal effects of tattooing are negative, people still participate in the practice. Humans are constantly struggling

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[4] These people, once again, do not contribute to subsistence and economy and generally, are not settled. Interestingly, the evolution of the America into a capitalist state led to the glorification of rock stars and celebrities. So although they are on the outskirts, they are not shunned because of it, while struggling artists and bikers are looked down upon.

to understand their world and establish themselves in it. Through tattooing, humans are able to publicly present their individual identities by almost conceptualizing and stylizing the world around them and carving it into their skin.

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