MARKING THE BODY, MARKING THE SOUL

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF BODY MODIFICATION

by

MEGAN RAE SUMMERS

(Under the Direction of William Power)

ABSTRACT

In this work I will examine the importance of ritual, particularly embodied ritual practices, in religious systems. Body modification is a very rich and meaningful religious ritual. One example of body modification, tattooing, has been practiced by people from various cultures for thousands of years. This tribal practice has deep religious significance. By examining classical rites of passage in their academic and practical context I will argue that tattooing fits this model of an initiatory rite of passage. I will also evaluate the historical and contemporary uses of voluntary physical pain and show how pain can foster religious experience. I will use research and field experience about Hawaiian tattooing to show how tattooing functions in tribal societies as well as modern ones. Lastly, I will use Foucault's philosophical framework to evaluate female genital mutilation in the context of involuntary physical pain and body mutilation.

INDEX WORDS: body modification, tattooing, rite of passage, embodied ritual, genital mutilation, Hawaiian tattooing

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Adam Michael Ware, my best friend, my “colleague”, and the love of my life. There are certain people who have the unique ability to put every aspect of your life into perspective. For me this person is Adam. When my life seemed so overwhelming, he brought me back to reality. When I doubted myself, he believed enough for the both of us. And when all I wanted to do was cry he made me laugh. He is in all regards the most interesting person I have ever met. My life changed forever when I attended my first meeting as a graduate student. Our relationship was unexpected, and I never could have predicted how much he would mean to me in such a short time.

Thank you, Adam, for your inspiration, your devotion, your sense of humor, your passion, your support, and your love. My experience as a graduate student would have been so incomplete without you.

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I have cherished these last two years, and I am acutely aware of how blessed I am to be able to study a subject I truly love. I only hope that this is the beginning of a long and fulfilling journey.

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"If you're leaving marks on the world, the world should make marks on you."[1]

-Anthony Bourdain

Introduction

How do we worship? This must be one of the most basic religious questions, asked by all humans who wish to orient themselves to something outside of their own existence. We all ask, "What can I do to demonstrate the ultimate object of my trust and loyalty," and "How do I make visible that which I feel inside?" History has shown us that there are as many answers to this question as there are the people who ask it. The interesting question becomes why do some answers triumph over others? For instance, why does Christianity dominate North America instead of an indigenous Native American practice? The answer to all of these hypothetical struggles is almost always power. The ideology with the most force—either monetary, military, political, or otherwise—becomes the law of the land. Perhaps history supports this triumph of might as an overarching trend of all civilization, so the Darwinian survival of the fittest becomes the cultural model of appropriation and replacement instead of the alternative: sharing and integration.

The tragedy of this cultural imperialism is only fully realized when religious seekers realize that they have severely limited themselves. Instead of allowing for multiple ways to experience the divine, perhaps they only chose one to be appropriate. But what happens when that sole means of being a religious human being is inadequate? Whether the whole social structure fails an individual or just one aspect of the dominant religious tradition lacks appeal, the religious seeker is left with no other options because all other options have been forbidden from the contemporary discourse of religious life. Even though religion is always personal,

[1] Anthony Bourdain, "Miami Ink," The Learning Channel, first aired March 25, 2006.

Saint Augustine would remind us that it is necessarily social, making it even more difficult to transcend the religious system of the time.

Many modern religious seekers, unhappy with the dominant religious discourse, are looking into the past to rediscover traditions that were for one reason or another deemed "inferior". A majority of these forgotten traditions were practiced by people who were conquered in other aspects of life, not only the religious. Tribal peoples or primitive peoples were the most frequent targets of this cultural attack. Either unable or unwilling to protect their way of life, countless tribal societies were Westernized and modernized, often at the expense of any indigenous traditions. Rich cultures were abandoned for the comforts of Western culture. While some cultures resisted vehemently, other cultures, perhaps facing the seeming inevitability of appropriation, converted to a new and foreign way of life.

As the Western world is becoming more religiously homogenized, and as Christianity and other systematic traditions encroach on more and more alternative religious orientations, it is becoming even more urgent to rediscover these lost traditions. It is also ironic that, now, when Christianity is most readily available to the largest number of people, more and more of them are starting to turn away from it in favor of religions that were once deemed heretical by it. The more generic and overextended organized religions become, the easier it becomes to fall through the cracks. Indigenous religious traditions, on the other hand, offer religious rituals and beliefs that are supremely concerned with both the individual and the collective society. These traditions also embrace many aspects of human life that more structured religious systems tend to ignore or even to demonize.

Tattooing in indigenous religious systems is one of those religious practices that was deemed inappropriate in the Western world even though tattooing was practically a

cornerstone of tribal religions throughout the world. Before the world religions emerged, tattooing was so common that it would be difficult to find an indigenous people who did not practice the art form. After contact with the Western world, when cultural isolation became a thing of the past, tattooing began to disappear. While some cultures refused to abandon the practice, many did so either out of fear or perhaps out of a strong desire to assimilate. Why tattooing was targeted by Westerners is a very complex question with profound implications for its role in the past and its potential in modernity.

Why tattooing is such a common religious practice and why tattooing was perceived as a threat to Western religion can be resolved with one explanation. What tattooing provides is lacking in Western traditions—namely the affirmation of the body as a religious implement and the innate need in all human beings for ritualized, marked existence. It would be incorrect and irresponsible to say that these two concepts are non-existent in Western theology. Western religions do incorporate ritual into liturgy, and Western religions offer instruction on caring for the body. However, Western conceptions of the body are often tainted with Biblical notions of corporeal impurity or Manichean conceptions of the body as a lesser, evil reality. Tribal religions, on the other hand, embrace the innate goodness of the body and its necessary connection to the soul. It is a given in human experience that we all have bodies, and it is also presupposed that we live as embodied creatures. While some religions have asked us to ignore our bodies for more spiritual, abstract existences, tribal religions ask us to embrace our bodies and to realize our physical potential to connect to the divine. The body is no longer disgraced but rather adorned, tested, manipulated, and ultimately respected.

The other predominant appeal of tribal religious systems is the emphasis on ritual, particularly rite of passage. While Western religions still offer rituals of passage such as the Jewish Bar Mitzvah or the Christian Confirmation, these rituals have become hollow for some people who are seeking profound religious transformation. In tribal life every significant life event is marked with ritual, and each new stage of life is celebrated and delineated. What is most appealing about these rituals as opposed to more traditional Western religious systems is the comprehensiveness. Tribal religions involve body and mind, man and woman, individual and community. It is a complete human experience.

Body modification, however, is not always used for positive religious experience. It would be irresponsible not to discuss the negative implications of this rediscovered religious phenomenon. Just as power struggles have determined which religious paths would persevere, the body, too, is a dynamic locus of power. Unfortunately, in some cultures the transformative potential of the body is used to oppress rather than enlighten. Using the same tools and methodologies as people who voluntarily choose to modify the body, some people choose to change one another involuntarily, and the victims are almost always women. Clitoredectomies are phenomena that can not be divorced from the discussion of voluntary body modification because proponents of the former often rely on the latter to justify their behavior. The truth is that an enormous difference exists. Tattooing is a choice, and it is a choice that is intended to evoke a deep, personal, religious transformation in a willing participant. Female genital mutilation, on the other hand, is frequently not a choice for those who undergo it, and the purpose of this practice is not freedom but control, manipulation, and dominance. It is possible to preserve one tradition, tattooing, while still condemning the other.

In this thesis I will argue that tattooing and other forms of body modification are valid forms of religious experience that provide the participant with a more comprehensive and fulfilling religious experience. By doing so I will also argue for the necessity of rediscovering ancient religious paths and realizing the offerings they bring to modernity. Tattooing should be studied not as a relic but as a potent rediscovered ritual with enormous possibility for the modern world.

"The inability to enter in communion with God is a function of untaught bodies."

Talal Asad

Chapter 1

Rite of Passage: Theory and Application

For many citizens of modernity religious ritual is no longer a part of life. Turned off by the rather formulaic or even archaic nature of much religious ritual, people no longer wish to participate in the traditions passed down within their own cultures. But without rituals to delineate the different stages of life, are the younger generations of individuals missing out? Without ritual, life can lose meaningful rhythm, becoming merely a linear, chronological chain of events loosely correlated in the mind. Rites of passage are simply disappearing from our culture, which tends to embrace breaking boundaries and bypassing any obstacles. Faster is better, and easier is the only way. Earning one's place in society is outdated in our digital age where adulthood is merely an accidental happening rather than an earned privilege.

It would be oversimplifying matters, however, to claim that ritual no longer has a place in our culture, but it is perhaps necessary to broaden the scope of inquiry, to search outside of an established religious tradition, for a ritual that satisfies this transitional period from youth to adulthood. Therefore, it becomes even more urgent to discover and embrace a substitute for the traditional rites of passage that have all but disappeared from our society.

Tattooing is the quintessential example of this newfound rite of passage. Identifying tattooing as a new phenomenon, however, is incredibly misleading. Cultures have been tattooing their initiates for thousands of years or even longer across continents and across nationalities. For these preliterate tribes tattooing was a sign of entering adulthood. It was a

test of endurance, and it was a permanent sign of commitment to the tribe. Despite the historical evidence for tattooing as a rite of passage, it is a method typically not embraced in modern, Western culture. And until ten years ago, having a tattoo meant that you were a sailor, a biker, or a societal misfit. Although tattooing is increasingly acceptable today, it is still not widely embraced. Chris Rainer, a writer and photographer who has been documenting tattooing for his entire adult life, says, "Today the art of bodily decoration has emerged less as a protest than as a keen desire to reestablish a connection to those primordial impulses that have driven human societies throughout history."[2] Viewed in this light, tattooing is much more a conservative backlash rather than a radical movement. Tattooing is a reaching into the past and attempting to fill a void left by our times. This recent rise in popularity of tattooing points to a gap in our modern experience. We are desperately searching for a rhythm with which to synchronize our lives. By examining theoretical and historical evidence of the necessity of rites of passage within a society, I will show the current lack of any such ritual and then show how body modification, specifically tattooing, is a more than adequate substitute.

Rites of Passage in Scholarship

Reason and experience. According to George F. Thomas these are the criteria for judging the appropriateness and credibility of any religious tradition, so we should be able to apply them to tribal religions.[3] Not only should the student of religion utilize the tools of logic, reason, and rationality, but she should also evaluate religious experience, which we can define as the direct or indirect sensory or non-sensory perception of the divine.

[2] Chris Rainer, *Ancient Marks* (Santa Barbara: media27, 2004), 19.
[3] George F. Thomas, *Philosophy and Religious Belief* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

It is quite apparent to anyone who chooses to study religion that volumes of work have been dedicated to the first tenant of Thomas's argument, but there has been perhaps a less serious approach to studying experience. Thomas argues, however, that "religious experience of individuals is ultimately prior to the authority of the religious community" and he adds:

> *Religious experience of individuals and their reflection upon it has been not only the origin of religious beliefs and practices but also a source of continuation from age to age and of the transformations they have undergone in every religious community.*[4]

Thus, experiencing the divine is the foundation on which all religious dialogue, theology, and organized tradition is based, and this phenomenon deserves to be studied as a legitimate and ultimately indispensable aspect of religion.

Religious experience and ritual go hand-in-hand for Thomas and for many other scholars. Ritual is the acting out or the retelling of religious experience, and it functions as the preserver of much religious tradition. Thomas writes, "The expression of religious ideas and feelings in visible form is necessary because men are flesh as well as spirit, and religion is often expressed most effectively in ritual acts and moral conduct."[5] Because we are psychosomatic beings and not just thinking things[6], human beings need experiences that unite all aspects of our being, involving our minds, hearts, and bodies. Religion must "permeate and control the whole of life,"[7] according to Thomas. Ritual as religious experience achieves just this, becoming an experience for the totality of our selves. Thomas points out, "Thus, religious experience includes both inner states of consciousness and the outer manifestation of

[4] Thomas, 62.
[5] Ibid, 64.
[6] Descartes argued that there were two categories of existence: thinking things and feeling things. This implied a separation of body and mind that he never reconciled.
[7] Thomas, 63.

them in the most intimate relation to one another."[8] Ritual becomes the vehicle for sharing and preserving religious experience, which in turn functions as the cornerstone for building any religious tradition.

Rites of passage, specifically initiatory rites, are excellent examples of rituals with the possibility to serve the religious community. However, most scholars do not study rites of passage in this context. According to George Weckman in his article "Understanding Initiation" scholars have typically interpreted rites of passage in four ways.[9] First, scholars have examined rites of passage in a completely secular context, devoid of any transcendent possibility. Second, rites of passage have been studied as merely symbol sets or creative myths about transformation. Third, some scholars have only been interested in the structure of the rite. Last, and perhaps most recently, scholars have been attempting to create a combination of the first three methodologies.

Weckman argues that the fourth approach involves recognizing the secular function, acknowledging the rich symbolism and mythic elements, studying the actual structure, but most importantly realizing that all of these components can work together to create a divinely oriented ritual process. While most scholars have traditionally emphasized the non-religious aspects of rites of passage such as social role and sexual identity[10], Weckman realizes the immense spiritual potential. He comments, "The direction of initiation situations was upward toward higher realms of being and action."[11] Therefore, rite of passage is much more than a social force. It can be a religious transformation.

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[8] Thomas, 64.
[9] George Weckman, "Understanding Initiation" *History of Religions* 10, no. 1 (1970): 63.
[10] Weckman, 64.
[11] Weckman, 75.

If ritual is what gives our lives contextual meaning and cohesion, rite of passage is what gives our lives progression and development. Thomas says, "The rite of initiation is especially interesting, since it marks the entrance of a youth into a new life as a responsible member of the group."[12] Thomas values initiation rites as unique forms of religious experience. Ronald Grimes writes, "To enact any kind of rite is to perform, but to enact a rite of passage is also to transform."[13] Undergoing a rite of passage is an intense, transformative, and historically situated act. There is much diversity of practice within rites of passage, as these sacred events are intended to delineate every special life event or change. Arnold Van Gennep, acclaimed anthropologist and expert on rite of passage, says, "The rites of initiation are also, as the term indicates, the most important, since they secure for the individual a permanent right to attend or to participate in the ceremonies of fraternities and the mysteries."[14] The initiation is not merely a symbolic or ritual initiation, but it is rather a gesture signifying that one's place in the world is evolving, progressing.

Weckman acknowledges the importance of initiation for the society, and he notes that this has been a main focus of scholars in the field. He says, "Social scientists are concerned today to underline the tremendous significance of maturation process in human life; adolescence and youth have been seldom as disturbingly noticeable as today."[15] Initiation in tribal cultures meant entirely new privilege, and it ultimately meant the right to call one's self an adult and to participate fully in tribal life. Rites of passage confirm the humanity of the initiate: "After the pain of death the boy and his whole society are regenerated to become fully

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[12] Thomas, 72.
[13] Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2002), 7.
[14] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 177.
[15] Weckman, 75.

human and to participate in significant human life."[16] Rite of passage, so far, is primarily concerned with becoming fully human and becoming a full member of a particular community. Yet, this is not a complete picture of rite of passage, as its function in religions can not be so anthropocentric.

Rites of passage are embraced in religious traditions because in addition to preparing people for their social lives, they also prepare them for a life in the presence of the divine. Weckman writes, "In an initiation a person changes not only his relationship with the spiritual world or the social world alone but his relationship with both together."[17] According to Weckman we must not disregard either aspect of rite of passage, but we instead should focus on how this experience transforms us as both people and divine creatures. Mircea Eliade was one of the forefathers in this line of thought. He viewed rites of passage as instrumental in human sociopolitical life as well as in religious experience. He argues, "Initiation lies at the core of any genuine human life."[18] For Eliade, initiatory ritual was meant to indoctrinate both the person and her spirit, forging a complete transformation, which appeals to the argument made earlier in this paper for the power of religious experience to involve the entire person. Eliade, therefore; views initiation as a dynamic process, one that could hardly be sufficiently explained as a collection of symbols or a dramatic myth. Initiation is an active process, a conductor for religious feeling.

Thanks to the scholarly contributions of Van Gennep, Eliade, Weckman, Thomas, and others who share this commitment to religious experience, rituality and religion can co-exist, strengthening and enriching one another. Without experience what would scholars write

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[16] Weckman, 70.
[17] Weckman, 74.
[18] Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1994), 135.

about, and what would worshippers celebrate? Religious experience is the very essence of religion. Without knowing the sacred how can we even begin to know ourselves? Without understanding how we experience the divine, we will never know how to experience this world or why it can be lived in a way that mirrors the sacred. Initiating ourselves into our spiritual lives is why we have continued to baptize people for the last two thousand years and why we will most likely continue it for the next two thousand.

Several scholars dealing with initiation rites have developed models charting the necessary stages for this ritual. All scholars notice a period of separation where the initiate is typically isolated from his society. Second, there is a transition phase, and finally the initiate is reincorporated into the society, a new man or woman. [19]

RITE OF PASSAGE MODELS

Arthur Van Gennep:

Separation.....Transition.....Incorporation

(preliminal) (liminal) (postliminal)

Mircea Eliade:

Separation.....Transition.....Incorporation

(dying) (return to origins) (being reborn)

Joseph Campbell:

Separation.....Initiation.....Return

(Hero Journey)

[19] Grimes, 104-105.

The most dynamic phase of the initiation process and the phase that is most pertinent to this research is transition. It is in this transitory phase in which the real change occurs, and it is here where body modification happens. Grimes writes, "Since the threshold zone is a no-man's-land, it is dangerous, full of symbolic meaning and guarded. A rite of passage is a set of symbol-laden actions by means of which one passes through a dangerous zone, negotiating it safely and memorably."[20] This is the phase of the ritual where real, transformative change is allowed to and expected to occur. Several scholars describe this as the liminal phase. The participant is literally in limbo, between two worlds. He is neither child nor adult, member nor outcast. And it is precisely because of this ambiguity and personal turmoil that the participant is forced to choose. The choice is to become an adult or to remain a child. This choice, however, is not merely a social one. Several scholars recognize the potential for extreme spiritual transformation during this period. Eliade says, "The hope and dream of these moments of total crisis are to obtain a definitive and total *renovatio*, a renewal capable of transmuting life. Such a renewal is the result of every genuine religious conversion."[21] This transition is both social and spiritual, terrifying yet necessary. It is in this moment that a child truly becomes an adult both in social standing and spiritual awakening.

This initiatory process is crucial to a person's overall well-being, many scholars argue, "The success of these enterprises likewise proves man's profound need for initiation, that is, for regeneration, for participation in the life of the spirit."[22] This process was typically not a choice; it was a necessary part of becoming an adult. Other scholars argue that the very rhythm of this initiation mimics that of life. Van Gennep says, "For groups as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to

[20] Grimes, 6.
[21] Eliade, 135.
[22] Ibid, 134.

die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way."[23] If this is true than undergoing a rite of passage and emerging an adult is merely a microcosm of the turmoils inevitably faced in life; rite of passage is both a ritually symbolic and pragmatic endeavor. So if this process of initiation and the stage of transition are so crucial to our lives, why are we no longer embracing this tradition in modernity?

Rites of Passage in Modernity

Nearly every pre-literate and tribal society incorporated rite of passage into the collective ceremonies of community life. Tattooing, or some form of body modification, was frequently included in the process. So why are legitimate rites of passage nearly obsolete in modernity? And what does this lack of ritual say about the times in which we live? Eliade says, "It has often been said that one of the characteristics of the modern world is the disappearance of any meaningful rites of initiation."[24] This is a strong statement with even stronger implications. The dangers are immense for a world with no ritual.

A defining characteristic of the modern and post-modern world is the desire for autonomy above all else. Individuality is not just something to be desired, it is practically a requirement for modern people. And while this individualism has its obvious benefits within society, it also suggests a deep suspicion for all things collective or institutional. Grimes writes, "In search of meaningful rites, many find themselves trapped between institutionalism and individualism,"[25] and he adds, "Early initiations were collective; modern ones, individualistic. Early initiations were more ritualized; contemporary ones were more likely to

[23] Van Gennep, 189.
[24] Eliade, ix.
[25] Grimes, 115.

be merely thought or imagined rather than acted out."[26] Although this move towards individuality theoretically allows for an even more diverse ritual existence, in actuality ritual tends to fade into history, becoming merely a relic of forgotten ways of life. Eliade writes that " modern man no longer has any initiation of the traditional type…The rituals, imagery, and terminology borrowed from the mysteries of late antiquity have lost their initiatory aura."[27] Instead of looking into the past with as sense of wonder and earnest appreciation, modern people often treat these rites as outdated, archaic, and even hollow.

The most obvious ritual deficit in modernity is the absence of initiatory rites, or rites of passage. These rituals not only enrich the lives of the communities, but they also train the youth how to fully participate in adulthood. Girls do not become women by default when they begin menstruation, rather they earn the title of "woman," and they prove themselves worthy of adulthood and earn themselves a place in the society. Likewise, boys do not just call themselves men, for they are tested and retested before their manhood is acknowledged. Earning adulthood rather than just becoming an adult gives communities a true sense of cohesion. Boys who fight to become men value their place in the society.

Are the youth of today forced to prove themselves? Do young men have to earn their place in the world by proving their loyalty, strength, endurance, and education? I think it would be increasingly difficult to support this argument. It is cliché but accurate to say that babies are having babies in the twenty-first century. Children become "adults" earlier every decade, and it seems now that having a cell phone and a credit card is the price of admission. Grimes says, "Among a growing number of young people, initiation into adulthood is

[26] Grimes, 101.
[27] Eliade, 132.

experienced as a vague and uncertain process, not well focused by an identifiable rite of passage."[28] Children no longer know how to become adults.

Rejecting rituals that no longer hold meaning is a worthwhile process, but when we fail to replace those rituals, to create adequate or even better substitutes, we are left with rhythmless existence, a life without a beat. Grimes suggests that, "Our problem is not that we are subjected to initiations we would rather flee, but that we know so few authentic and compelling rites."[29] Given such a plethora of historical information from which to choose, it should be easy for the modern seeker to find ritual. This, however, raises an ethical question. Grimes says, "Currently, Westerners are 'borrowing' far more initiations than funerals, weddings, or birth rites, but do we have the right to 'borrow'? In my view, only with explicit consent."[30] Scholars from all fields differ in their opinions regarding this cultural borrowing or the concept of ritual buffet. Although some scholars, Grimes included, are highly suspicious of the motives and authenticity of borrowing from other cultures, I would argue that respectful inheritance is not only acceptable but practically inevitable. Cultures have blended since trade routes became vital for survival, and in the globally connected world, this multiple exposure and cultural mélange seems to result naturally. And while objections are valid when cultures are not borrowed but rather stolen, perverted, or even annihilated, the need for real cultural sharing becomes even more apparent. Rites of passage have flourished in recent history, and some of these models are reemerging in our culture, giving us both a window into the past and perhaps a methodology for the future. Tattooing, or ritually marking the body, appears in countless civilizations for the past several thousand years, and

[28] Grimes, 94.
[29] Grimes, 90-91.
[30] Grimes, 143.

while this practice has been marginalized in recent societies, it is once again being used as a rite of passage, a symbolic initiation of the body and of the self into adulthood.

Cultural Study: Becoming a Woman_____

In Papua New Guinea young women have bare, brown faces. When they reach a certain age, which usually correlates with their first menstrual cycle, the elder women of the tribe will decide if they are ready for the next phase of their lives. There is no angst about this decision, for the young women realize they have very little say over the outcome, but instead they are trusting of their elders, enjoying their youth without much anticipation for the future. If the elder women determine a girl is ready to become a woman, an elaborate and painful process commences. For weeks the young girl will lie on her back while an elder pricks the tender skin on her face with a needle pulled from a cactus. Her entire face is tattooed, covered in homemade ink. The design motif is completely unique, and the swirls usually reflect something about the girl's lineage and personality. The girl must not stir or make a sound. She lies silently, enduring her transformation.

Tattooed, she is now a woman, and she is now a full member of society. Men in the tribe have remarked that women without the facial tattoos, or foreign women, do not interest them. For them as well as the new women, the tattoos signify a new phase of a woman's life, one in which she is allowed to seek a partner. The facial tattoos are proof of a young woman's dedication to her family and to her tribe. They signify her readiness to start her own family. And they are a sign of her beauty. Rainer argues that, "For cultures such as these that maintain no clear separation between the secular and the sacred, the material and the

immaterial, decorating the body serves both a spiritual and a social role."[31] The young girl emerges as a young woman, and she is forever marked because of her transformation.

Tattooing and Rite of Passage

For these young women in Papua New Guinea, as well as for young men and women all over the world, tattooing is an essential part of the rite of passage. According to Van Gennep bodily mutilation, including tattooing, is a transition rite in the initiation process.[32] He says, "The category of all practices of the same order which by cutting off, splitting, or mutilating any part of the body modify the personality of the individual in a manner visible to all."[33] Tattooing the body is a visual mark of membership as well as an ordeal that must be overcome with some semblance of pride, integrity, and strength, making it an excellent rite of passage.

Perhaps the most important function of tattooing as a rite of passage is its explicit function as an identifier of commonality. Van Gennep says:

> *The mutilated individual is removed from the common mass of humanity by a rite of separation (this is the idea behind cutting, piercing, etc.) which automatically incorporates him into a defined group; since the operation leaves ineradicable traces, the incorporation is permanent*.[34]

A rite of passage is incomplete without incorporation, and it is in this transitional phase that the incorporation is truly forged. It must be an individual choice to become part of the group. In a tribal society the choice to belong to the tribe is crucial, often meaning the difference between life and death, but for the initiate it is still an internal struggle between chance and

[31] Rainer, 16.
[32] Van Gennep, 81.
[33] Ibid, 71.
[34] Ibid, 72.

destiny, between conformity and isolation. Van Gennep said, "The final act is a religious ceremony…and, above all, a special mutilation which varies with the tribe…and which makes the novice forever identical with the adult members."[35] The initiates forever change their bodies, but the significance is that they change their bodies just like all the members of the tribe have changed their bodies. Chris Wroblewski, a scholar who has written extensively on the practice of tattooing, writes, "Tattoos were a perfect excuse for erasing one's existential anonymity and realigning oneself to a new set of tribal beliefs and customs."[36] Marking the body becomes a conscious choice to transform and to join, to become an adult and to become a member of a community.

The function of tattooing, however, extends beyond the context of anthropology and sociology, the frameworks most frequently used by scholars. Tattooing, especially in the context of a rite of passage, has extreme spiritual connotations. Wroblewski writes, "The release and manipulation of blood became a fertilizing and binding ingredient that sealed a pact between man and his creator."[37] Just as some more modern religious traditions use methods such as prayer or communion, tribal religions used the resource most readily available to communicate with the divine: their bodies. The body is the most intimate tool, and tribal people saw immense possibility within the sphere of the human body. Rainer says:

> *To endure the excruciating ordeal inherent in the decorative techniques was not only to pass in initiation from innocence to experience and from childhood to maturity, but also to establish an explicit connection between the individual and the realm of the spirits. To be tattooed or decoratively scarred was to be human, and to be human was to know the gods.*[38]

[35] Van Gennep, 75.
[36] Chris Wroblewski, *Skin Shows: The Tattoo Bible* (London: Collins & Brown, 2004), 21.
[37] Wroblewski, 9.
[38] Rainer, 15.

The body was a site of possibility, not a locus for guilt, shame, or even denial. The body was to be understood, utilized, and, most importantly, respected. The body was the microcosm for the world. If any real change was to occur, it would first occur within the person. Rainer adds, "Milennia after the dawn of man's awakening, we continue to etch the geography of our bodies as we have always marked the landscape of the earth."[39] Tattooing in this context makes a girl a woman by first forcing her to endure and transcend physical pain, to mark herself like those who went before her were marked, and by using her body to communicate and connect with the divine. Marking the body in turn marks the soul, leaving the tattooed forever changed.

Rites of Passage for the Future

With such a rich heritage—there is an example of body modification associated with rite of passage on nearly every continent—why are modern people so impoverished of any sufficient rituals to mark life transformations? Arguments can be made for first communions, driver's licenses, and even graduation ceremonies, but do any of these events actually initiate young people into adulthood? And who is doing the initiation? Is it parents, teachers, religious leaders, or peers? Grimes warns us, "If wise elders don't initiate adolescents, won't adolescents initiate themselves?"[40] It is worthwhile to examine why tattooing could still be an effective transition for young adults in modern culture.

Tattooing, when approached safely and responsibly, is still a vehicle for personal transformation and a means for attaining a sense of community. Rainer writes, "For a wide range of humanity…body marking has emerged as a form of initiation into clans of the new

[39] Rainer, 185.
[40] Grimes, 2.

urban world tribe."[41] Tattooing allows us to realize that change on our physical persons can actually lead to change in our lives. It is no coincidence that people who are tattooed often associate the process of tattooing with a deep sense of euphoria. Modifying the body, at the very least, draws attention to the body as a volatile and mutable medium. Also, with modern people feeling more and more isolated, people who are tattooed are default members of a community of people who have also chosen to decorate their own bodies. This is the epitome of the twenty-first century community, bound more by choice than genetics.

I am certainly not advocating, however, that everyone who gets a tattoo is seeking a transition into adulthood or a spiritual gateway, and I am not arguing that bodily modification is the only method for rite of passage. There are of course problems with this custom in modernity, and perhaps these are the reasons why tattooing is still not used in the same context as it has been used in tribal societies. Wroblewski says, "In this post human society where bodies are continually being traded, remodelled, and artificially rejuvenated, the tattoo mark may lose some of its allure and mystique, once everyone gets in on the act."[42] It is difficult to argue that a butterfly on the lower back or a Nike swoosh on a man's chest are signs of initiatory ritual, and we must not mistake fad for faith, but we must also realize that our definitions of religious experience and ritual must adapt or be left entirely in obscurity. Paula Cooey, a feminist scholar studying religious imagination and the body, argues that, "The body metaphorically understood as a land of emotions suggests an ambiguity of the body as both site for and artifact of human imagination, as well as human ambivalence toward

[41] Rainer, 182.
[42] Wroblewski, 22.

the body."[43] This is exactly why the body can be incredibly powerful and dangerous or simply taken for granted.

Conclusion

Tattooing and body modification have historical context in rites of passage, and many scholars have acknowledged the power inherent in transforming the body. I would argue that modern people are desperately seeking for such a ritual to implement in the current draught of ritual meaning. The transition from adolescence to adulthood needs to be made sacred or set apart from profane existence. If left unmarked, life becomes monotonous. Tattooing is a quintessential transition phase of a rite of passage. It allows a dynamic change within the body, resulting in a drastic change in the person. And although the practice of tattooing has been cheapened to the point of "trend" it is not a coincidence that almost one tribe on every single continent has used tattooing in ritual. How then do we use this practice effectively and earnestly? First, tattooing must once again be an event. It must be enriched with its own history and practiced out of respect for this tradition. Second, tattooing needs to be practiced safely and responsibly. Third, tattooing must be understood in this context and approached mindfully and sincerely. By marking our bodies, we can affect a change that is much more than skin deep.

[43] Paula M. Cooey, *Religious Imagination and The Body: A Feminist Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 42.

"Blows that wound cleanse away evil; beatings make clean the innermost parts."

Proverbs 20:30[44]

Chapter 2

Voluntary Physical Pain_____

Pain is a confusing phenomenon in twenty-first century culture. The word pain carries connotations with mixed messages. Is pain something to be avoided or something to be desired? Is pain a part of us, or is it an external foe? These questions are not unique to this generation, for pain has been a topic of much discussion throughout the centuries, beginning with the earliest religious mystics who sought to discover the role of the physical in the spiritual. Pain is much more than a physical chain of reactions; however, as the complicated process we call pain involves the body and the mind. Our definitions of pain and reactions to it are socially conditioned, so human beings are constantly redefining their relationship to pain. This relationship has changed over time; with the emphasis shifting from the suffering servant motif to the more technologically modern model of the anesthetized patient. To truly understand why pain can be useful for spiritual experiences, it is first necessary to discover the medical definitions of pain and the subsequent interpretations.

Even medically speaking, pain is not an easy concept to define. Pain is one of those medical anomalies that seems to transcend classifications or definitions. Dr. Steven Brena, who has studied the relationship between pain and religion, delineates two different types of pain: pathogenic and operant.[45] Pathogenic pain is based on a stimulus, while operant pain is

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[44] Wayne A. Meeks, Ed. *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1993), 968.

[45] Steven Brena, M.D. *Pain and Religion: A Psychophysiological Study* (Springfield, Ill: Charles C Thomas Publisher, 1972), 55-56.

not controlled by a stimulus. Touching an eye of the stove and burning your hand is pathogenic pain, while operant pain is best illustrated by a general ache with an inexplicable origin. There are many theories which attempt to accurately describe the origins and manifestations of pain. One such theory describes pain as waning and waxing levels of intensity or energy in the body,[46] while another theory known popularly as the "Gate Control" theory names the spinal cord as the interpreter of all of the pain in the human body. According to this theory, the spinal cord, when excited, proceeds to spread the message of excitation throughout the body, acting as a neurological gate keeper.[47] Although these and other theories on pain are medically sufficient, the nature of pain still intrigues scientists because of the comprehensive way it involves the entire body.

We experience pain in a very complicated manner, several bodily systems working in cooperation to convey one message: something is happening to me! The muscles are the first part of the body to respond. Their natural reaction is to contract, a basic mechanism of avoidance. Second, the vascular system begins to work, causing one either to pale or flush. Then the organs respond; one frequent example of this is nausea or a funny feeling in the stomach, a nagging reminder that something is out of the norm. Fourth, the endocrine system joins the process, causing the glands to produce and release various levels of hormones, ranging from testosterone to adrenaline. Only after the body has accomplished all of these reactions—in a matter of seconds—are we able to verbalize the pain sensation. Finally, we will change the behavior that is causing us this pain, if we can identify it, and lastly, we learn in muscle memory and cognitive memory this causal chain of events.[48] Pain is the ultimate

[46] Brena, 65.
[47] Ibid, 66-67.
[48] Ibid, 77-85.

symbiotic relationship, all of the bodily systems working in harmony to manage and protect the human being.

Even after analyzing the complex way in which the body processes pain, scientists have typically come to one conclusion regarding the appropriate response to it for human beings: avoidance. Despite his studies of the complex and almost artistic nature of pain Dr. Brena does not maintain its overall usefulness in human experience. He implies that this whole symphony of biology goes practically unnoticed, and he says, "Unaware of their trinity, soul, mind and body have little capability of interacting harmoniously on the playground of nature."[49] Dr. Brena does not deny that pain could transcend physical experience, but he does say how difficult it can be to realize its relationships. He writes, "Yes, pain is a useful warning signal and an imperative behavior in the face of inquiry or disease; as a matter of fact, we could hardly survive without it. No, pain is not necessary in its misery of chronic suffering; it is an artifact of our imperfect nature,"[50] and he adds that humans should rise above the "compulsion of sensory experiences."[51] While it would be difficult to argue for the benefits of chronic pain, dismissing all pain as a solely negative experience or even worse classifying it as a relic of primitive humanity undermines the complexity of the human body and the human experience.

History of Pain

Although he relinquishes pain to the status of an evolutionary leftover at times, Brena does realize that pain has not always been avoided. In fact, people throughout history have realized its potential. He looks to religious systems to find examples of this phenomenon, and

[49] Ibid., 9.
[50] Ibid., 132.
[51] Ibid., 132

he says, "Mysticism seeks a reality above but not against the material creation, and does not overlook sensory experience,"[52] and he adds, "In the process of 'spiritualization' the soul-consciousness shines forth in a balanced relationship with the body through the mind."[53] It is through religious experience that Brena perceives the possibilities of pain. First it is necessary to realize the complexity of pain and the totality of its influences. Only then can pain become more than something to be avoided.

Pain has a historical precedent in all three Abrahamic faiths. Since God condemned Adam and Eve's transgressions with omens of pain in the fields and in childbearing, pain became part of the religious dialogue.[54] And when God asked Abraham to circumcise all of his descendents, voluntary pain was introduced.[55] Jews enacted the role of "suffering servant," accepting suffering as devotional piety. Christians have been using pain since the inception of the religion to either prove a point, with martyrdom for instance, or to heighten their experience of the divine, illustrated by such Christian mystics as Melania, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Christina Mirabilis. Judith Perkins describes the martyr Vibia Perpetua of Carthage as finding "empowerment through suffering."[56] In her work on the history of pain and suffering in Christian tradition, Perkins highlights the function of this cultural phenomenon in the early Christian community. She writes, "This survey of pagan and Christian sources demonstrated that early Christian narrative offered a particular self-understanding for Christians—the self as sufferer."[57] Pain is not arbitrary in this religious

[52] Ibid, 30.
[53] Ibid, 50.
[54] Meeks, Genesis 3.
[55] Ibid, Genesis 17.
[56] Judith Perkins. *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995), 105.
[57] Perkins, 32.

schemata, and Perkins writes that the "body's pains were profitable."[58] Over the course of Christian history, devout participants have joined the community of sufferers by practicing self-flagellation or proclaiming themselves to be the recipients of stigmata. Islam also has a tradition of utilizing pain, particularly in a ritual venerating the Shi'ite martyr Husayn. In a re-enactment of his martyrdom Muslims whip themselves with chains and beat themselves with their fists until they are dripping with blood. Pain connects them to their history. Perkins writes, "Rituals are the means by which groups send collective messages to themselves, supporting their social fabric and legitimating their world-view."[59] What we have seen in the history of Western religion is a system of rituals centered around pain and suffering, promoting the worldview that suffering can bring salvation. Now me must look at how this social fabric continues in modernity.

Pain Today_____

Emerging from a tradition with a deep respect for the validity and possibility of pain in religious experience, many modern religious practitioners are seeking to embrace this practice of pain despite an overarching social discourse that teaches them otherwise. Pain is no longer an acceptable experience in our age of anesthesia, anti-depressants, and feel-good culture. The ancient practice of tattooing, which has reemerged onto the scene in the last fifty years, is one of the last acceptable ways of experiencing voluntary pain in modern culture, and even this practice is often deemed socially inappropriate or taboo. Why is such a natural human experience suddenly so unacceptable? Rufus C. Camphausen says, "As has been done with the realities of birth, sex, and death—the other 'wet' and 'dirty' truths that belong to human

[58] Perkins, 142.
[59] Ibid., 32.

life—pain has been banned from discussion and experimentation and from everyday discourse."[60] Perhaps pain is either too raw an emotion to be discussed, or maybe pain is so real that it is too frightening to fully realize its potential for change or destruction. And while pain generally carries with it a negative connotation, it also possesses a wealth of possibility for spiritual growth and transformation.

As we have seen throughout history, particularly in the community of Christian mystics, pain is not always associated with only suffering and loss. Throughout history people have seen pain as possibility not punishment. Rush says, "Pain is difficult to ignore, and each culture appears to have sanctioned ways of administering and expressing pain."[61] Whether it is a mother coaching her daughter through childbirth or someone getting his or her first tattoo, pain is an occasion for shared cultural experience and the physical embodiment of an emotional transformation.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas says, "The more personal and intimate the source of ritual symbolism, the more telling its message."[62] What is more personal than the body? Scholar Kevin Schilbrack adds, "The ritual body is an active subject of experience."[63] As the nexus for spiritual transformation and physical experience, the body serves as the ultimate ritual implement. The body becomes the ground for change, and voluntary physical pain becomes the changing agent. The process of experiencing physical pain, which is innately personal, becomes a possibility for self-examination and spiritual experience. The profane leads to the sacred, all within the human body.

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[60] Rufus C. Camphausen, *Return Of The Tribal: A Celebration of Body Adornment* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1997), 83.

[61] Rush, 186.

[62] Mary Douglas "*From* Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo" in *Theory and Method In The Study of Religion*, ed. Carl Olson, 312 (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003).

[63] Kevin Schilbrack. "Ritual Metaphysics," in *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack (New York: Routledge, 2004), 136.

But how do we analyze such a complex relationship in light of the historical precedent and the contemporary beliefs? Reverend Jason Cusick, a chaplain and member of the committee studying ethics and pain management at a hospital in California, has developed a rubric for interpreting the ways in which we experience and then incorporate pain into our religious lives. Reverend Cusick says, "Those interested in character development argued pain was a door to spiritual and moral growth."[64] He quantifies the experiences of voluntary physical pain into five categories, each with unique manifestations of pain in the psychological and social aspects of a person's life. First, pain can function as a punitive event. Second, pain can allow for transcendence. Third, pain can foster tests or competition, serving as rites of passage. Fourth, pain can be used for atonement. Last, pain can be used to gain and regain personal control.[65]

Tattooing has been punitive in history. For instance, certain social groups have tattooed outcasts or prisoners, a custom akin to a permanent scarlet letter. Cusick reminds his readers of the importance of pain as punishment. He says, "And though modern scholarship downplays the connection between punishment, sin, and physical pain, traditional Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have always understood some direct relationship between pain and punishment."[66] Voluntary pain, therefore, can be a recreation of this traditional theological discipline where the recipients of pain wish to make themselves ready and open to God's inspiration. Rush says,

> *Pain and/or punishment within a specific ritual process, and especially with the consent of the initiate [a requirement for tattooing], directs awareness so as to impart a specific symbol or cluster of symbols…*

[64] Rev. Jason Cusick, "Spirituality and Voluntary Pain" *American Pain Society Bulletin* 13, no. 5 (2003): 1.
[65] Cusick, 3.
[66] Ibid., 2.

> *with an emphasis on or amplification of his or her relationship to the group and the spiritual world.*[67]

Tattooing as punishment would not be punitive but rather educational—spiritual conditioning, so to speak.

Transcendent pain is illustrated more clearly in the process of body modification. The physical tattooing creates a reaction within the body and mind to turn towards the self, to examine the inner life, and the finished product, the tattoo, is an eternal reminder of the struggle and victory and/or defeat of this process. Cusick says, "While most mainline religious faiths advise against suffering and encourage the use of pain medications when needed, they also recognize the potential for spiritual transformation through pain."[68] This personal suffering has religious precedent; in a Christian tradition the most striking example is of the crucifixion. Cusick quotes the late Pope John Paul II, " 'Suffering seems to belong to man's transcendence: It is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense *destined* to go beyond himself, and he is called to this in a mysterious way.'"[69] However, voluntary pain, despite is historical presence in the church, is becoming less acceptable in organized religious traditions as a means of spiritual experience. Perhaps pain is too difficult to control to function in a hierarchical environment, but nevertheless, pain, for many practitioners, is still an avenue for transcendence.

How does pain function to elevate the participant from the profane to the sacred? Scholars reference the initiation process, more specifically the symbolic death and rebirth, as a mirror image of the fluctuation of physical and emotional pain.[70] Pain here functions to unite the body and mind. I would argue, however, that pain is transcendent because only

[67] Rush, 178.
[68] Cusick, 2.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Rush, 185.

through this tangible, quantifiable experience can we really truly describe the unseen anguish. Voluntary physical pain acts as a vehicle for expression. Camphausen says, "A person uses pain as a means of transcending ordinary consciousness, of opening the heart and mind to realities beyond everyday life."[71] In this sense, pain is a vehicle that through sensory perception opens us to non-sensory truths. Tattooing, therefore, as the physical manifestation of internal pain, allows us to transcend our profane existences and approach the sacred.

Pain used in tests or competitions is essentially a system of rites of passage that use pain as the indicator of worth and/or readiness to move on to the next stage of life. Anthropologist W.D. Hambly, one of the first scholars to publish an extensive work on the history of tattooing, says, "There is no doubt a good deal of pride assumed by a man who has publicly shown contempt for physical pain, and for the gratification of this pride and the earning of a superior social status."[72] Tattooing, along with other forms of body modification, is used in countless cultures as a rite of passage for young boys and girls to become young men and women or for members of a specific society to prove their worth within the community. Maori women are tattooed on their chins as a sign of entering adulthood; the Kaleri women of Nigeria are scarred before childbirth.[73] These are merely a few of the many examples of this phenomenon.

Body modification scholar Maureen Mercury says, "An initiation through body modification creates a sensate threshold crossing, testing one's endurance for pain, while leaving the initiate with a badge of the crossing."[74] The ability to withstand pain was virtually

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[71] Camphausen, 86.
[72] W.D. Hambly, *The History of Tattooing And Its Significance With Some Account of Other Forms of Corporal Marking* (London: H.F.& G. Witherby, 1925), 203.
[73] Camphausen, 62 and 31.
[74] Maureen Mercury, *The Alchemy of Body Modification: Pagan Fleshworks* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2000), 26.

a prerequisite for pre-modern societies, especially those in which young men were traditionally responsible for hunting and protection. Pain as a rite of passage is more symbolic than practical today, but it is still an act of initiation into adulthood: a true test of the self. Hambly says, "Tattooing appears in some instances to be quite disconnected from any magical aspect of initiation, but it is just used as a test to find whether the candidate can show stoicism which justifies his inclusion in the ranks of men."[75] Enduring pain is embodying courage, patience, and inner strength, all of which are still admirable qualities associated with adulthood in modernity. If pain or physical perception is the most human reaction to the environment—the way in which we judge the nature of our surroundings—enduring this pain would be a true test of our humanity.

Tattoo as the specific form of voluntary pain also leaves behind a mark of accomplishment, a permanent physical reminder that is indistinguishable from the body, of what we have accomplished. Although this rite of passage is ancient, its relevance for modernity is hardly lost. Because our institutionalized markers of adulthood and transition have lost authenticity and meaning for many members of younger generations, we are now reaching back into a rich tradition to rediscover how to evolve within our own lives and how to delineate change within ourselves and within our culture.

Atoning pain relies heavily on the Christian mystical tradition I have addressed earlier. It is necessary, however, to slightly alter the traditional understanding of atonement. In this system atonement is more spiritual and personal in nature. While Christian mystics atoned for their sins in the eyes of God and used their suffering as a vehicle to connect them spiritually and emotionally to their savior Jesus Christ, modern atonement can and does exist with no definite affiliation with any particular religious community. Understood this way, atonement

[75] Hambly, 203.

is a personal reconciliation and inventory of unwanted behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. Rush reminds us that without this spiritual detox we are unable to see ourselves or the divine clearly.[76] Afflicting pain on one's self for the purposes of spiritual cleansing is vividly illustrated in the practice of self-flagellation or corporal mortification in devout veins of orthodox religious groups. I would argue that tattooing is merely a modern, more practical and somewhat socially acceptable form of corporal mortification.

Scholars often interpret body modification as a practice with a holistic goal, aiming to heal the divide between the mind and the body, a seemingly Manichean or dualistic predicament. Mercury says, "Tattooing, piercing, branding, and implanting the body are, at a basic level, rites of initiation that attempt to heal the mind/body split."[77] By inflicting pain on the body while simultaneously stimulating the mind, body modification in general and tattooing specifically is said to involve the totality of a human being. Some scholars argue that pain allows atonement because the person experiencing voluntary physical pain is making a sacrificial offering of his or her body: "In the case of physical sacrifice, one must not overlook the dimension of atonement it carries for the giver himself."[78] This physical offering is symbiotic; the participant surrenders a part of his or her own body but is also rewarded in the process.

The last category of experiencing voluntary physical pain deals with the issue of control. Voluntary pain is essentially all about control. It is the self-willed, deliberate manipulation of the physical body and consequently the mental state. Afflicting the body is an attempt to gain control over it, to balance the chaotic outer world with the malleable inner self. Physical pain can reshape memory, allowing healing to begin from within. Rush adds,

[76] Rush, 176.
[77] Mercury, 26.
[78] Camphausen, 84.

"Even self-mutilation, perceived as a pathological condition by Western-trained psychologists and psychiatrists, is an attempt at self-healing."[79] Young girls who make cuts in their flesh are doings so because in their chaotic worlds, cutting themselves is their choice; it is purposeful and intentional. It is typically the only thing in their lives that they are actually choosing or willing to be. Getting a tattoo is often an effort at internal, personal reconciliation. Mercury says, "It is important to understand that as with tattooing, piercing, implanting, or reforming the body is not a wounding or a mutilation of the flesh, it is a homeopathic attempt to heal oneself."[80] Voluntary physical pain replaces a much more elusive pain, and by making it visible and "real" it is validating and exorcising these old wounds. Tattooing or modifying the body is actually recreating a very natural process of death and rebirth on the microcosm of the self. There is scientific precedent that supports pain as method of controlling the body. Brena suggests that learned pain can become a "habitual pattern of reaction in a variety of stress situations,"[81] and he adds, "When learned factors dominate in any given pain situation, the end result is that the output is no longer dependent upon the input, but is governed by the psychosomatic mechanisms triggered by itself."[82] Essentially, the implications of this in the human body are twofold. First, the body can teach itself that bad habits are actually beneficial. For instance, drug use becomes a habitual pattern, one in which the body can easily confuse the effects of the drug with natural emotional states. On the other hand, however, practices such as tattooing can become a way to train the body to deal with stress in a positive manner, allowing a human being to overcome the mechanism of the human body, allowing us to truly control our person.

[79] Rush, 167.
[80] Mercury, 54.
[81] Brena, 60.
[82] Ibid, 59.

Conclusion

The needle whirs loudly, filling the room with a mechanical hum. The nerve endings in the skin register an acute, distinct set of pressures and punctures. The body and mind are experiencing the pain of modifying the body, and perhaps undergoing a multitude of spiritual transformations. Perhaps the recipient chose to get a tattoo to celebrate a changing life event, perhaps to remember a loved one, or maybe getting a tattoo was a way to balance or eradicate mental anguish. Despite the particular scenario, tattooing is an established, culturally diverse practice of body modification. Pain is intrinsically healing, however; pain is no longer popular in the medical community. We seem to live in a culture obsessed with eradicating pain; as a society we are more medicated than ever before. We avoid pain at all costs, and by doing so, we are missing out on a very basic human need—the catharsis of experiencing voluntary pain. Tattooing is a cultural phenomenon that is going against several trends dominating the social discourse. First, tattooing is allowing people to manage their own healing process. Second, tattooing is reaching into the past, embracing pain as an acceptable experience and expression, and opening up new or maybe only forgotten venues for spiritual awakening and discovery.

tat.too

-A permanent mark or design made on the skin by a process of pricking and ingraining an indelible pigment or by raising scars.

-Of Polynesian origin, tatau

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language

Chapter 3

Tattooing in Hawaii: A Living Tradition

Traditional Polynesian tattooing is somewhat of a misnomer these days. Although tattooing began with the Polynesian people, it is a tradition that was lost for one hundred fifty years and is only very recently experiencing a cultural revival. But American neo-tribalism is very different in many ways from its historical counterpart. On a travel grant from the University of Georgia Graduate School I was able to travel to Hawaii to study Polynesian tattooing and culture. I expected to travel to Hawaii and get a traditional bone tool tattoo. I expected to find native Hawaiians adorned in traditional tattoo designs. Needless to say I had a romantic ideal of this culturally rich land, and what I thought would be its flawlessly preserved traditions. What I found in Hawaii, however, was quite different. I forgot one very important detail when imagining my trip: the inevitable onward march of modern technological progress. Hawaii, like the rest of the United States, is a twenty-first century community. Most Hawaiians resemble the ancient Polynesians as much as most Americans resemble their frontier ancestors. Times have changed, and the art of tattooing is not immune. What I did find in Hawaii was a rich, innovative tradition of tattooing that artfully blends heritage with modernity and upholds an authenticity of spirit if not practice.

Characterizing tribal societies is the lack of distinction between the physical and spiritual realms of existence. Western society has typically drawn a very distinct line between the body and the spirit, and therefore the sacred and profane. Bodily concerns are terrestrial and usually less important than matters of the soul. Tribal societies, however, lacked this distinction. Tribal citizens saw no separation between the sacred and profane. In fact, much tribal artwork, including tattooing, represents the inevitable and perhaps inescapable monism of the world. Body equals spirit, and vice versa, so modifying the body necessarily modifies the spirit. For tribal societies this was a blessing not a burden. Like the connection between body and soul, there was also a blurring of the boundary between religion and culture. Sacred and secular were one in the same. Therefore, all art was religious art. J. Macmillan Brown says, "Religion has penetrated into every detail of existence, and its symbolism demands the development of art."[83] Brown also concludes that bodily art is the most basic art form: "Undoubtedly decoration of the person comes long before any other: for the desire of appeal to the feminine imagination appears earliest after the methods of satisfying hunger in the culture of primitive man."[84] Because of this very basic, human urge to decorate the body, tattooing is probably one of the most widespread and culturally diverse art forms. Tattooing in the Pacific Ocean islands was multivalent, intertwined with all aspects of identity including religion, politics, gender, rite of passage, and death. For Pacific Islanders tattoo was a way of life that brought together all aspects of a person's being into one unified, artistic, spiritual endeavor.

[83] J. Macmillan Brown, *Maori and Polynesian: Their Origin, History and Culture* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1907), 178.
[84] Brown, 183.

History of Tattooing in the South Pacific Islands_____

Many historians posit that the peoples of the Polynesian Islands migrated from an island in Southeast Asia and gradually inhabited the islands of the South Pacific from 1500 to 300 BCE. Most likely, they brought the art of tattoo with them. The Western world became aware of this thriving artistic tradition of Polynesia because of the voyages of several European crews sent out to explore the "uninhabited" world. One particular European, Captain James Cook, is responsible for recording the tribal tattoo as it existed during and immediately after contact with the European world. In fact, Cook invented the word "tattoo," borrowing the Tahitian "tatau," which means to tap lightly.[85] The majority of Europeans immediately despised the practice of tattooing, which is ironic because Europeans also had an ancestry of tattooing. Maarten Hesselt van Dinter remarks, "Europeans unfamiliar with tattooing, scorned the practice, considering it outlandish."[86] However, many Europeans were fascinated with the entire culture of tattooing, and some even embraced the tradition, later bringing the art form back to Europe.

Tattooing for the Polynesians was never divorced from the rest of their lives, especially their religion. There is an even a God of tattooing, *Tohu*, who has been performing the sacred rite since *Te Po*, the infinite original night.[87] According to Van Dinter, "It was essential that the gods approved, or the tattooist would not receive the inspiration required to create beautiful tattoos."[88] Tattooing was not only compatible with religion, but it was practically impossible without it. The un-tattooed were called *pala'ai* or cowards, and the naked body was not ready for the divine life.

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[85] Dominique Morvan and Jane Cooper, transl., *Tatau: Maohi Tattoo* (Tahiti: Tupuna Productions, 1993), 6.
[86] Maarten Hesselt van Dinter, *The World of Tattoo: An Illustrated History* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2005), 10.
[87] Morvan, 7.
[88] Van Dinter, 172.

All aspects of tattooing were important to the overall function and purpose of the tattoo itself. The whole experience was cohesive, including the tools. Tattoo instruments were made from material from the surrounding environment. Although the specific materials varied from island to island, the general construction was the same. The ink for the tattoos was usually a mixture of charcoal and the pigment from the kukio nut. Before getting a tattoo, many islanders would burn their own pigment, and they would accompany this by fasting before the tattoo to consecrate the ink. Typically a sharpened bone or tooth was fastened to a stick to create the instrument. In Hawaii specifically:

> *A bone or mother-of-pearl comb, or a grouping of needles of some sort (bird bone, bird beak, fish bone, or thorns) was hafted perpendicularly to a wood, reed or bamboo handle. The teeth would then be dipped into a charcoal-based pigment, placed on the skin, and tapped with a mallet, causing a superficial puncture and injecting the ink with the same stroke.*[89]

The makeup of the tattoo instrument depended on the materials available to those tattooing. By using these tools, the tattoo not only became a part of the person but also connected with the natural world.

Like the methodology, the particular designs and motifs were unique to the Polynesians. Each island had its own aesthetic, and often a person's origin could be judged accurately by reading his or her tattoos. Dominique Morvan says, "Age, gender, social rank, the personality of the tattooed person and his/her membership of a specific group were all factors which contributed to the choice of motifs."[90] While many early scholars of the Pacific Islands cite the prevalence of war as the motivation for the design,[91] it is often much more complex. Maoris (modern day New Zealand) chose *moko*, or facial tattoos with elaborate spiral and leaf patterns. *Moko* were unique to each individual, and Europeans signing treaties

[89] Tricia Allen, *Tattoo Traditions of Hawai'i* (Honolulu: Mutual Publishing, 2005), 107.
[90] Morvan, 10.
[91] Brown, 186 and 189.

with Maoris typically demanded an artistic rendering of the *moko* in addition to a signature. On the islands of Tonga and Samoa trouser tattoos, designs covering the buttocks and thighs were popular designs. Blue, repetitive motifs adorned the bodies of Easter Islanders. The Marquesans chose a combination of geometric shapes and regional flora and fauna. Eastern Polynesians, including Hawaiians, "tattooed natural history."[92] The designs were hardly arbitrary. Much could be learned from reading the tattoos of an individual, including the social status, relationship to the environment, life history, and genealogy.

The function of tattoos in Polynesia is just as complex and diverse as the design. Tattoos are *tapu* or sacred because the rhythms of life are sacred, as is the art that expresses this. In Polynesia tattoos are practical yet magical, ritualized yet individualized. The functions of tattoos are probably as unique as each tattooed individual, but for the purposes of summary Polynesian tattooing can be divided into three rough categories: initiation, identification, and protection. Christopher Gotch argues that tattooing is a substitution for other more brutal rites. He says, "The act of being tattooed formerly was the equivalent of circumcision, labia mutilation and other puberty initiation rites. Certainly tattooing provided the same element of suffering, though to a less drastic degree."[93] Tattooing can be placed in the category of an initiatory rite of passage, a cultural practice with such early historical references as the Hebrew Bible.

Perhaps the most basic function of tattoos was identification. Just like the *moko* of Maoris became the equivalents of personal signatures, tattoos in the South Pacific Islands were so unique to both the region and the person that they became permanent calling cards. In addition to signifying the practical aspects of identification such as name, tribe, and marital

[92] Brown, 185.
[93] Christopher Gotch and Surgeon Captain R.W.B. Scutt, R.N., *Art, Sex and Symbol: The Mystery of Tattooing* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1986), 75.

status, tattoos also were used for divine identification. Van Dinter claims that tattoos revealed the "collective consciousness and creative spirit of a group."[94] Gotch takes this a step further and argues that "They therefore used tattoo marks as a means of identification in the next world and a passport to future happiness."[95] Polynesians were superstitious about the afterlife, and they were concerned with maintaining both their individual and tribal identities after death, so the permanence of tattoos was incredibly appealing to them.

Tattoos were also protection for Polynesians. Because tattooing was a religious act, it had implications for one's religious life. In Fiji, un-tattooed women became food for the Gods.[96] As mentioned before, the naked body was not appropriate for the divine presence. A tattoo functioned as a physical blessing or sacred mark on the body. The best example of this is tattooing around the orifices of the body. Polynesians believed that the orifices of the body were the entry points for the divine, and for women particularly the orifices were also the origins of life. Orifices opened the *po* or inner body to the *ao* or outside world.[97] Tattooing these parts of the bodies provided the individual with divine protection. Morvan calls this genre of tattoo a "talisman,"[98] and Van Dinter argues these tattoos were so important because "People were thought to be particularly vulnerable to external evil influences at such times [i.e. pregnancy]."[99] Gotch adds that tattooing the orifices could "ensure an easy passage through difficult phases in life, such as puberty and pregnancy."[100] So tattoos were not merely identification markers. They were appeals to the divine beauty, bodily offerings to the

[94] Van Dinter, 17.
[95] Gotch, 63.
[96] Ibid, 64.
[97] Allen, 105.
[98] Morvan, 10.
[99] Van Dinter, 19.
[100] Gotch, 13.

gods. All aspects of the tattooing process in Polynesia—methodology, design, and function—were intricately linked with the ways of life and the conceptions of the divine.

It is difficult to talk about traditional Polynesian tattooing with any great degree of certainty for two reasons. First, the majority of information about this tradition comes from a variety of sources that might not be entirely historically accurate. Many of the early drawings and accounts we have exist in multiple versions, and we must assume that some early ethnographers were not immune to personal interpretation and extrapolation. The records we have must be examined closely, keeping in mind the possibility for error and slight alteration. Second, traditional Polynesian tattooing did not stay traditional for very long after European contact. Van Dinter says, "Almost immediately after the arrival of the Europeans, the islanders began tattooing realistic depictions on their bodies, and traditional Tahitian tattoos fell into disuse."[101] This sudden change in style is an accurate representation of the shift in Polynesian tattooing. Soon after the Europeans arrived, Pacific islanders were tattooing each other with muskets, sheep, and other predominantly Western designs. Van Dinter, and other scholars, suggests that this collision of traditions was a positive experience. He argues, "It is human nature to exchange customs upon meeting, whether out of friendship, respect, envy or curiosity. The reciprocal imitation of tattoos by European sailors and South Sea Islanders is a splendid example of this."[102] This is an overly simplified and idealistic answer to a very real question: When does sharing and imitation become subversion? Polynesians seemingly abandoned their own rich tradition for one that was not theirs. Even after this dramatic assimilation, tattooing was eventually banned by Christian missionaries in nearly all of the islands of Polynesia. Tattooing on the relatively young island chain known as Hawaii

[101] Van Dinter, 139.
[102] Ibid, 17.

exemplifies all of these overarching themes: tattooing as a multifunctional cultural practice, assimilation, and finally adaptation.

Hawaii

Hawaiian tattooing is a part of the larger cultural tradition of Polynesian tattooing, but this relatively young island chain used tattooing in ways that are different from the larger tradition. The islands in the far eastern region of Polynesia were the last to be inhabited. Beginning in the first year of the common era, Samoans began to sail eastward.[103] The Samoans, the first people to step foot on the dormant volcanic islands now known as Hawaii, arrived about 350CE, and the second wave of inhabitants, residents of the Society Islands, did not arrive until about 1200CE.[104] Because the islands were isolated from outside contact for over five hundred years, a vibrant culture evolved, including a very complex religious system. In 1778, however, Hawaii was changed forever. On January 18th of that year Captain James Cook would "discover" the archipelago he would name the Sandwich Islands, after his chief patron the Earl of Sandwich. Cook found Hawaii by accident, a seemingly common occurrence for adventurers. He was looking for the Northwest Passage, but instead he found Hawaii.[105] During his lifetime Cook made several voyages to Hawaii, and eventually he died there. The artist Jacques Arago traveled on the Freycinet with Captain Cook in 1819,[106] providing us with some of the best and most vivid illustrations of Hawaiian culture, especially tattooing. In fact, loved by the native Hawaiians, Arago even became a tattoo artist. He was

[103] John H. Chambers, *On-The-Road-Histories: Hawaii* (Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2006), 26-27.
[104] Chambers, 26-27.
[105] Ibid, 48-49.
[106] Allen, 4.

in fact the only known outsider to tattoo an indigenous people.[107] While Arago had a great deal of respect for the natives of Hawaii, not all foreigners would share his ethnographic and artistic approach. After much foreign influence, in 1819 the *kapu* system [political and religious order] was challenged,[108] and the people of Hawaii were even more susceptible to the first missionaries, "Calvinist New Englanders."[109] The Christian missionaries were desperate to convert the native Hawaiians. And while many native Hawaiian practices and beliefs were abandoned, in nearly seventeen years of mission work only one percent of the native population was converted.[110] Many Hawaiians still held onto their traditions, but the social landscape was changing, and the customs, such as tattooing, were changing with it. Tricia Allen says, "With the conversion of the populace and the fall of the old system of social order…after Kamehameha's death [the first king of unified Hawaii], tattoo was no longer an integral aspect of Hawaiian culture. The practice was largely abandoned by the mid-1800s."[111] Tattooing would become dormant in mainstream Hawaiian culture, for a while. We must examine what constitutes Hawaiian tattooing, however, to be able to understand its resilience.

What makes Hawaiian tattooing so unique is its lack of uniformity. Neighboring islanders had very systematic, often rigid guidelines for motif, placement, and methodology of tattooing. Hawaiians, on the other hand, were much more free to create their own process. This is not to say that there was no standard because certain themes can be deduced from the historical evidence, but there existed a much more flexible system. Allen says, "There was

[107] Ibid, 124.
[108] Chambers, 98.
[109] Ibid, 101.
[110] Ibid, 117.
[111] Allen, 2.

not a single 'Hawaiian' convention that all tattooists or subjects recognized."[112] While this often makes studying Hawaiian tattooing more difficult because of its diversity and difficulty to quantify, it also allows the scholar to consider a more broad definition of this cultural practice.

Although anthropologist Alfred Gell denied the existence of complex symbolism in Hawaiian tattooing,[113] other scholars such as Tricia Allen have argued the opposite. She says, "Design motifs, like many aspects of Hawaiian culture, have *kaona*—that is, layers of meaning."[114] For Westerners interpretation of these ancient designs can be a bit problematic, for we lack the cultural and situational context that is inseparable from the actual tattoo. It is very possible, however, to survey the most frequent design motifs as recorded by Arago and other ethnographers. Inspiration for tattoo designs is typically found in nature. The most prevalent design themes are triangular motifs representing shark's teeth, *hoaka* or crescents representing genealogy, and designs from *kapa* or bark cloth beaten by Hawaiian women.[115] *Makaloa*, woven checkerboard patterns, and names of the dead and death dates were also very popular designs.[116] After contact with the Western world, Hawaiians wore tattoos of goats, muskets, and other relics of European culture. Tattooists placed the designs on the *ma'i* or genitals, the inner leg, which points to the genitals, the navel, hands, feet, faces, and torsos.[117] Just as the designs of the tattoos were not random, neither was the placement. All tattoos were associated with *kapu* or potency and sacredness. Hawaiians tattooed genitals because they were the source of life, so they needed the divine protection. They tattooed women's

[112] Ibid, 123.
[113] Alfred Gell, *Wrapping In Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1993), 283.
[114] Allen, 98.
[115] Ibid., 99.
[116] Ibid., 80-81.
[117] Ibid., 104-105.

hands because the hands contained *mana* or spiritual power.[118] Navels, also tattooed, were the center of the body's power. Although we see more flexibility and diversity in Hawaiian tattooing than in other Polynesian traditions, a spiritually coherent parameter still exists.

Tattooing in Hawaii lacked the political and social connotations that the tradition possessed on other islands such as New Zealand and Samoa. Alfred Gell comments:

> *I believe that the Hawaiian political system had, in effect, outgrown tattooing as a vehicle for the expression of political relationships at the level of the total social system, but had not fully arrived at a position in which tattooing could be reconstructed as a class practice or subcultural marker, as in truly modern societies.*[119]

Unlike the Maoris whose *moko* could tell the educated observer his rank in the society, his family history, and his individual personality, Hawaiian tattooing was far removed from the political dynamics of island life. This does not mean, however, that Hawaiian tattooing was solely superficial. Instead, Hawaiian tattooing often served a very important function in the society.

Amidst the diversity of Hawaiian tattooing, one particular function stands out: tattoos to mourn the dead. Tattooing the names and death dates of the deceased was incredibly popular in Hawaiian society. Anthropologist Alfred Gell calls mortuary tattooing a "special feature of Hawaiian tattoo,"[120] and scholars Maarten van Dinter and Tricia Allen also recognize the prevalence of this practice in which both women and men participated. Gell says, "Mortuary tattooing is always implicitly two-sided indicating both that one has mourned a death, shared in it, but also that one has encompassed and survived it."[121] For those remaining in this world, a tattoo is the closest approximation to the death they have just

[118] Ibid, 101.
[119] Gell, 278.
[120] Gell, 283.
[121] Ibid.

witnessed. The body does undergo a miniature death; the tattooed, scarred, or burnt flesh dies, but it does not die completely. The skin transforms, becoming stronger. Gell says, "Scarred or tattooed skin is always implicitly stronger and more protected than unblemished skin."[122] The tattoo serves several purposes. First, the tattoo or scar becomes an embodied memorial, a perpetual reminder of the lost life. Second, the person who is left behind to live can share in the experience of death, an experience that for tribal persons was not feared or dreaded as in Western culture. The individual death becomes a communal act of participation and later remembrance. The tattooist recites *oli* and *pule*, chants and prayers, and the tattooed memory of the deceased is "permanently captured in the skin, providing the wearer the continual protection."[123] It is a beautiful and healthy process of grief and recovery. Because the living are allowed to share in the death of their tribesmen and tribeswomen, the healing becomes collective, embodied, real, and manageable. Mortuary tattooing is practiced in other Polynesian cultures, but it is particularly prevalent in Hawaii.

Contemporary Hawaiian Tattooing

It is important to remember that Hawaiian tattooing has always embraced change, innovation, and even assimilation. According to our earliest records, Hawaiians readily accepted the design motifs of the Western world and freely participated in the exchange of ideas and customs. Some theories even suggest that Hawaiians had abandoned tattooing before their neighboring islanders encouraged them to resume the art. Nevertheless, European colonialism and assimilation typically evoke a much more negative reaction in our modern minds, and this is an appropriate reaction to a certain degree. Tattooing died out in

[122] Ibid.
[123] Allen, 99.

almost all of the Polynesian islands after contact with the Western world. A new religion and new ideas about culture and appropriateness dominated this discourse. Van Dinter says, "Western influence increased the islander's awareness of alternative value systems. The young became reluctant to undergo a painful tattooing procedure for a tradition that only had value on their island."[124] Modern sensibilities about body and decency replaced ancient traditions, and a tattooed body, previously viewed as the most beautiful kind, became taboo, heathen, savage, and uncivilized. Van Dinter said that tattoos became a "pastime of a less developed person,"[125] and they soon gained the contempt of Western missionaries seeking to replace tribal ways of life with Christian principles. Eventually tattooing disappeared from the South Pacific Islands. It was too dangerous to continue the practice. Tattooed individuals were hunted down like animals. Maori men were captured, and their tattooed heads were shrunken and preserved, a souvenir of Western conquest. The tradition faded into the past, yet today all over the Polynesian islands people still tattoo.

Even though the tradition of tattooing lay dormant for nearly 200 years, traditional Polynesian tattooing is experiencing an unprecedented revival in interest and practice. Tattoo artists, like Tricia Allen, are reaching into the past to rediscover a vibrant tradition and recreating it with a respect for the tradition yet a hope for innovation. However, it is not just a matter of picking up where the native Hawaiians left off. Much of the history of tattooing was lost in those 200 years, and many modern tattooists question the appropriateness of either changing tradition or merely imitating it. Tricia Allen writes, "We are modern people, and the majority of us, Hawaiian or otherwise, are of mixed blood. Therefore I think it almost inappropriate in many cases to take designs verbatim from the old sources. A tattoo should

[124] Van Dinter, 11.
[125] Van Dinter, 13.

represent who you are, and again, we are modern people under many influences."[126] So Allen, along with many other modern tattooists, chooses to use the past for inspiration, and she respectfully adapts the traditional designs for modern people. Hawaiian tattooing as it was in the nineteenth century no longer exists, but Hawaiian tattooing in the twenty first century is alive and well, sparking interest for not only Polynesian people but also those who find the tradition and heritage of tattooing just as appealing as the design.

Fieldwork: Tattooed by Tricia Allen[127]

I went to Hawaii hoping to get a traditional bone tool tattoo from a genuine Polynesian tattoo artist who would be wise in the ways of Polynesian tradition and custom. While people like this still do exist, such people and such tattoos are extremely rare. More common are the modern practitioners who for a variety of reasons were drawn to the tradition, so they learned the designs, the methodology, and the history. Tricia Allen is probably the epitome of a modern Polynesian tattoo artist. Tricia is not Hawaiian. She came to the art form from a love of African and Pacific art, and she completed her Master of Arts thesis at the University of Hawaii on Marquesan tattooing. Since the beginning of her career Tricia has tattooed nearly 7,400 times. She spends nearly thirty five weeks out of the year traveling to the mainland to tattoo Hawaiians in the United States. Approximately eighty-five percent of her clients are Polynesian, so already I feel honored. Today Tricia is an ethnographer, anthropologist, curator, author, and tattoo artist.

[126] Allen, 207.
[127] All information unless otherwise cited comes from an interview with Tricia Allen in her home on Oahu on October 29, 2006. Tricia Allen gave the author permission to use the interview and any photographs of the tattoo for academic purposes.

I went to Tricia's home for my tattoo, and I sat on her back porch, overlooking the island where the TV show "Gilligan's Island" was filmed years ago, waiting for my stencil. Before tattooing me, Tricia applies a stencil of the design. It is basically carbon paper adhered with deodorant, a well-known trick of the trade. Unlike most contemporary tattoo artists, Tricia free hands most of her designs and stencils. She applies my design, twice because I am fidgeting excitedly, and then we wait. It takes nearly half an hour for the stencil to dry to Tricia's satisfaction. When I am sufficiently dry, we go to a spare bedroom of her house, converted into her private tattoo studio. Unlike her tattoo predecessors, Tricia is extremely concerned with sterilization. Everything that will touch my body is thoroughly cleaned and covered with plastic wrap. While Tricia's approach is traditional her methodology is modern. For my tattoo she uses a high-tech Swiss rotary machine, smaller and less synthetic feeling than most contemporary machines. Tricia appreciates the smaller size of the machine, for after 7,400 tattoos she will soon have surgery on both her neck and arm, casualties of the profession. The moment before the tattoo is always tense for me. I am conflicted between excitement, anticipation, and still a little fear. This will be my sixth tattoo, but it is already the most unique. The first touch of the needle is exhilarating. It hurts, but it hurts in a way that is utterly appealing to me. I have never had a high threshold for pain, which I think is part of the reason tattooing entices me. I am always proud of myself for not crying, for finishing, for embracing the pain. The needle hums softly in the background. The machine is superficially puncturing my skin, simultaneously pushing the black ink underneath. The body naturally tries to reject the ink, treating it as a disease, so the final product depends entirely on the skill of the tattooist, for the tattoo only heals correctly if the needle reaches the correct depth. Too deep or too shallow will result in an imperfect tattoo.

Tricia says that all tattoos are imperfect in some respect, and I think this is part of the attraction for me. It is not only the design, but it is also the unique way my body will heal that makes the tattoo mine.

Tricia designs my tattoo specifically for my body. No one else has or ever will have this exact tattoo. The design is a blend of ancient Polynesian designs and contemporary influences. Each aspect of the tattoo is representative of the design and culture of Polynesia. Each level of the tattoo is a representation from nature. Starting from the top of the tattoo the layers represent rain, trochus shell, woven pandemus flower, pandemus flower, ihea, sun, and eyes. The eye design is Marquesan, while the rest of the designs are Samoan with a contemporary Hawaiian flair.

Rain

Trochus Shell

Lauhala / Woven pandemus

Pandemus flower

Ihea

Sun

Mata, eyes

So, I went to Hawaii to get a Samoan and Marquesan tattoo by an American woman. Tricia Allen writes in her book, "Ancient Hawaiians were innovative, and I have no problem with innovation today. It is a living culture."[128] I think my experience represents the essence of tattooing in Hawaii: adaptation.

Conclusion

Modern Hawaiian tattooing has withstood the test of time. Nearly forgotten for two centuries, the practice still thrives today, adapted yet true to its heritage. Perhaps the reason it existed is simple. Maybe there exists a very human urge to decorate and manipulate the body, an urge so strong that no amount of Western colonialism could defeat it. Christopher Gotch says of tattooing, "It can be decorative, it can be useful or it can be a distinctive badge. The reasons for having it done are enigmatic and, like so many aspects of human behavior, may be vested in the subconscious; besides which, motivations have changed over the centuries along with social customs and pressures."[129] The reasons for tattooing are many, as are the approaches to the art. Tattooing, despite its particularities, embodies a very uniform trend of all ancient ways of life. It changes, succumbs to outside influences, recedes, and then emerges new yet familiar, changed yet the same. What I expected from Hawaii and what I got were two different things, but I think I am left with a much more realistic and at the same time more hopeful view of how tribal culture can fit into modern life. Traditions such as tattooing ebb and flow, but they never recede completely.

[128] Allen, 208.
[129] Gotch, 13.

"It is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission."[130]

Chapter 4

The Body and Its Power

It would be irresponsible to discuss the benefits of voluntary physical pain without addressing the obvious reality that today and throughout history pain is often not voluntary. Unfortunately, the same theoretical justification behind body modification can be manipulated and misconstrued into a detrimental and dangerous system of oppression and abuse. Our bodies become not vessels for spiritual experience but rather weapons to be used against us. We are not in control but controlled by our physical bodies, and all of the possibilities that accompany the deliberate choice to endure pain become obsolete and irrelevant when the choice is not ours. We have seen that the mastery of the body essentially yields control. Such power in the wrong hands can be terrifying.

The body is a dynamic unit. As we have seen previously the body is the site for physical, emotional, and spiritual activity. French philosopher and social critic Michel Foucault wrote prolifically about the dynamic relationships of the body to the self and to the society. In his influential work *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* Foucault writes a comprehensive historical and analytical treatment of the judicial system. In this work, Foucault deals extensively with the nature of the human body, its innate power, and its social possibilities. He posits the body as existing in a constant duality and perpetually subject to external control. According to Foucault the human body is always interpreted twofold: as a

[130] Michel Foucault. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 25.

personal entity and a political entity.[131] Because of this duality the body can be potentially controlled in two different arenas.

The body is first a private universe, accountable to the individual. Because of the delicacy and privacy of the body, however, it becomes a very vulnerable inlet into the person. Foucault writes, "The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as right and as property."[132] We regard our bodies as belonging inalienably to us, but Foucault suggests that our bodies are always for sale, and he reminds us that the most effective way to control a person is to control his body.

This foreign occupation of the body ushers it into the political realm. Foucault writes, "But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit sighs."[133] This statement makes sense in the punitive system about which Foucault writes, but these sentiments apply directly to body modification and the positive and negative connotations it engenders. Foucault notes that ritual must mark the body,[134] and body modification does just this. Foucault even glorifies the body as a ritual subject that can be modified. He writes, "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."[135] The beauty of Foucault's theory is like a double-edged sword. On one hand, the body, which is infinitely impressionable and influential, has unlimited potential for change and growth. On the other hand, the body is severely in danger of falling under malevolent influence. As I have already addressed the applications of this theory that engender positive

[131] Foucault, 29.
[132] Ibid., 11.
[133] Ibid, 25.
[134] Ibid, 34.
[135] Ibid, 136.

manifestations in religious and cultural systems, I will now address the darker side of Foucault's explication of the relationship between socio-political power and the body.

Female Genital Mutilation

The most striking example of this personal *coup d'etat* is the brutal practice of female genital mutilation. It has become a "perpetual battle"[136] between individual rights and cultural norms not only in far away places such as Africa but also right in our own backyard. It is a common misconception to assume that practices such as genital mutilation are antiquated or irrelevant in today's society. The opposite, however, is true, for genital mutilation is a thriving cultural ritual that is defended vehemently by its supporters all over the world. Superficially, genital mutilation seems strikingly similar to tattooing. Both rituals involve physical pain and marking. Both rituals emerge from cultures that wish to mark the passages of a life on the physical person. While genital mutilation shares theoretical similarities with tattooing, practically, the former lacks any of the positive and transformative elements of the latter.

In order to truly understand the implications of female genital mutilation it is necessary to first understand the nature of the procedure and of the arguments supporting this practice. Genital mutilation is not a monolithic practice. There are variations in degree, practitioner, compulsory or mandatory status, and ritual circumstance. In the article "Female Genital Mutilation And Cosmetic Surgery: Regulating Non-Therapeutic Body Modification," authors Sally Sheldon and Stephen Wilkinson detail the different forms of genital mutilation. Starting with the most minor procedure, "Sunna" circumcision involves the removal of a

[136] Foucault, 26. Foucault makes a point to call the struggle of the body against the state a "perpetual battle" and not a "conquest of a territory".

small portion of a woman's clitoris. Excision or clitoridectomy entails removing the entire clitoris and sometimes the labia minora. The most extreme procedure is called Infibulation or pharaonic circumcision and calls for the complete removal of the clitoris, labia minora, and the labia majora, as well as sealing the two sides of the vagina together typically by sewing together or fusing scar tissue.[137] While the most minor of the procedures is almost entirely symbolic, involving very little physical pain or discomfort, and can be compared to male circumcision, the most severe procedure is incredibly painful for a woman and almost always leaves the woman permanently scarred and damaged.

Despite the growing opposition to female genital mutilation, many men and women still support the practice. Rosemary Kinyanjui, a Kenyan woman and a social advocate, defends some aspects of this practice. She primarily defends female genital mutilation as a worthy rite of passage. She writes, "Without this rite of passage no one could claim the benefits of adult status since they were [still] regarded as children."[138] Female genital mutilation is a cross-cultural rite of passage, effective because it not only changes the individual internally but also marks them physically. Kinyanjui cites other benefits of the practice: "It is preserved as a means of reducing promiscuity among women. Economically, the circumcised girl is believed to bring more wealth to the parent at her marriage."[139] Although these socio-political motivations might seem outdated and chauvinistic to a Western audience, they are vital to many cultures still grounded in a more traditional, conservative patriarchy. Kinyanjui writes, "The welfare of the tribe depended entirely on the rigid observance of the taboos and rites. Female circumcision was a ritual honoured by society. It

[137] Sally Sheldon and Stephen Wilkinson. "Female Genital Mutilation And Cosmetic Surgery: Regulating Non-Therapeutic Body Modification" (*Bioethic*s Volume 12 Number 4, pp263-285, 1998), 266.
[138] Rosemary Kinyanjui. "Hidden Cost of Rejecting Female Genital Mutilation [FGM]" (Tranformation Volume 19 Number 1 January, pp72-77, 2002), 73.
[139] Kinyanjui, 74.

was felt that its abandonment would cause society bad luck."[140] In all highly ritualized societies, the absence of a ritual practiced for generations would evoke suspicion, anxiety, and even fear for the future of the community. Ritual is meaning, and abandoning it is tantamount to abandoning life for many peoples.

While Kinyanjui realizes the importance of genital mutilation as a rite of passage in her highly ritualized society, she does not accept the practice in its entirety. Kinyanjui writes, "Despite the advantages claimed by traditional society, the disadvantages are alarming and destructive."[141] She names a few of the side-effects of female genital mutilation: hemorrhaging, acute and chronic infections, extreme pain, and complications in reproductive, sexual and urinary function.[142] For Kinyanjui, however, these risks are not enough evidence to abandon the practice completely, for she sees the dangers in this extreme as well. She says, "As a rite of passage, it prepared girls for the adulthood and womanhood which the girls were to face in future. The church has felt the gap created by abandonment of the earlier practices without any replacement."[143] An absence of ritual is potentially just as damaging for women in these societies as female genital mutilation. Kinyanjui, and many other women like her, is caught in a very difficult paradox. Which is the lesser evil? Should she abandon a practice that has been a part of her culture for generations, or should she try and find an adequate replacement? Female genital mutilation is creating this ethical dilemma for women and men all over the world.

Why would women continue to support a practice that could possibly damage their bodies permanently? Why would they support a practice that assumes their bodies are

[140] Ibid, 76.
[141] Ibid, 73.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid, 74.

property of the community? The practice of genital mutilation asks these questions of all its supporters and critics. The answers, however, are as complicated as the practice itself. Like Rosemary Kinyanjui, women all over the world are conflicted by complex and overlapping ethical obligations. In *Ethics & World Religions: Cross-Cultural Case Studies,* editors Regina Wentzel Wolfe and Christine E. Gudorf attempt to explore complex ethical dilemmas that are intricately linked to religious worldviews. In a hypothetical scenario, Gudorf explores the multiple emotional investments involved with female genital mutilation. Gudorf creates a fictional Senegalese family who are currently dealing with this issue. In the following excerpt the mother Awa is trying to explain the justification for the procedure to her daughters:

> *'When I was a girl in Dakar,' Awa began, 'my mother and my father argued over whether I was to have the womanhood ceremony. My mother and both my grandmothers insisted that I had to have it. They argued just as you have heard—that the genitals of a girl who did not have the cutting of the ceremony grew long and deformed until they hit her knees, that she had the parts of a man, and could not bring forth a son, and that even the girl babies she bore died from touching her male parts in birth.'*[144]

Although what Awa is explaining to her daughters has absolutely no scientific credibility, these superstitions survive in communities where access to such scientific knowledge is oftentimes unavailable. If these horrible things are true, it would be an enormous risk to forego this procedure. While Awa herself does not believe these things she is aware of the social stigma that will be placed on her daughters if they do not undergo genital mutilation. However, Awa was raised by parents who were learned in Western culture, and she was also well aware of the risks of undergoing the procedure, even if it was the cultural norm. She tells her daughters:

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[144] Regina Wentzel Wolfe and Christine E. Gudorf, eds. *Ethics & World Religions: Cross-Cultural Case Studies* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 24.

> *If you survive, you will walk differently, more slowly and carefully, all your life, for all the skin will be scar tissue, and tight. It will take you much longer to empty your bladder, for the opening in the scar tissue is so small. Your menses will last longer for the same reason, and you will have infections and bad smells, for it will be impossible to clean that collection space on the inside of the scar tissue. When you marry it may take days, even a week or more for your husband to 'open' you, and you will scream with pain.*[145]

Awa's story represents the very real struggle that all women in these cultures must face when they have daughters of their own. There are risks inherent in all options. Women who do not undergo this ritual will possibly be shunned, unable to find a marriage partner, and perhaps even ostracized from their communities entirely. In addition to Awa's hypothetical ethical dilemma the editors of *Ethics & World Religions* provide the reader with response from different cultural backgrounds. Mary Gendler who is responding on behalf of the Jewish community introduces another complication into this already intricate scenario. Gendler does not condone the violence associated with female genital mutilation, but in a way she envies the level of participation allowed for women in cultures that accept this practice. She says:

> *Jewish women face the problem of marginalization and, at times, even exclusion from the heart of religious ritual practice because women are de facto excluded from carrying the covenant in their flesh. For all its barbarity, female circumcision within Judaism can create a certain communal and religious standing for women, albeit at the cost of their physical well being and full sexual functioning.*[146]

This posits yet another aspect of genital mutilation to ponder. Are the risks worth the benefits? Does participation demand some personal sacrifice? This is a question that is answered in a multiplicity of ways across cultures and generations.

There are many reasons to practice genital mutilation, such as culture, ritual, and tradition, but there is an equally passionate community committed to eradicating the process altogether. Authors Sheldon and Wilkinson argue, "Opponents of female genital mutilation

[145] Wolfe and Gudorf, 25.
[146] Ibid, 38.

have argued that only someone who was coerced, manipulated, or highly irrational would agree to undergo female genital mutilation and that, therefore, valid informed consent to it is, in practice, impossible."[147] While many young women do willingly and even eagerly accept this fate, critics would say that they have no real option to deny it. Sheldon and Wilkinson also detail the popular feminist critique that genital mutilation contributes to the "global subordination of women,"[148] and they explain that it contributes to stereotypes of virginity, promiscuity, and infidelity in women.

Compromises and Alternatives

It would seem, given the two opposing sides of the argument, that we are at an impasse regarding female genital mutilation. But alternatives and compromises do exist. Rosemary Kinyanjui writes about alternatives to female genital mutilation put into practice as early as 1996. One alternative is allowing girls who are of the age to participate in a communal workshop where they learn about the challenges and privileges of womanhood together. The even is marked with a ceremony and a reception of certificates.[149] This alternative dismissed the physical aspect of ritual altogether, and it is one of the most noticeable departures from the mutilation. However, there are alternatives that do not eradicate the physical element. Instead, the physical aspect of the ritual is decreased, becoming more symbolic than functional. In the fictional story provided by Gudorf, Awa describes to her daughters a modification of the ceremony that she herself experienced. In this version the woman is anesthetized, and a doctor removes a small portion of the clitoris, not enough to cause any significant sexual or functional change. Yet, the ritual is still marked

[147] Sheldon and Wilkinson, 271.
[148] Ibid, 273.
[149] Kinyanjui, 75.

physically.[150] This modified ceremony is seen by many as an adequate compromise, and I argue that in this modified version this ritual is comparable to tattooing. The physicality of the ritual is preserved, the community is appeased, and the health and well-being of the girl is preserved. Like tattooing, the girl might even feel empowered by this mark of her adulthood, this embodiment of her status change.

Michel Foucault was probably unfamiliar with the practice of female genital mutilation, but his writings seem to apply to the situation perfectly. In societies where this ritual is performed, the body becomes caught in an intricate web of power relations, and it is more often than not the case that the young woman whose body will be changed forever has virtually no power within her society. Some would argue, however, that the ritual will in fact empower the girl, but this assertion is problematic. Patriarchs of these societies yield power over these budding women by changing their bodies in an effort to limit their behavior. They cut their genitals in hopes that they might not become promiscuous. They cut them, so they will be more valuable and appealing to a future husband, and they cut them, so they will know what it means to be a woman.

It is easy for Westerners to simply scoff at this ritual, decry the violence, and to convince themselves that such a brutal practice could only happen far away from home. But this is not the case. In fact, in 2001 an Ethiopian man living in Lawrenceville, Georgia was convicted of performing genital mutilation on his two-year-old daughter.[151] Khalid Adem was sentenced to ten years in prison for removing his daughter's clitoris with a pair of household scissors. The United States does have laws pertaining to genital mutilation, but

[150] Wolfe and Gudorf, 24-25.
[151] All information concerning this case is from the following source: www.cnn.com/2006/LAW/11/01/female.circumcision.ap/index.html

they only apply to children under eighteen years of age.[152] According to the news article detailing the genital mutilation, Adem was in fact convicted on charges of aggravated battery and cruelty towards a child—less ambiguous convictions, legally speaking. In 2001 the State Department estimated that approximately 130 million women all over the world have experienced this procedure. Americans were appalled that something so barbaric and "primitive" could be happening in their own neighborhoods. The reality is that for those who practice genital mutilation, the practice is not morally reprehensible or unduly violent. Instead it is a culturally supported ritual that exists as a necessary rite of passage for young women.

Perhaps it is a double standard in this country to allow and even encourage male circumcision while vehemently shunning its female counterpart. Maybe it is even hypocritical to embrace the cultural phenomenon of tattooing while simultaneously outlawing genital mutilation. Not all ritual involving the body is equal, however, and it becomes crucial for any participant to ask one question: Is this ritual helping me more than harming me? Yes, voluntary physical pain can be extremely beneficial for both the body and the soul, but involuntary pain or even excessive voluntary pain does more damage than good, thus invalidating the original purpose of the ritual. Tattooing changes the person for the better, but genital mutilation often harms someone irrevocably. Modified genital mutilation does have a place in the greater canon of physical rituals, and the importance of the ceremony should be found in the motivation and not the details. Removing a small part of the clitoris in order to mark the passage from adolescence into adulthood is ultimately more dynamic than viciously removing the entire clitoris to mark the same passage. The woman who participates in the former procedure is marked by her transformation, but she is emotionally and physically able

[152] Sheldon and Wilkinson, 269.

to respect the ritual while still maintaining her well-being, but the woman in the latter procedure is damaged not marked, and she will forever be scarred rather than transformed. Female genital mutilation is not necessarily a practice to be outlawed or demonized, but like all successful rituals the practice as a whole must be willing to evolve to meet the evolving standards of the community it wishes to serve.

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"

1 Corinthians 6:19

Conclusion

It amazes me that in such a dynamic culture, when the span of a few years can seem like an eternity, that a practice which started thousands of years ago remains so culturally relevant and still so true to its original form. The designs, colors, instruments, and clientele may change slightly, but the art form is essentially unchanged. From the earliest ancestors of tattooing who used charcoal and sharpened bones to the neo-tribalists who blend primitive designs with very modern technology, the basic ingredients remain the same: skin, ink, and tool. Tattooing appeals to a very universal and instinctual urge to mold and decorate the flesh. Despite all the differences present in humanity, all human beings have bodies and the ability to change their bodies to appropriately reflect their places in the world.

The portrayal of tattooing in popular culture has varied dramatically. The tattooed have frequently been marginalized and cast as social miscreants. Margo DeMello writes, "For westerners, the tattoo has always been a metaphor of difference."[153] The savage, the sailor, the outcast, and now the urban tribalist. These are the people who tattoo, the outcasts of society, but this stereotype is already self-contradicting, for members of the tattooed community now come from all walks of life: corporate, domestic, young, old, rich, and poor. Once again this speaks to the universality and availability that has always distinguished tattooing. The question we must now ask is if this growing acceptance of tattooing will

[153] Margo DeMello. *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 13.

ultimately harm rather than hurt the practice. Could tattooing lose meaning as its popularity grows? Will quantity trump quality? Maybe this question is irrelevant or maybe more appropriately rash. It would be safe to assume that a tradition which survived its evolution from the Polynesian Islands to the tattoo parlors of Athens, Georgia, is well versed in weathering the whimsy and notoriously short attention span of most people. Nevertheless, tattooing survives in myriad forms and in countless locals around the world.

Why tattooing is so relevant for religious studies is its unique ability to encompass the totality of a person involved in a religious ritual. Tattooing forces us to consider how we perceive our own bodies, how we define our identity—both individual and social—and asks us just how personal our religion should be. Any effective ritual will necessarily involve physical participation. Foucault writes, "In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless: everything must be called upon to form the support of the act required."[154] We must believe and *feel* ritual if we are to incorporate into our person.

The implications of this study are far-reaching. By evaluating tattooing in a cultural, religious, and ritualistic perspective I am attempting to broaden the academic scope of religious behavior and meaning. New generations need new religions, and new religions require new intellectual reflections and new ritual manifestations. It is worthwhile to reconsider old notions of what constitutes religious experience. In this study I have dealt with various issues such as body image, cultural imperialism, religious experience, ritual, body modification, pain, power, and spirituality. These are dynamic issues that require ever-evolving definitions. Religion without adaptation is a stagnant and frankly unappealing monolithic institution. Tattooing is the embodiment of adaptation and progression. Rooted

[154] Foucault, 152.

inevitably in the past, tattooing reaches into the future and appeals to all classes, races, genders, and religions. Tattooing embraces art, body, ritual, voluntary pain, and tradition to create a wonderfully hybrid, innovative, yet conservative religious phenomenon. By marking our bodies we can indeed mark our souls.

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** All information unless otherwise cited comes from an interview with Tricia Allen in her home on Oahu on October 29, 2006. Tricia Allen gave the author permission to use the interview and any photographs of the tattoo for academic purposes

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Appendix A: Images from Hawaii

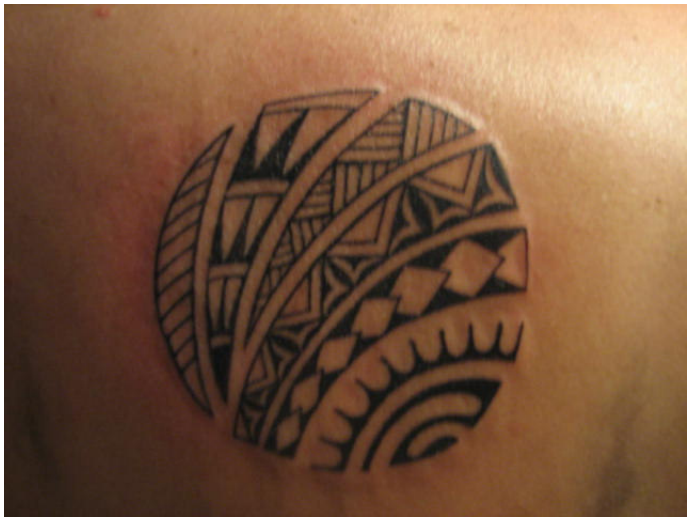
One of Jacques Arago's sketches of indigenous Hawaiian tattoo. The image was published for the first time in Tricia Allen's book *Tattoo Traditions of Hawai'i*.

Tricia Allen, anthropologist and tattoo artists, places the stencil for my tattoo on my shoulder on the porch of her home on Oahu, Hawaii.

The stencil must dry completely before Tricia proceeds with the process.

Tricia Allen tattoos me in her home. She uses a Swiss Rotary tattoo machine.

Finished tattoo



Finished tattoo