



SCARRING SKIN FOR SURVIVAL: DISCERNING THE TATTOO OF KARBI WOMEN

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Abstract: Tattoo and bodily markings have been prevalent in human societies since time immemorial. During the Burmese invasion in Assam between 1817 and 1825, the Karbi women marked their faces with a black scar called '*duk*'. This scarring on the face is an act of 'disfigurement', made as a remedy to save themselves from being captured and sexually tortured by the then 'ruthless' Burmese invaders. Fortunately, this facial marking of *duk* has enabled these women to survive. The present study tries to understand the significance and representation that this mark holds up until the present day, even after it is no longer in practice. Interestingly, the same act of scarring or disfigurement on the women's face, has earned them honour, respect, and even being preferred for marriage, by the members of the Karbi society. Today, young Karbi women apply the temporary facial marks as a replicatory depiction of *duk* during special occasions, as tribute to the original *duk*-marked women for their bravery and honour in history. Further, this study also makes an attempt at gendering the *duk* mark in particular and indigenous tattoos, in general, analysing the gender dichotomies. Methods of non-participant observation, semi-structured interview, content-analysis and case studies were applied for this study.

Key words - *duk*, Karbi, tattoo, scarring, disfigurement, facial mark, gender dichotomy, gender socialization.

INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, tattoo or bodily marking is seen to be practiced globally. Generally, in the modern times, it is more of an expression of art, aesthetics or beautification. However, for the indigenous people, it is more of a cultural and ritual practice mandated by clan or family depicting the "societal values on the skin" (Krutak, 2014 in Krutak, 2015). The Karbi community of Assam is no exception to the practice of facial marking. The Karbi women mostly born before 1960s are seen to have a black mark lined straight across the centre of their face, from the forehead down to the chin, skipping the lips; this is called '*duk*' in their dialect. This study is an attempt to describe what the *duk* represents for the Karbis in the present day, even when the practice is not prevalent anymore, based on the experiences of women who got marked themselves. The present study also attempts to explain how the practice can be interpreted from the lens of gender dichotomy.

METHODOLOGY

The selection of the field area was based on where the Karbi women with *duk* resided. The selected areas of study are Amguri village, about 5 kms. from Nellie area, in and Maitkramsa village, near Umswai area of West Karbi Anglong district,

Assam. For the primary data collection, non-participant observation was made in a natural setting, to comprehend the appearance and maintenance of the *duk*, and lifestyle of the Karbi people in general. Semi-structured interview was conducted on a total of 16 women who were facially marked with *duk*, to find out the details about the procedure of application of *duk* among the Karbi women, their personal thoughts on the experience and the implications of the practice. The interview had both close-ended and open-ended questions. Secondary data analysis has been made for collecting data from existing literatures on *duk* among the Karbis.

THE KARBIS

The Karbis, also known as ‘Mikirs’ are a major tribal community of the state of Assam. They have been reported by Lyall (1908:5) as ‘the most numerous and homogenous of the Tibeto-Burman races inhabiting the Province of Assam.’ They were called ‘Mikirs’ by the Assamese while the former called themselves as ‘Arleng’ meaning ‘man’ (Lyall, 1908:5). According to 2011 Census, the Karbi population in Assam is 5,11,732. They are also found in the states of Meghalaya and Nagaland.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Purpose of *Duk*

To understand the purpose behind getting the tattoo mark on the Karbi women’s faces, one has to go back to the dark era of the Burmese invasions of Assam between 1817 and 1826. According to karbianglong.gov.in (2018): “...The Burmese who invaded Assam perpetrated inhumane oppression on the people. The Karbis took refuge in the deep jungles and high hills leaving their hearth and home in the submountain region. In order to save themselves from the greedy eyes of the Burmese invaders, the young Karbi girls started to use a black line from the forehead to the chin which is known as “*duk*” with a view to making them look ugly looking. While some of the Karbis migrated to lower Assam, some had crossed the Brahmaputra and settled in the north bank...” (sic). Similarly, Hansepi and Laisram (2022) in their article, wrote about the practice of *duk* by the Karbi women as a way of looking ‘ugly’ to save themselves from the Burmese army, whose accounts of atrocities such as murdering and raping women, are mentioned in their ballads and folk songs.

During an interview, Ms. H. Tokbipi who works as a teacher at Amguri village, narrated a legend which she had apparently heard as a child from the elders in her family; this legend could perhaps best explain the series of events leading to the mass application of *duk* among Karbi women before 1960s. Tokbipi narrates:

“There was a Karbi hero, named Bikha Tokbi, who was believed to be so brave, that he procured a precious bead from one of two fierce elephants, while hunting with his elder brother. The king who had captured over their region at that time, from Burma, called *Maan desh* in Assamese, named Rajeshwar Singh, had entitled Bikha the title of *Midu kirong* which translates to ‘landlord’ or ‘fighter’. The Maans were a fierce group of people and a number of battles were fought between them and Karbis. After being defeated for three consecutive times, the Karbis were forced to hand over Bikha and the Karbi women as captives to the Maans. Bikha came up with a plan that all women should be made to apply tattoo on their faces so that they become unattractive, and thus would not be taken away. His instructions were followed and women underwent the painful procedure of getting tattooed on their faces, using the *siju* plant for preparation of ink and cane thorn as the needle.

It is also recalled that few Karbi girls, including one named Tahin, refused to get tattooed, and were eventually captured away by the Maans, by force. Furthermore, Rajeshwar Singh’s plot to kill Bikha Tokbi for instigating women to get tattooed. The king invited Bikha to a grand feast at a tree-house constructed high up, and cleverly intoxicated him. Thereafter, Bikha’s long hair, hands and feet were tied to a bamboo pole and he was brutally tortured by stabbing with bamboo sticks. An old lady arrived at the scene and remarked that Bikha should be killed immediately instead of being tortured first,

since he is brave and strong enough to escape. Heeding her advice, Rajeshwar Singh ordered his men to chop off the brave Karbi man's body into two halves and then buried him off."

There is a possibility of few cultural alterations to the original stream of events in the one narrated by the informant mentioned above. However, irrespective of whether this story is perfectly accurate or not, at least it aligns with the common claim as in most other existing sources, which speak about the practice of *duk* among Karbi. They all claim about the cause of the regulation of applying the *duk* across all females' visages to enable them to escape from the abduction of the Burmese invaders.

4.2 Application of *Duk*: Process and Post-care

In the present study, the respondents on whom *duk* had been applied, self-reported about the use of black dye known as '*lir*' in their dialect, prepared out of the leaves of a plant called '*sibu*'. A thin branch of a plant was used as the pre-marker, dipped in the black dye, and a straight was drawn, through the center of the face, from the forehead to the chin, skipping the lips. Thereafter, a sharply pointed thorn from the cane / rattan plant was selected. Then, following the drawn line, the pointed end of the cane thorn was carefully pricked in a linear fashion, inserting the black dye into the skin.

From the sample population, it was found that the women who got the *duk* are between the ages 48 and 107 (in 2019). The ages when they got it, ranges between 6 to 12 years, and the age of marriage among them, ranges between 15 to 24 years. One among the sample population got the *duk* re-touched for four times at separate intervals of time (see Figure 2). All of their families have been practicing agriculture as the main occupation, while almost all of the women sell home-brewed rice wine as a secondary occupation.



Figure 1: A *duk*-marked woman



Figure 2: A *duk*-marked woman who got four touch-ups

The marked women had to stay indoors until the wound on the pricked skin completely healed. In some cases, after application, the excruciating pain often left some of the marked-women famished and sick. The skin around the area of *duk* would get swollen after application. Adequate rest was required to heal the wound and the body weakness. The women consumed only boiled vegetables and refrained from consuming fried, sour and bitter food items. The family members helped the marked-women carry out the post-application care and all kinds of support. The women who were very young during the time of application shared that, at that time, they felt clueless, terrified and no less than a traumatic experience. Most of them stated that they had been extremely scared of going through the pain of getting the *duk* applied and yet, on the other hand they had the bigger fear of being captured by the enemies. Some women had to re-experience the severe pain to get touch-ups, if the *duk*-mark faded away with the passage of time.

4.3 *Duk* and the meaning it carries

According to Krutak (2015: 1-4), tattoos could depict five meanings of representation and communication which indigenous people make through their drawings on the skin: Adornment, Identity, Status and Position, Therapeutics, Apotropaism and Mimicry. The first three out of the five representations cited by Krutak could be applicable for the Karbi *duk*, but only corresponding to a later period, after the actual practice took place. The *duk* was not introduced as an adornment, which is Krutak's first depiction of tattoo meaning. It was a simple straight line across the centre of the face which lacked any elaborate or illustrative

design, ‘urgently’ created to give a flaw on the skin of the women. Hence, it rather worked as a ‘shield’ or ‘armour’, a weapon for self-defense as it enabled the women to protect themselves from being captured.

Moving to Krutak’s second tattoo representation, the *duk* as the ‘cultural identity’ of the Karbis is evident from the words of Teron and Borthakur (2014) in one of their research articles: “.....practice of *duk* is unique and upholds traditional views of the dignity of women in particular and cultural identity of the Karbis in general....” In their paper, they did not mention of the *duk* as a consequent strategy of the Karbi to avoid being abducted by the Burmese invaders. However, since the event is quite evidently stated in various sources, it can be said that, the terms ‘dignity of women’, ‘symbol of purity and honour’, ‘free from impurity’ and ‘divine’ used by these authors are presumably references to the chastity that the Karbi women managed to retain without being captured by the Burmese invaders, besides saving their own lives in the first place, by getting the *duk*. Again, in the present study, a few respondents, both males and females, had made the common statement (translated from Karbi to English): “*Duk* is a sign of cultural identity for Karbi women”. Besides the fact that the *duk* mirrors the ‘identity’ of the marked-women with honour and dignity, even more remarkable is the fact that this glorious identity is not just for the women but for the Karbi community as a whole. Further, Teron and Borthakur (2014) quotes, “...In the past, on attaining puberty girls received *duk* to substantiate their adulthood. Girls were not married off before receiving the facial tattoo; *duk* thus made them eligible for marriage.” These statements highlight the depiction of the respectable ‘status’ that these marked-women are entitled to, unlike those who were not marked. *Duk* was considered as symbol of purity and honour so much so that only those having the mark could serve food and other establishment to dignitaries of traditional institutions.

The *duk* does not directly have any therapeutical or apotropaic significance in itself. However, it is regarded to have the ability to bestow purificatory qualities on the soul of whoever is marked with it. Quoting Teron and Borthakur (2014) again, “It was believed that *duk* was not a mere tattoo but possessed the divinity to purify the soul: girls who had not received *duk* were considered immature and unholy...On taking a *duk*, the girl was said to be free from impurity and became divine...” These statements depict the immediate transfer of ‘pure’ and ‘divine’ status to a woman once she gets the *duk* on her face. Conspicuously, such a woman receives utmost respect from the community members.

A few marked women expressed their relief that their own daughters did not have to go through similar trauma as themselves. Nevertheless, the respect associated with the *duk*, more so at the present times, is evidently portrayed by the community members irrespective of sex and age. Today, the evidence of such a respectable notion on *duk* can be traced from the practice of young girls wearing a similar black temporary mark on their faces, while adorning their traditional attires during various events. One such prominent event is the Karbi Youth Festival held in February every year, at Diphu, Karbi Anglong district of Assam, since 1974. Wearing the temporary *duk* is a representational honour of the Karbis and a tribute to the marked-women who had bravely faced the challenging phase during the Burmese invasion. It is a mark of communal pride and celebration of the victory achieved in saving their own lives, and at the same time earning a title of dignity for the Karbis, in general. This representation entirely validates the statement of Krutak (2005): “... the tattooed dermis is a potent source of pride, precisely because it reenacts ancestral or mythological traditions”. The surviving women who bear the *duk* on their faces are living cultural assets for the community. The marked skin is indeed the source of their pride and testimony of their glorious war against the Burmese.



Figure 3: A Karbi girl in her traditional attire displaying a temporary *duk* across her face, during Karbi Youth Festival.
(Source: Hingchong Ronghang)

4.4 Gendering the Indigenous Tattoos

As seen in the earlier discussion, the practice of *duk* was a consequence of a critical war-situation, the main motive being the safety of the women. It is solely the women who had to undergo this practice as they were the soft targets of abduction; after being captured, they were potentially to be married off to these invaders back in Burma, or worse still, being subjected to life-long sexual abuse and torture. Maniram Dewan had given an account of the atrocities he had witnessed with his own eyes in *Buranji-vivek-ratna*, as "...It was dangerous for a beautiful woman to meet a Burmese even on the public road.... Fathers of damsels whom the Burmese took as wives rose speedily to affluence and power" (Butler, 1855. pp.247-9). Here, it is evident that the women were picked in terms of their 'beauty' which meant their physical attractiveness. Men, on the other hand, were attacked by enemies with weapons, and the sole intention was to attack, torture and kill them. Generally speaking, throughout history, it can be seen that, in a battle, the enemies fight and try to conquer the men and women in different manners. Fighting wars and battles were basically a 'male' task; of course, there have been many women warriors joining with equal aggression and strength. However, women have been approached differently, during most times. Women have commonly always been judged for her beauty more than men (Skinner, 2019), which quintessentially includes their visages to have appealing features and flawlessness. Therefore, a woman wishing to be appreciated for her looks, can maintain the same, while one who wants to be neglected or refrained from receiving attention for her looks, can conveniently disfigure, scar or disrupt her own features. By doing the same, she may receive either positive reactions such as, being sympathized or suggested measures, or negative reactions, which she actually anticipated, of being neglected, ignored or rejected (Skinner, 2019). In the present case, the *duk* has been created as a tool to disfigure and flaw the woman's skin, thereby causing the flawed skin to be a repelling agent to the perpetrators. On the other hand, devising a strategy like that of the *duk* was futile in the case of the Karbi males.

Similarly, if other indigenous tattoos of the males and females of various groups are compared with respect to their meanings and representations, interestingly, a common pattern of difference can be traced. It can be seen that for the males, the most common representation of the traditional markings is either their status or physical strength in hunting and battlefields as seen among the tribes of Konyak, Nocte, Singpho and Wancho (Konyak and Bos: 2017, Boruah: 2006). On the other hand, among the women, the significance of their tattoos is commonly based on their physical attributes, as seen among Baiga women who tattoo their skin as a sexual stimulant on which the male Baigas say 'When she is well tattooed, then our sinful eyes declare her beautiful...' (Krutak, 2022). Further, women tattoos signify a transition in her life as seen among Konyak women (Konyak and Bos, 2017), most commonly, demarcating the attainment of puberty or motherhood as observed among Toda and Majhwar women (Rao, 1942). Of course, there

are common representations between the tattoos of both genders too, such as in terms of healing ailments or identifying the caste of the individual, which generally speaking, is conspicuous from the fact that these aspects are not distinguished between the genders during early socialization. Hence, the differences are more significant than the similarities in the present sphere of discussion.

It seems quite obvious that this contrast, dichotomy or division in the treatment of the two genders roots back to the upbringing process of an individual since his or her birth, which can be termed as 'gender socialization'. Now, gender socialization is defined as "the process through which children learn about the social expectations, attitudes and behaviours associated with one's gender" (Barker G., 2006). Since the birth of a child, it begins to undergo the process of socialization, wherein the physical and social environment around it, and the conditioning done by the parents, guardians, teachers around them, immensely influence and contribute to it. There could also be self-socialization in the individual causing to affect in the gender-related behaviour, and factors such as 'prenatal biological influences, media portrayals, peer and parental attitudes' could be influential (Ling Halim, 2023: 26). Generally speaking, since early times, when the gender socialization process is coated with a patriarchal layer, it is seen to be quite a common social expectation for women to be objectified, 'good looking', respectful especially towards men, speak in low voice, and preferably be a virgin to be called ideal for marriage; whereas, for men, they are programmed to be brave, strong and protective in nature to be perceived as ideal. This division or dichotomy in gender socialization becomes obvious and affects the roles of the individuals in all possible aspects of daily life. Most feminist writers oppose to such dichotomous thinking (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004: 25) as it leads to various 'social practices and cultural values that result in the subordination of women' (Prokhovnik, 1999:37). In extreme cases, a patriarchal society ingrained with a stark dichotomy in the typical process of gender socialization, often may see injustice done towards women when they do not adhere to the expected gender role or worst still, heinous crimes against them. It is quite clear that throughout human history, the same patriarchal attitude has allowed to push across the dominance over women, in many cases.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights one of the varied meanings that an indigenous tattoo could represent. The *duk* of the Karbi was created as a shield or armour for protecting the Karbi women from the Burmese invaders. The mark of *duk* on the women served as a testimony to their retainment of chastity, what could be termed as the 'inner beauty' of those women, which was duly recognized by earning them respect and even being preferred as an ideal bride. The term 'inner beauty' has been used here specifically to explain the complex nature of the term 'beauty', which could be essentially in addition to the words 'divine' and 'pure' used by other authors, in the context of the marked Karbi women. In this case, the mark of physical 'ugliness', has therefore, become effective for 'the enemy men', who were the target of this shielding strategy of *duk*, in the first place, while the same has become a source of inner beauty for the community members. The underlying significance of this representation is that the *duk*-mark on the skin in itself, is the source of the honour and dignity for the whole community, for the valorous association of the community with its origin.

There are innumerable cases of mayhems in history, where invaders choose to inflict violence, showing a gender dichotomy, as the men were mercilessly attacked, murdered, stabbed or set on fire, whereas, women, along with these violent ways, were inexorably, kidnapped and sexually tortured. The present study is just one such example. This is where the present study tries to assume that such a dichotomy could most possibly be rooted in gender socialization, where patriarchal streaks exist. But the question here is, could a common socialization process without any dichotomy or distinctions between genders result in a different situation? In such a case, would there cease to be dichotomy in most aspects of culture, and specifically in the representative meanings of tattoos? To arrive at that answer either the society needs to change drastically or some social experiment has to be conducted.

In the present study, having discussed about dichotomy in treatment of different genders, simply stating it to be a potential cause of violence against women would be a generalized statement which is not universally justifiable. Disfigurement by marking on a women's face or any body part does not necessarily have the same reaction in all cultures. In the present study, the Karbi women were rescued and eventually respected because of the disfigurement by *duk* on their faces, even making them potential

brides for Karbi men. But in some societies, it may lead to a negative consequence such as annihilation of the women's chance of marriage with her loss of 'beauty' with disfigurement. Again, in most cases, although the common victims of sexual abuse and torture may be women but it cannot be unanimously confined to women alone. Other genders suffer in similar manner too. Perceptions are constantly changing with time. Parenting manner and education process are also constantly changing, and bringing about changes in the age-old and stereotypical mindsets. The inevitable change in the process of gender socialization, today, also conspicuously changes the expectations of behaviour in individuals. Insights cannot solely be drawn from a unilinear perspective, and there is a need to acknowledge cultural differences and nuances to understand any phenomena. As for the *duk*-marked Karbi women, who have stood firmly for themselves at a time of crisis, they will always be honoured and revered, and the *duk* will be forever celebrated in history, as it truly deserves to be.

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