

FROM THE FRINGES: INDIGENOUS TATTOOS IN THE ‘NORTH-EAST’ AS TEXT

Angshita Sen

Ph.D Scholar

Department of English

B.P.H.E. Society's Ahmednagar College, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune,
Maharashtra, India

Abstract : *This paper aims to explore the role of tattoos in the Naga community and study them on as viable sources of knowledge formation and preservation. It aims to explore the role played by these visible art in recording stories, personal victories and creating a tapestry, rife with indigenous knowledge. This paper intends to make use of the conception of 'border of representation', proposed by Jose Pablo Villalobos in his article "Up against the border: A Literary Response" in the book Border Transits.*

Keywords - 'North-East', Tattoos, Oral Literature, Borders.

Tattoos in our modern, 21st century, represent a choice, a point where with one can exert their individuality. It has had a very storied existence- the tattoo that serves as a permanent ornamentation has a different meaning for each culture/community, for some, such as Egypt, Iron Age of Siberia, South-East Asian countries, Polynesian Islands, it was a sign of power and courage (Gilbert 2000). In other places like Greece, Rome, Japan and China, it was a sign of disgrace such as identification of slaves and criminals implemented by countries. In every sphere of the use of tattoo, it has represented a story, a narrative of the human being who carried art and history on their very skin. However, it has always been something more for the indigenous people living in different parts of the world. The skin has, for long, served as a means to hold memory, to show allegiance, to record events. It has held stories more than the paper itself, becoming the part of literature and literary tradition by its very existence. In the presence of tattoos and the art of tattooing, the oral tradition is revived, and the communal stories are sung again and again, embedded in the memory of its people. This paper intends to explore the tattoo as a medium of literary transmission, as a repository of stories and narratives that find expression only in art. In doing so, the paper intends to move beyond the boundaries of what we privilege as literature- the stories that make it within the 'canon', what means of producing that literature is considered viable, upto where is its distribution limited to. As soon as we look on as tattooed body as a text, literature becomes a very intimate affair, etched on the skin and bound to fade away. It stands as a counter to the very heavily public performance that is considered literature now- the writer as a profession, the story as a narrative bound within copyrights and demands of the publishing houses, the academic circles that dissect the text for research, the pan-regional distribution of books after publication. The story, in this case, tends to live on if the book or the source material is preserved, becoming a sempiternal object. Even though the copyrights cease to exist, the story belongs to the writer, like a toy that had never really changed hands. Tattoos change the narrative. Sinah Theres Kloss in their article "Indelible Ink: An Introduction to the Histories, Narratives and Practice of Tattooing" calls tattoos 'impermanent, fluid and volatile' (Kloss). While they are talking about the process of tattoo removal when talking about impermanence, it also takes the body itself into account- the death of the person ends the narrative and returns it to the dust.

The Naga people are an indigenous people, their homeland stretching along the North Eastern states of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and north-western Myanmar (previously called Burma). The Nagas on the Myanmar side lies within the Sagaing state. The state of Nagaland was created out of the Naga Hill areas of Assam and North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1963 becoming the 16th state of the Indian Union. Spread over an area of 16,579 square kilometers, the population of the Nagas in India is about four million, out of which 71.03 per cent of the population resides in rural areas and 28.97 per cent in urban areas as per 2011 census. The Nagas belong to multi-ethnic groups and subgroups, though they have no common language, they have similar cultures and traditions. The 16 major tribes such as the Angami, Ao, Sema, Lotha, Rengma Chakhesang, Khiamniungan, Chang, Konyak, Phom, Sangtam, Liangmei, Yimchungrü, Pochury, Rongmei and Zeme and numerous sub-tribes each with its own distinct languages, custom and dress inhabit the 11 districts of Kohima, Dimapur, Mokokchung, Wokha, Zunheboto, Longleng, Kiphiri, Tuensang, Mon, Peren and Phek with Kohima as its capital. Tribes such as the Khiamniungan, Konyak, Yimchungrü, Tikhir, Makuri and Tangkhul have villages on either side of the international border.

Until the advent of the British in the 1830s, the Nagas had little contact with the outside world apart from cultural contact with the Ahoms, who ruled Assam from the 13th to early 19th century. Lotha (2007) writes that Naga Anthropology developed parallel to the growth of the British Empire in the Naga Hills. Beginning from the mid 1830s, various articles in the form of military and survey reports and classical monographs were written on the Naga tribes such as the Angami,

Sema, Lotha, Ao, Konyak and Rengma Nagas by anthropologists, British administrators, surveyors and christian missionaries. However, writings about Naga art are meagre.. While much anthropological and ethnographic work has been done on the Naga community like the publication of various monographs- T. C. Hodson's *Naga Tribes of Manipur* (1911), J.P. Hutton's *Angami Nagas* (1921), *Sema Nagas* (1921) J.P. Mills's *The Lotha Nagas* (1922), *The Ao Nagas* (1926), and *The Rengma Nagas* in 1937, not much was published on the body art of the Nagas. Robert Gosset Woodthorpe's *The Lushai Expedition* (1873), the descriptions of land surveys, research and observations in the Naga hills collected in the *Narrative Reports* (1876-1878), and the *Notes on the Wild Tribes Inhabiting the So-Called Naga Hills* (1882), has illustrations of Naga village scene, burial ground, woodcarvings, ornaments, body tattoo, weapons, clothing and tools. The photographs taken by Christoph von Furer- Haimendorf in the Naga Hills in 1935 and 1937 constitutes one of the finest photographs on the Nagas regarding their agriculture, ritual and art and used extensively by Julian Jacobs in his book *The Nagas: Hill Peoples of North East India* (1990). (Odyuo).

The earliest documentation on tattooing among the Naga community was done by the British administrators like J.P. Mills and J.H. Hutton. (Dutta Chowdhury) Their observations focused on various patterns used in the art of the Naga tribes and the significance of those patterns to those tribal cultures. Chowdhury asserts that for most of the indigenous tribes, the art of tattooing served the main purpose of establishing their tribal cultural identity.

Tattooing was confined to the northern and central Nagas such as the Chang, Sangtam, Ao, Phom, Yimchungrü, Khiamniungan and the Konyak. As with any other ornaments tattooing serves to make statements about membership of groups and status within groups. Tattoos on arms and chest with human figures and various zigzag patterns are associated not only with headhunting but it also enabled a man to tell a friend from a foe, particularly when a number of villages had combined to attack another village. The V-shaped tattoo with slight variations on the chest of Chang, Khiamniungan, Phom and Yimchungrü men are commonly known as a 'tiger chest' indicating that the wearer could "act like a tiger and kill his enemies" (Saul 2005:36). Both men and women tattoo among the Khiamniungan, Yimchungrü, Phom and the Chang but the Ao, Sangtam and some Tangkhul Nagas only tattoo their women. Among the Chang Nagas, woman's facial tattoos represent her clan. For instance, The Ongh, Lomou, Honghang and Khangshou clan have identical forehead tattoo known as *khüngbub* which consist of a lozenge shape that had its sides extended at the top and bottom. The tattoo on the chin known as *kaobüb* differs from clan to clan. Ongh woman has three wavy horizontal lines on her chin whereas the Lomou has an X-shaped tattoo between two simple vertical lines. But both has the same chevron shape > to the corner of their mouth. Honghang woman chin tattoo is identical to the Lomou and Khangshou chin tattoo but the Khangshou chin tattoo is enclosed within a chevron > shape. Ruokuonuo Rose Yhome in their article "An Ethnographic Account of Body Tattoo Art in Hutsü Village, Nagaland" presents an interesting picture of the tattoos and the symbolic importance they hold in the community. The tribe follows the custom of marking the women in the tribe, before marriage. The community does not tattoo their men. It is interesting to note that the tattooing is only done in the season of winter. There are set designs with very specific names that the young girls are tattooed with. (Yhome). The tattoos in the Naga community are all etched on the members of the community during important events- victory over a fallen enemy, puberty, marriage among other things. With the criminalization of head hunting, the once vibrant tattoo culture began to die out. The skin no longer held stories of the clan, some of which were deeply associated with the creation myths and mythos of the community. Lars Krutak in his article "Sacred Skin: Tattooing, Memory and Identity among the Nagas of India" recounts that the arrival of the American Baptist Mission to the Naga Hills in 1872, sought to 'plant the banner of the Cross among the savage tribes and eradicate the 'degrading and repulsive; customs. (Krutak)

This brings the reader to the crux of this paper. While we are aware of the art of tattoo as being monikers of identity and culture, what do they tell us about the literary tradition of the communities? The question hinges on the fact that much of the 'North-East' does not have written scripts wherein to transmit their stories. Stories are passed by the word of mouth, from generation to generation. In a community where the literary itself transcends boundaries, it becomes important to look on at every viable form of art as telling a story. Tattoos perhaps tell the stories the best. Mary Kosut in her article "Tattoo Narratives: The Intersection of the Body, Self-Identity and Society" understands the tattoo as a form of communication. She theorises the tattooed body as a distinctively communicative body written within a multiplicity of contexts. (Kosut).

One of the most important aspect of tattoo that aids on to the idea of literature in the region is the close connection between community and the tattoos themselves. Like folkloric literature, the motifs in the tattoos are communal, each tattoo meaning something and telling a story that has already been told so many times. In doing so, it exists beyond the relationship of the author and the text, belonging to the community at a whole. This leads to looking on at the body as the site of knowledge. Looking at the body as a mode on which literature could be etched, one can arrive at a multiple meanings to the painted story. Mary Kosut in her work "Tattoos and Body Modifications" looks on at the tattooed body as a 'distinctively communicative body created within a multiplicity of contexts. (Kosut). Elizabeth Grosz in her book *Volatile Bodies* inform that the tattoos engage in body projects in various ways, they influence both individual and communal processes of body construction, or create and maintain social relationships. The body becomes a site of lived relations. (Grosz).

This takes us into studying about literary and knowledge transmission in the region. Literature in the 'North-East' of India is mostly, oral. Oral literature is also extremely intently associated with the mythos of the community. Therefore, literature in this case, becomes a living, breathing object, kept alive by the people. This also breaks the privilege of only written literature being considered as 'true' literature. The privileging of written or printed works on paper or bark has often canonically been called literature. Anything outside it was mere folktales or rituals. Oral literature, too, is often considered inferior to the written literary works. This rather reductive thought process leaves out a very large chunk of the literature. It focuses on only one type of knowledge formation and

distribution. Tattoos sit completely outside this. However, it carries stories, of the people, of the community. Accepting and looking at tattoos as a viable source of literature opens avenues for other forms of literature to open up. In doing so, we make way for more and more forms of expression, moving beyond the dichotomy of the written and the oral.

Lars Krutuk in his chapter entitled “One Mark at a Time: Ethnographic Notes on Tattooing” backs the consideration of tattooing as literature. He understands that tattoos fixed the world at specific moments in time and emphasised the importance of the ephemeral moments in life like human emotions, intentions and prayers. Krutuk goes on to say that there is linguistic evidence that related to tattooing to writing. He goes on to say that this data usually came from Indigenous languages which has been defined as ‘unwritten’ in the scientific literature. He refers to Samoa where tattoos are considered to be an ‘indigenous form of writing’. Similarly in North America, the performance of Omaha women’s tattooing on the Great Plains and other similarly related female marking traditions among other Siouan tribes is textual in its syntax and literally textual in its art of writing. Some Pomo groups deployed words which became associated with the modern verb ‘to write’. In the Chinese lexicon, the contemporary term for tattoo is based on the Han character which means ‘to write’. Similarly, the word ‘tattooing’ for the Paiwan people of southern Taiwan is *Vecik* or ‘writing’. (Krutuk).

This can perhaps be best explained taking into account Jose Pablo Villalobos’s ‘border of representation’. In his article ‘Here is where Jose Pablo Villalobos’s ‘the border of representation’ perhaps comes into picture. In his article “Up against the border: A Literary Response”, Villalobos speaks of the Tijuana border in between USA and Mexico as being a construction. According to him, the depictions of what he calls *la frontera* is markedly different from the actual lived experience of the people living in the region. He argues for a change in the older narratives and instead tries to redirect focus towards a ‘border of representation’ which is aimed at the expression of the concrete reality of the border. The ‘North-East’ has for a very long time, been considered to be at the border, the very frontier. Along with its geographical location of being situated at the periphery of the country. The region is the country’s border in many ways. It’s literature too breaks barriers. The region exhibits a variety of literary modes- oral, written. Considering tattoo as a site of knowledge and stories harks to Villalobos’s border of representation. Instead of the canon defining what the literature from the region needs to look like, there is a fluidity in what is considered literature. In this way, the representation of what Villalobos calls *la frontera* can be established in its truest sense.

It is only recently that we are seeing a rise in the number of Neo-Naga tattoos all over again. Much of the revival of the Naga tattoo has been attributed to an artist of Uipo- Naga descent called Moranngam Khaling. His designs are bold, modern and geometric and are derived from traditional Naga tattoo patterns. He is slowly reclaiming the Naga tattoo which had been almost eradicated by the Church. Pauline Alvarez in the book chapter entitled “Indigenous (Re)inscription: Transmission of Cultural Knowledge through Tattoos as Resistance” calls this ‘(re)inscription’. (Re)inscription moves beyond the centring of pre-colonial Indigenous tattooing practices and deeply considers the continuity and adaptability of tattooing traditions. (Alvarez). It stands as an act of resistance against the colonial need to stifle and end Indigenous knowledge systems. It is artists like Mo Khaling who keep the traditions alive.

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