

## Tattooing as a Popular Form of Body Art in Ascendancy among Urban Youths in Tanzania

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the increasing popularity of tattoos as body art amidst the negative attitudes and social stigmas attached to them in the context of Tanzania. Specifically, it delves into aspects of the tattoo culture before examining the influence and motivations behind the decision to tattoo. Finally, it evaluates the attitudes of Tanzanians to individuals with tattoos. With recourse to the Group Norms Theory (GNT) serving as a framework for elucidating on the underlying factors prompting young individuals to embrace tattooing, this article qualitatively examines data to unravel the complexities of the phenomenon under study. The data came from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. The article demonstrates how tattoos bearers value them for the personal symbolism they engender and as a form of decorative self-expression. Other push factors towards tattooing include peer pressure, social media, celebrities, and commemoration. In the context of Tanzania, this article provides insights that could help debunk the misconceptions surrounding tattoos and demystify this intriguing body art, and, hopefully, pave the way to more nuanced and inclusive debate and understanding of this type of art.

### **Keywords:**

Tattooing practices, tattooing engagement, tattooing stereotypes

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### **Introduction**

A tattoo is a permanent or, sometimes, temporary mark or pattern created on the skin by pricking and ingraining an indelible pigment or by producing scars on a human body (Green 2012). Tattooing has a long history globally. Bianchi (1996), as quoted by Poli, Fleenor and Rearick (2012), for example, argues that the first evidence of tattooing was discovered in 1901, when the “Iceman” mummy was unearthed on the Italian-Austrian border, with tattoos carbon dated to 5300 years ago. The initial figural tattoos, on the other hand, were discovered on two naturally-preserved mummies in Gebelein, Egypt, dating from 3351 to 3017 BC

(Martell & Larsen 2022). Traces of this rite have also been discovered in Greece, Persia, Sudan, China, Japan, and the Polynesian Islands, “where an artistic climax was attained and the name ‘*tatua*,’ meaning artistic, emerged” (Mallon & Galliot 2018). Tattooing had become popular in Western nations by the 1900s. Also, a 2011 study published in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* highlighted a global resurgence of ancient tattooing techniques among Indigenous communities, driven by a desire to reconnect with cultural heritage and identity (McComb, 2011). As these age-old designs and techniques find their way into modern tattoo artistry, they exert a palpable influence on contemporary tattooing procedures.

In Africa, Tanzania in this case, tattooing from a traditional sense is not a new phenomenon. Ethnic groups such as the Mang’ati, the Iraqw and the Luo, the focus this study, have been practising tattooing since time immemorial. As such, this article focuses on two types of tattooing practices: Traditional and modern. Whereas the former has been a common feature among some ethnic group in Tanzania, the latter has been much more emergent.

Traditional tattooing depends on the utilisation of traditional procedures and techniques that has been passed down through generations of tattoo artists. This kind of tattooing is frequently connected with distinct cultures with area and artist-based variations. Traditional tattooing is a deep-rooted practice with cultural and spiritual importance in many cultures. These tattoos might represent the rites of passage, social prestige, or religious convictions. Traditional tattoos known as ‘*tatau*’ in Polynesian culture, for example, helped to denote a person’s status and social position, and often symbolised protection and spiritual power (Gemori 2018). Traditional tattooing methods vary, but they frequently require the use of a hand-held tool known as a “mallet” or “tapping stick” to puncture the skin and apply the ink (Beckwith & Fisher 2012). Although this approach is more time-consuming and unpleasant than the current machine-based tattooing, many individuals prefer it for its cultural importance and aesthetic worth. Traditional tattoos also stand out because of their style, which frequently include bold, black lines and brilliant colours (Johnson 2018). Popular designs include animals, vegetation, and culturally-significant symbols.

Overall, traditional tattooing thrives today as an essential aspect of many cultures spearheaded by experienced craftsmen, who acquired these skills

and traditions from their predecessors as an inter-generational passing down of the craft among tattoo artists. Tattooing and scarification have recently merged into a technique known as *Cicatrization* in Sub-Saharan Africa formerly regarded as two separate fields that were often misconstrued as one (Kordestani 2019). Cicatrization, according to Stein and Stein (2015), is a process of healing and scar development that happens after a skin lesion or damage. The body heals injured tissue by creating new collagen fibres to seal the wound and generate a scar during cicatrization. Cicatrization is a normal aspect of the healing process following a cut, burn, or other sort of skin damage (Kordestani 2019).

On the other hand, modern tattooing practices which have developed significantly through time thanks to the development of new instruments and materials (McCoy & Dufresne 2017). A growing number of techniques and tools help to create tattoos, which are a common kind of body art. One of the most common methods of getting a tattoo nowadays is via a tattoo machine, which injects ink into the skin using a needle. These devices are more effective and less painful than conventional hand-tapping techniques, which explains why many tattoo artists and customers like them. The electric tattoo machine, which inserts ink into the skin via a single needle or a set of needles soldered onto a bar coupled with an oscillating unit, is the most prevalent form of tattooing in modern times (McCoy & Dufresne 2017). The use of novel inks, such as organic and vegan inks, is less likely to cause allergic reactions and has a lesser ecological impact than traditional inks (Laux et al. 2018).

Tattooing is becoming increasingly popular across the world, particularly among teenagers and young adults. Their classification is of three types based on appearance and use: purely ornamental, symbolic, and pictorial (Serup, Kluger, & Baumler 2015). Those who have tattoos on their skin are stereotyped as criminals, illiterate, sexual workers, or lower-class people (Serup, Kluger, & Baumler 2015). Flaxman, (2013), however, argues that tattoos help to show personal progress and uniqueness in addition to documenting life events.

Despite the popularity of tattoos in some circles, many people believe that tattoos make people seem less attractive, and now have been connected

with criminality and deviant conduct that in turn causes stigma (Thompson, 2016). When the stigmatised person is held responsible for his situation in the same mould as drug addiction, obesity, and smokers with lung cancer, the negative stereotypes held by the public about that group that inform negative attitudes and prejudicial behaviour toward that group are strengthened (Pryor & Reeder 2008). To circumvent the negativity associated with tattooing, (Dryjanska 2015) argues that tattooing can be based on their functions. Its ritualistic functions, for example, is vital. He contends that since it depicts the human body with integrated societal feelings, it can be an artistic form. As such, it contributes to the cultural legacy of a society and is highly valued because of its intangible qualities, such as its aesthetic, historical, scientific, and social values, all of which serve as identification objectives (Dryjanska 2015). Krutak (2015) contends that tattooing should be treated as a technique of knowledge transfer in the form of a visual language whereby culture is imprinted and kept in a unique way. This articles, thus, explores why young people engage in tattooing practices and the stereotypes associated with tattooing in the context of Tanzania with a view to establishing an inclusive understanding of this body art form.

### **Theoretical framework**

The social psychology framework known as Group Norms Theory (GNT) helps to explain how group norms affect people's attitudes and conduct. The Group Norms Theory was first put forth in the 1930s and 1940s by Muzafer Sherif and his collaborators, even though Sherif is given the credit for its creation (Sherif & Sherif 1953). He and his associate(s) carried out several experiments, including the Robbers Cave Experiment, which showed the potential influence of group norms on individual behaviour and intergroup relations (Sherif 1954). According to this idea, group norms are the unwritten rules that define what behaviour is proper or inappropriate inside a particular social group. These standards, which might change depending on the community and the situation, require socialisation for transmission.

In the context of research and the increase in juvenile tattooing, the Group Norms Theory can provide insights into the role that group norms play in establishing attitudes and behaviours towards tattoos. Indeed, the Group Norms Theory offers a useful framework for analysing the social and

cultural factors, particularly among youths, that impact the decision to get a tattoo. Analysis of societal norms and values within various social groups allowed the researcher to gain insights into the attitudes and behaviours that are fuelling the increase in tattooing among young people. Yet, specifically in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, no studies have been done on the factors contributing to the rise in number of young people participating in tattooing due to various social advancements and cultural awakenings among youth that heighten the desire to express or undergo body modification through tattooing. Many young people are getting tattoos more frequently to satisfy personal needs, and they receive criticism when they do so. According to this study, it is crucial to research tattooing to inform the public on why young people choose to get physical changes regardless of public sentiments.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section devotes to present and analyse data gathered for this study. It has three sub-sections. The first part provides an overview pertaining to why young people engage in body tattooing; the second part explains the social dogma of tattooing among youth; and the third sub-section discusses the stereotypes associated with body tattooing and conclusion.

### **Engaging in Tattooing**

Tattooing varyingly exists among individuals of all ages in Africa, but more frequently among young adults and teenagers. Traditionally, tattooing has connections with the rites of passage in many African societies, such as the coming-of-age celebrations, initiation rituals, or religious ceremonies. Tattooing has a long history in several African nations, such as Egypt and the Sudan, and it persists, particularly among elderly women (Kapinga 2017). Tattoos frequently symbolise beauty, femininity, or a social position in these cultures.

In other African countries, such as Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, and South Africa, tattooing has become more popular in recent years among younger people. These tattoos are increasingly serving as a form of self-expression and uniqueness among many young people. Some use tattoos to commemorate major events or milestones in their lives or simply as a kind

of body art. It is important to note that attitudes toward tattoos vary widely across Africa and that there may be taboos associated with certain cultures or religions that forbid getting inked. And in other countries, getting a tattoo – especially on a child – may be prohibited.

In Tanzania, getting a tattoo is not a common or customary cultural practice, exclusive of those ethnic groups who treat traditional tattoos as an integral part of their culture. However, in recent years, the usage of tattoos has increased among some younger populations in urban areas, especially among those who want to show their individuality. Some young people engage in it because of global youth cultures. In Tanzania, tattoos are frequently but not necessarily linked to gang participation, criminal behaviour, prostitution, or disobedience of social norms. Consequently, getting a tattoo may constitute as a deviant act based on perception and cause social shame especially among older generations or more traditional groups.

The Group Norms Theory, a key idea in this investigation, also emphasises that people who strongly identify with a particular cultural or social group are more likely to embrace tattoos and other forms of body modification associated with that group, regardless of whether these practices are rooted in tradition or are more contemporary (Holt & Schreiber 2016). In Tanzania, traditional tattooing practices such as “ukuta” or “chale” involving precise skin incisions and healing scars, have cultural significance and aesthetic appeal (Fiksa, 2021). Similarly, traditional Maasai tattoos, characterised by thorn punctures and ink application, are widespread in Tanzania among this ethnic group.

Notably, Tanzania’s contemporary tattooing landscape bears the imprint of both Western and indigenous tattooing methods. Electric tattoo machines, akin to those in the West, have found their place in modern Tanzanian tattoo parlours, often featuring designs inspired by traditional Tanzanian cultural motifs and symbols. Besides, the study there is a growing interest in the utilisation of tattoos for medical purposes in Tanzania, particularly for identification and medical data monitoring (Hansoti, Kalanzi, Lester, & Karanja 2014). This medical application is still emerging and not universally embraced throughout the nation.

Significantly, Tanzania has young subcultures such as the hip-hop scene that elevates tattoos to a form of artistic expression and identification. These subcultures may use tattoos as a method to demonstrate their adherence to their culture. Overall, Tanzanian youth's decision to get a tattoo is affected by a mixture of personal preferences and views of social standards. Youth who place a great impetus on conventional values and social approval may be less inclined towards acquiring tattoos than those who stress self-expression and originality. The latter may resort to tattooing regardless of the unfavourable societal standards. Furthermore, tattooing may differ by gender among Tanzanian teenagers, with women being less inclined to tattoo due to traditional ideals of femininity and modesty. Teenagers' interest in tattooing might also desist from the practice because of a shortage of sanitary tattooing facilities.

Also, social media plays a huge part in influencing youth participation in tattooing in Tanzania. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat and Facebook (now META) offer a place where people can access and share knowledge about various facets of tattooing including designs, methods, and health-related issues. In fact, tattooing has grown in popularity among young people worldwide, especially in urban areas with Tanzania no exception. Social media may affect young people's openness to getting tattoos by creating a sense of community and shared identity among tattoo enthusiasts. Young people who are into tattoos may meet others who share their interests, no matter where they live. This is particularly important in Tanzania, where tattoo culture is still emerging and may not necessarily be acceptable among all ethnic groups. The social media landscape might serve as an inspiration source for young people who are thinking about obtaining tattoos. They can browse through photographs of numerous designs to help them decide on the type, colour, and design of tattoo they desire. Before choosing one to employ, they can also hunt up nearby tattoo artists on social media and browse their portfolios.

Besides social media, celebrities also play a significant role in influencing youth to engage in tattooing in Tanzania. When celebrities, particularly musicians, actors, and athletes get tattoos, they inspire their fans and followers to get tattoos as well. Influential public figures with tattoos, such as Harmonize, Jux, and Diamond Platnumz – as they are known by their

stage names or nom de guerre—influence young people to get tattooed since they elevate the practice to iconic status in the context of Tanzania. This may frontier a change in cultural perceptions of tattooing and, hence, boosts the number of young individuals getting tattoos. Youth, who experience exclusion because of tattoos, may feel a sense of belonging and community with their favourite celebrity. Regardless of how influential the celebrities are, Tanzanian youth require being critical while engaging in tattooing including practicing tattoos that reflect their own beliefs, values, and culture to avoid blind-following.

### **Significance of Tattooing Practices**

Particularly in urban areas, Tanzanian teenagers are increasingly getting tattoos frequently. For many young people, getting a tattoo represents a way of expressing themselves, staking out their individuality, and showing that they belong to a particular subculture or social group. (Irwin 2011). Tattoos frequently have symbolic implications in Tanzania, much like in many other cultures, and the motifs that individuals consider can be quite important to them personally. Many people choose tattoos to mark important life events, such as the birth of a child, while others choose artwork that honours their cultural background or religious beliefs. Most Tanzania's youth see tattoos as both stylish and a way to keep up with modern trends elsewhere. In this setting, tattoos are frequently selected more for their visual attractiveness rather than for their deeper symbolic significance. Even though tattoos are becoming increasingly common among Tanzanian youths, some people still have unfavourable opinions about them, especially older groups who might connect individuals with criminality or immorality. Additionally, there are worries regarding the cleanliness and safety of tattooing procedures, especially in places where the use of modern tattooing methods has yet to become common.

By providing insight into how social norms and values affect the symbolism and meaning of tattoos in diverse cultural settings, the Group Norms Theory can clarify the significance of tattooing practices. According to the Group Norms Theory, three key factors group members' values and beliefs, other group members' social influence, and the structural limitations and opportunities of the larger social context are responsible for the creation and reinforcement of social norms and values (Levine & Moreland 1998). In the case of tattooing, the factors might include:



*Values and beliefs:* Diverse groups' cultural and religious beliefs frequently influence tattooing practices. For instance, tattoos may serve as a sign of identification or commitment in certain cultures, whereas in other cultures they may be a part of rites of passage or a way to express oneself.

*Social influence:* Members of a group's social influence can have an impact on tattooing habits. For instance, if one social group treats getting tattoos as a way of expressing oneself or one's individuality, this may persuade other members of the group to follow the same path. On the other hand, tattooing habits may decline if it is stigmatised or discouraged within a social group.

*Structural opportunities and limitations:* The broader social milieu, which includes legal and cultural norms, can also have an impact on the meaning and symbolism of tattoos. For instance, if getting a tattoo is forbidden or strictly regulated in a certain culture or group, the meaning and symbolism associated to it may increase. Ultimately, the importance or symbolism of tattoos may also decrease if they become accepted and commonplace.

In this regard, the Group Norms Theory assists in comprehending how social norms and values influence the significance and meaning of tattooing traditions in various cultural settings (Preston & Brown 2005). We learn more about the cultural and social importance of body art by investigating the values and beliefs, social impact, and structural limitations that contribute to the significance of tattooing practices.

### **Tattooing as a Social Dogma**

Apparently, tattoos are becoming more mainstream, and their acceptance is growing within Tanzanian communities, particularly in metropolitan centres such as Dar es Salaam and is influenced by cultural standards and ideals. The study also revealed that tattooing is increasingly becoming a form of personal expression and social expression among youth and middle adults. It is even becoming more popular since influential people are increasingly embracing it their form of self-expression and identity (Levy, 2008). In fact, popular artists such as Diamond Platinumz, Ali Kiba and others are normalising this new trend of tattooing and stigma to those who have already undergone it.

(Schildkrout 2004) contends that, because tattooing did not start yesterday, its activities should not be considered weird and those who do it should not be condemned. Some societies have used tattooing to designate persons as belonging to a particular ethnic group or religious sect. For instance, the Ainu ethnic communities of Japan have historically tattooed women's faces to designate them as important community members (Schildkrout 2004). Women without tattoos were stigmatised as being unattractive and lacking in identity because of the tattoos. Tattoos used to symbolise social anomalies representing people associated with estranged walks of life who were, sometimes, considered dangerous (Serup, Kluger, & Baumler 2015).

Narrowing to Africa, Tanzania in this example, tattoos have served a range of functions including gender identification in groups like as the Datooga and the Iraqw (Mgema 2021); warrior rank in some communities such as the Maasai (Pergola 2013); body decoration in communities such as the Datooga (Mgema 2021); and a test of perseverance to boys due to the painful nature of the process in communities such as the Arusha and the Maasai (Spencer 2004). Young people and middle adults also engage in tattooing for aesthetic and as a form of expression as time passes (Turner 2011).

#### **Tattooing-Related Stereotypes**

Getting a tattoo is less widespread in Tanzania and those who engage in it usually contend with stereotypes. Tattoos are frequently viewed as a sign of rebellion and deviance in some Tanzanian communities. Harsh criticism and social exclusion for women practising it makes this practice among women impossible. Tattoos are also associated with gang culture and criminality in several Tanzanian districts, and this is primarily due to the influence of Western media and popular culture, which frequently depicts people with tattoos as tough, dangerous, and violent.

However, tattooing is viewed as a means of empowerment and self-expression in Tanzania. Arguably, Tanzanian artists are capitalising on tattooing as a form expression and raising awareness about various issues facing them and their society. Since these artists also actively engage in positive events aimed to raise funds for social causes including promoting gender equality and HIV/AIDS prevention, they have given tattooing a positive spin particularly among who would otherwise dismiss it as an unwanted excess. Country-wise, Tanzania's perspective on tattoos is complicated and diverse, hence reflecting the wider social and cultural

attitudes regarding body art and individual expression. Tattoos may be associated with negative stereotypes in some groups, but an increasing number of people are getting them as a method to express their individuality and reject societal norms.

### **Conclusion**

This article has shed light on tattoo culture, the influence, and motivations behind the decision to engage in tattooing and the attitudes of people towards individuals with tattoos. It has deployed the Group Norms Theory (GNT) as a theoretical framework to examine the intricate interplay between traditional and modern tattooing practices. The article has revealed a fascinating connection that underscores the rich tapestry of tattoo culture worldwide (Caplan & Maurer 2018). Evidently, many contemporary tattoo designs and techniques have their origins in the time-honoured traditions of tattooing from various corners of the globe. This linkage between the old and the new suggests a profound and enduring relationship between traditional and modern tattooing.

Moreover, a plethora of motivations driving young people in Tanzania to adorn their bodies with tattoos has emerged, hence underlining the multifaceted nature of this cultural phenomenon. Among the array of reasons, self-expression emerges as a prominent catalyst, enabling individuals to articulate their innermost thoughts, sentiments, and unique identities through intricate ink designs. Tattoos, in this context, become a vibrant canvas upon which personal narratives and expressions find their voice. In addition to self-expression, the quest for identity plays a pivotal role in driving the increasing prevalence of tattoos among Tanzania's youth. What this article has also demonstrated is that tattoos are not merely inked images but symbolic representations of one's affiliations, beliefs, and cultural heritage. They serve as tangible markers of belonging, enabling young individuals to proudly assert their connection to specific subcultures or social groups. In this intricate dance of identity construction, tattoos become an emblematic thread that weaves together the diverse tapestry of personal and communal identities. Furthermore, the study discerns a strong undercurrent of empowerment flowing through the motivations behind tattoo acquisition. Tattoos also offer a sense of agency and control over one's body and narrative, particularly in a society where traditional

norms and expectations can often feel constraining. They empower individuals to defy conventional norms and claim ownership of their bodies as canvases of self-expression. Overall, this article expands readers' understanding of the role tattoos play in expressing people's identities as individuals and as a collective.

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