Body Aesthetics: Contextualizing the Tattooing Culture of the Konyak Naga

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Abstract: This paper attempts to look at tattoos as a form of body modification that confers an identity on the wearer. It also attempts to understand the diminishing art of tattooing from the perspective of the Konyak of Nagaland, India. Based on their tattoos, the Konyak may be categorized into two groups: Thendu representing those with tattooed face, and Thentho, those with white face. Tattoos were an integral part of the Konyak existence through which they illustrated their group, village, clan and even individual identities. Tattoos demonstrated the distinction between a warrior and a common man, between a married and an unmarried woman. For men, tattooing was inextricably linked with headhunting. The most significant accomplishment for men was to be honored with the tag of a ‘warrior’ that symbolizes their courage, strength, and triumph in warfare. The tattoo patterns reflect their accomplishments. For women, the tattoos depict their biological transformation from one stage of life to another. However, the tattoos visible today are scarce and remain confined to the older generation only. Obviously, the original purpose for which tattoos used to be done have lost its significance. But the question is will the loss of tattoos be a cultural loss?

Key words: Tattoo, Adornment, Identity marker, Visual representation, Konyak, Headhunting