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## CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF TATTOOS: A THEORETICAL STUDY IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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**Abstract.** Tattooing is one of the ancient traditions passed down through generations, present in all human societies across time. It has always been an integral part of daily life, serving various purposes such as treatment, adornment, and decoration. Tattoos come in many forms, including geometric shapes, flowers, trees, zodiac signs, planets, and crescents. These decorative patterns carry specific meanings and reflect the culture and beliefs of the society that creates them. It is challenging to arrive at a precise definition of each symbol or its symbolism that would be universally accepted by anthropologists. Many scholars, however, have explored the relationship between symbols and the ideas they represent. The terms "symbol" and "symbolism" are used in different ways, as many things serve as symbols- or more accurately, symbolic elements. These are established representations of abstract ideas or meanings. People use spoken or written language to express their thoughts and convey meaning to others. Their language is often rich with symbols, which can be as simple as a word, a name, an image, or a colorful form in daily life. However, these symbols always carry additional meanings beyond their explicit, accepted definitions.

**Keywords:** Tattooing, Cultural connotations, Anthropology, Symbolism, Cultural beliefs

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## КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ КОННОТАЦИИ ТАТУИРОВОК: ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ В ОБЛАСТИ КУЛЬТУРНОЙ АНТРОПОЛОГИИ

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**Абстракт.** Татуировка- одна из древнейших традиций, передаваемых из поколения в поколение, существующая во всех человеческих обществах на протяжении времени. Она всегда была неотъемлемой частью повседневной жизни, выполняя различные функции- от лечения до украшения и самовыражения. Татуировки бывают самых разных форм: геометрические фигуры, цветы, деревья, знаки зодиака, планеты, полумесяцы. Эти декоративные узоры несут определённые значения и отражают культуру и верования общества, которое их создаёт. Дать точное и универсально признанное определение каждому символу или его символизму довольно сложно. Тем не менее, многие учёные исследовали связь между символами и идеями, которые они олицетворяют. Понятия "символ" и "символизм" трактуются по-разному, поскольку множество вещей могут выступать в роли символов- или, точнее, символических элементов. Это устоявшиеся представления абстрактных идей или смыслов. Люди используют устную и письменную речь для выражения своих мыслей и передачи значений другим. Их язык зачастую богат символами, которые могут быть простыми- словом, именем, изображением или цветной формой в повседневной жизни. Однако эти символы всегда несут дополнительные значения, выходящие за рамки их прямого и общеупотребительного смысла.

**Ключевые слова:** татуировка, культурные коннотации, антропология, символизм, культурные верования

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## DÖYMƏLƏRİN MƏDƏNİ MƏNALARI: MƏDƏNİ ANTROPOLOGİYADA NƏZƏRİ TƏDQIQAT

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**Abstrakt.** Döymə- nəsilən-nəslə ötürülən qədim ənənələrdən biridir və zamanla bütün insan cəmiyyətlərində mövcuddur. O, daim gündəlik həyatın ayrılmaz hissəsi olmuş, müalicə, bəzək və zinət məqsədilə istifadə olunmuşdur. Döymələr müxtəlif formalarda - həndəsi fiqurlar, çiçəklər, ağaclar, bürç işarələri, planetlər və aypara şəkillərində ola bilər. Bu bəzək motivləri xüsusi mənalara daşıyır və onları yaradan cəmiyyətin mədəniyyətini və inanclarını əks etdirir. Hər bir simvolun və ya onun simvolikasının antropoloqlar tərəfindən ümumi qəbul edilə biləcək dəqiq bir tərifini vermək çətinidir. Bununla belə, bir çox tədqiqatçı simvollarla onların ifadə etdiyi ideyalar arasındakı əlaqəni araşdırmışdır. "Simvol" və "simvolizm" anlayışları müxtəlif cür işlədilir, çünki bir çox şey simvol ola bilər- daha dəqiq desək, simvolik element kimi çıxış edə bilər. Bunlar abstrakt ideyaların və mənalарın formalaşmış təmsilçiləridir. İnsanlar düşüncələrini ifadə etmək və başqalarına mənalara çatdırmaq üçün danışmaq və yazı dilindən istifadə edirlər. Onların dili çox zaman simvollarla zəngindir və bu simvollar gündəlik həyatda bir söz, ad, şəkil və ya rəngli forma kimi sadə ola bilər. Lakin bu simvollar həmişə zahiri, qəbul olunmuş mənalарının fəvqündə əlavə mənalara daşıyır.

**Açar sözlər:** Döymə, Mədəni mənalara, Antropologiya, Simvolizm, Mədəni inanclar

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## **1.Introduction**

Anthropologists have long focused on the symbolic aspects of human relationships. Symbolism is a defining characteristic of humanity. Humans alone are capable of using and interacting with symbols, and tattoos are one example of this practice. Tattoos serve as both art and symbols representing numerous concepts, and they are used for various purposes across different cultures. They are an anthropological, psychological, and social phenomenon that encompasses structural, semantic, and functional dimensions.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To identify the various forms of tattoos.
2. To explore the social and cultural significance of tattoos.
3. To examine key issues surrounding the tattoo phenomenon and the related cultural expressions.

### **Significance of the Study**

Tattooing is a prominent social and cultural phenomenon, often reflecting the prevailing social conditions of the time. The history of art shows that tattooing, as a social form, does not emerge solely from individual awareness but is shaped by the collective expressions of society.

The importance of this study lies in its examination of material culture, specifically focusing on certain tattoos and their anthropological meanings. The study aims to uncover the development of aesthetic characteristics and elements within folk heritage. By analyzing the components of folklore, it seeks to highlight the cultural and social significance of these traditions.

### **Study Questions**

1. What are the primary social and cultural meanings attributed to tattoos?
2. What symbolic expressions are most commonly associated with the tattoo phenomenon?

### **Methodology of the Study**

This research is a theoretical anthropological study based on a descriptive analytical approach. This approach is valuable in describing the phenomenon being studied, helping to better understand it through theoretical analysis and drawing an objective conclusion.

### **Study Concepts**

**Significance:** This refers to the relationship between a signifier (something that represents) and a signified (the meaning or concept it represents). If the signifier is a word, the meaning is verbal, and if it is an image or symbol, the meaning is non-verbal. These signifiers can be further divided into mental, natural, and positivist categories.

Significance connects the object with its cultural concept. Anthropologists and others who study human behavior often interpret actions and words by seeking their hidden meanings. By analyzing these signals- whether verbal or

non-verbal- they can uncover underlying symbolism and interpret its significance. This significance holds social value because it reflects cultural production that arises from collective communication processes.

This study, therefore, aims to understand how tattooing functions as both a social and cultural practice and how its symbolism can be interpreted within specific cultural contexts.

### **Tattoos: A Cultural and Symbolic Art Form**

Tattoos are designs made on the skin by inserting needles and injecting ink, with clear and specific patterns. The process is precise and governed by particular rules, conditions, and rituals. Tattoos may include various forms of body art such as engraving with ink, charcoal, or henna. Today, modern industrial and electrical tools are used in the practice of tattooing, making the process more refined and accessible.

Anthropologists view tattoos as part of social etiquette, as they are closely tied to the tattooed individual's body and life. Tattoos remain with the person until death and are seen as a means to connect the spiritual and material aspects of the body itself.

### **Tattoo Objectives**

1. To capture the attention of others and to express a desire for change.
2. To carry meanings related to popular beliefs, such as myths, spells, and religious rituals.
3. To demonstrate religious, political, national, or tribal affiliations.
4. To commemorate significant memories, such as love, revenge, or gratitude for a specific person.
5. To enhance aesthetic appeal or symbolize strength and resilience.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

Symbols within societies are organized in such a way that each symbol aligns with specific aspects of life. Geertz (1987) suggests that symbols are more than just their immediate meanings- they embody unconscious aspects that may be difficult to explain. A symbol points to something beyond its direct form and can represent other things or convey an appropriate portrayal. For example, a symbol may intensively represent an external form or act as a signal or sign of something else [Increase, 1987, p.23].

In semiotic linguistic semantics, meanings are often distinguished. Casero (2001) explains that symbols are signs with connotations found in language, myth, and knowledge, representing abstract forms. Symbolic representation is a function of human consciousness. Society determines the meaning of symbols, giving material things specific interpretations that transform them into symbols. Symbols encompass metaphors, similes, and complex semantic signs between things [Abouzaid, 2001, p.8].

From an anthropological standpoint, understanding symbols requires an analysis of the social construction elements and cultural factors that interact with the symbols of society. Symbols acquire meaning within their social context. In certain societies, people use shapes to decorate their bodies during ceremonial gatherings, including tattoos, leather bands, and ornaments. The interpretation of these symbols is grounded in anthropological research and a deep understanding of the culture's components. This research highlights the limits of generalizations and the importance of specific cultural contexts when interpreting symbols [Abouzaid, 2001, p.143].

Symbolic interpretations often suggest that all human actions carry meanings beyond their overt and direct purposes. Anthropologists distinguish between special symbols, public symbols, and complex symbols with multiple meanings. Carl Gustav (2010) notes that symbols like the bird, fish, and snake were historically used to represent male attributes. However, symbol classification faces challenges due to the complexity of images and their varied connotations. Symbolic interpretation helps bridge the gap between a behavior's visible expression and the deeper meanings behind it [Kuraytem, 2010, p.99].

The study of symbolism is an essential aspect of anthropology. It is part of ethnological research that compares social processes across different cultures. Arts, since their inception, have symbolized various phenomena, including human fears, obsessions, and societal concerns.

## **2.Cultural Connotations of Habitual Tattoos**

### **2.1.Political Connotations of Tattoos**

The motivations behind tattooing are deeply influenced by religious and political authorities over time. Tattoos, particularly among the youth, often serve as a symbolic form of resistance against authority, expressing allegiance to a political party or group. Young people, who represent the largest group to use tattoos in this manner, frequently adopt tattoos to reject political regimes and express their political stance. These tattoos are placed in visible locations, such as the palms or forearms, or in more private areas like the chest. Tattoos featuring political figures or symbols are not a modern phenomenon but date back to the early emergence of tattoos and the development of political consciousness.

The political role of tattoos is most noticeable in prisons, where inmates tattoo their bodies as a form of personal expression or to commemorate their suffering. Inmates often request tattoos that reflect their personal stories or emotions, such as love, revenge, or gratitude. These tattoos are frequently of animals like snakes or scorpions, and some prisoners also tattoo names that hold personal significance. The practice of tattooing in prisons has become an

established tradition, with some individuals specializing in tattooing fellow inmates [Al-Jabawi, 2007, p.126].

## **2.2.Aesthetic Connotations**

Human beings have always been driven by a desire for beauty and adornment, an instinct rooted in our nature. The pursuit of beauty stems from a deep-seated desire to maintain youth, freshness, and survival, especially as humans face the inevitability of death. Beauty is often defined as any quality that makes something visually pleasing to the observer. Anything that satisfies a person's aesthetic desires is considered beautiful. Both men and women have long been drawn to adornment, which is intricately tied to the prevailing aesthetic values of society. In different cultures, people have practiced various forms of body adornment, such as tattoos or body painting [Dewarrant, 1988, p.475].

For women in particular, the desire for beauty and adornment has been more pronounced, influenced by physiological changes and the need to maintain personal appearance. Tattoos became widely popular long before cosmetics were developed and provided a permanent form of beauty and self-expression when other methods were either unavailable or difficult to maintain. The main purpose of cosmetics is to enhance a person's physical appearance to attract the opposite sex, and tattoos often fulfill a similar function. While cosmetic methods are temporary, tattoos serve as a more lasting solution for beautifying the body. In some cultures, tattoos have also been used in place of jewelry, such as ring tattoos on fingers, wrist bands, vine patterns on the foot, and chain designs around the neck [Lips, 2006, p.41].

Tattoo designs often include geometric or decorative shapes, as well as images of flowers, trees, birds, butterflies, hearts, and stars. These designs are usually small and strategically placed on visible areas of the body, such as the forehead, cheek, chin, mouth, between the eyebrows, chest, and shoulders.

## **2.3.Belief-Based Connotations**

Humans have long been driven by a desire to understand and explain the unknown. People seek answers to the questions that plague their minds, either through scientific inquiry or by resorting to superstitions, magic, and irrational beliefs. This is especially true among women, who often turn to magical practices to address health issues or to protect themselves and their families from misfortune. Some believe that tattoos, particularly those featuring symbols or prayers, can provide protection or healing.

In ancient societies, tattoos were often linked to magical beliefs and rituals. Tattoos were thought to strengthen the part of the body they adorned, such as the joints. This is likely why tattoos are sometimes associated with strength, resilience, and even brutality. In some cultures, tattoos were performed during

ceremonies or transitional rituals to mark a change in a person's status or role within the community [Belhadj, 1998, p.48].

The social significance of tattoos is also apparent in their use to distinguish between tribal members, particularly women. Tattoos served practical purposes, such as identifying prisoners during times of war. Some women even chose to tattoo Quranic verses on their arms, believing these tattoos provided spiritual protection and peace. In certain cultures, tattoos on the cheeks or other parts of the face were believed to attract the attention of a partner. Some societies tattoo their children for protection against the "evil eye" or envy, often placing the tattoos on the forehead or cheeks [Abdul Samad, 1995, p.59; Sadiq, 1990, p.78].

#### **2.4. Medical and Therapeutic Indications**

The use of tattoos was not limited to decoration; they also served as a therapeutic method for treating bone, joint, and nerve pain. Additionally, tattoos were used as a remedy for vague, unspecified pains. For centuries, medicine has been intertwined with philosophy, profession, and eventually art. It is likely that tattoos, in their early stages, were a therapeutic tool used to alleviate pain in troubled areas of the body. This simple method was practiced in the Near East for thousands of years before being adopted by Greek doctors, and specialists continued to pass down this knowledge.

Tattoos have been used to treat various conditions, particularly chronic diseases such as rheumatism that affect the bones. They have also been employed as a medical treatment for joint tumors, women's perspiration, dislocations, back pain, headaches, visual impairments, and even as a remedy for what was believed to be possession by evil spirits. The magical and healing associations of tattoos often overlap. This is especially evident among primitive cultures, or those still practicing lifestyles similar to these ancient peoples, who view tattoos as a method of healing. Tattoos, in this sense, share similarities with other folk remedies such as cupping or cauterization, which aim to treat both physical ailments and spiritual concerns. The process of tattooing, which was considered a therapeutic procedure, was typically performed during specific times, particularly during the spring inversion. This period, similar to the practice of cupping, was believed to be particularly effective for medical tattooing.

#### **2.5. Sexual Connotations**

Prenslaumalinowski considered sex to be a primary source of religion, highlighting its significance and deep impact on human life in general. He argued that sex plays a major role in religious practices, as it has been incorporated into various magical rituals that might not strictly belong to the realm of religion [Dewarrant, 1988, p.103].



The sexual significance of tattoos is often linked to the physical locations where they are placed on the body. Archaeological discoveries have revealed drawings from ancient times, such as one of a naked woman preserved in the Amitag Museum. This drawing depicts tattoos in the shape of an inverted crescent around her navel. In a metal artifact from the same period, tattoos were found on the inner thighs of naked musicians, forming small circular patterns centered around one point [Al-Qar'an, 1998, p.49].

Among the Ulitian tribes, there is a belief that tattoos enhance sexual attraction. Other customs associated with sexual tattoos are typically practiced during adulthood, beyond adolescence. In central Australia, a ritual called "furuncle" or "skin lynx" is performed as a primary religious ceremony for adolescents. This process involves wounding the adolescent's chest with several cuts, which are considered a key part of their transition into early masculinity [Joshi, 1979, p.54].

Freud, in his work *Totem and Taboo*, pointed out the close connection between tattoos and sex. For example, certain images depict a girl surrounded by two fish and a snake. In such cases, the image of a man beating his chest represents an inherent desire to marry a specific woman. Tattoos, in some cultures, symbolize the transition from adolescence to adulthood, representing masculinity, femininity, social maturity, and responsibility. They are seen as a way to assert one's sexual identity and fertility. Some tattoos symbolize motherhood or marital status. For instance, married women may tattoo their breasts and chests as a gesture for their husbands, and tattoos may also be placed near the genitals [Joshi, 1979, p.45].

Folk traditions and popular narratives suggest that tattoos were often done at a specific point in a girl's life- during adulthood. This association signifies an important and distinct event in a girl's sexual development. From the perspective of popular belief, tattooing marks a girl's sexual maturity and her transition to a new stage of life. In this context, tattoos are considered symbols of sexual maturity and represent a key element of feminine beauty. As such, tattoos are believed to enhance sexual desire. Women, aware of this function, often displayed their tattoos at social gatherings, celebrations, and while dancing.

The tattoo represents a form of temptation, a means of sexual arousal, and a way to attract the attention of another individual, awakening their desires. It also has a psychological aspect, particularly for women. The process of getting a tattoo may involve pain, which can be endured in pursuit of a desired outcome- often related to marriage. This concept may extend beyond mere desire, approaching what could be seen as a form of sadism. The woman may seek to extinguish an inner drive, which leads her to endure the physical pain associated with tattooing. The resulting spiritual and psychological discomfort

may even lead to a sense of aversion to her own instinctual attraction, especially when the tattoo is placed in more private or concealed areas of the body. However, over time, the tattoo may evolve into a source of temptation, sexual arousal, and attraction to others, particularly as it aligns with a stage of sexual tension [Al-Jatawi, 2000, p.72].

### **2.6. Psychological Connotations:**

Tattoos can have emotional or subconscious psychological meanings. They may act as a form of compensation for a perceived lack, a way to satisfy repressed desires, or an expression of unconscious, aggressive impulses. Tattoos may also symbolize the desire for freedom from the pressures and constraints of reality. In some cases, tattoos reflect the culture of excess, societal disintegration, and the luxury associated with advanced civilizations.

Individuals may get tattoos during periods of psychological instability or emotional distress. This could include significant life changes, personality shifts, or social upheaval- such as emotional separation from family, deep sadness, or even mental disorders- that push an individual toward losing their sense of balance and identity. In such cases, body art becomes an expression of inner turmoil, anxiety, and disorder that the person may be trying to overcome. The tattoo acts as a veil, hiding the individual's distress beneath its surface [Al-Jatawi, 2000, p.72].

Tattoos bring a sense of balance between emotions and the subconscious, providing psychological security and inner comfort. The invention and use of tattoos arose in tandem with the development of human consciousness. They are viewed as a means of achieving balance, bridging the conscious mind with the unconscious. Tattoos can represent a rite of passage into adulthood, symbolizing maturity and self-awareness. For example, a girl's body might be tattooed with images or symbols reflecting her mother's hopes and dreams, which is not merely an act of personal expression but also a protective measure aimed at securing her future [Abbasi, 2011, p.86]. Tattoos thus carry both psychological and emotional significance, reflecting a desire for both personal growth and spiritual fulfillment.

### **3. Conclusions**

The social significance and the symbols embedded in tattoos are clearly visible through different designs. These symbols are rooted in the culture of the community and play a significant role in conveying meaning. There is a reciprocal relationship between the tattoos' symbolism and the cultural context in which they are found. Tattoos are closely linked to the culture, perceptions, and ideas of the society in which they exist. Many symbols and inscriptions on tattoos reflect the social and cultural realities of the community, showing the interconnection between its various segments and representing the lived experience of its members.

The process of tattooing is rich with vocabulary tied to local beliefs and cultural practices. Each tattoo design encapsulates the customs, traditions, and values of the society in which it is practiced. As both an art form and a symbol, tattooing carries significant meaning across different societies. It is not exclusive to one culture or civilization but is, instead, intrinsically linked to the cultural context in which it evolves. Tattoos are thus a powerful reflection of societal values, beliefs, and identities.

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