Body Arts
Tattooing

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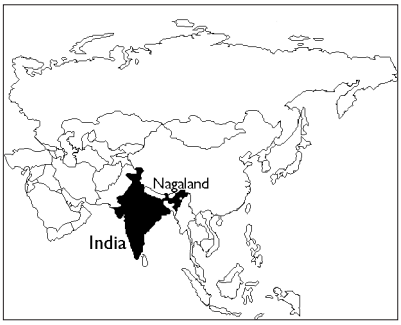
Anthropology and World Archaeology

Nagaland, India

These tattooing tools are from Nagaland, a region in north-east India. Naga people used tattoos to indicate status just as other people might use ornaments or textiles.

Tattooing tools, Nagaland, 1936.4.14 - .17



For example, Konyak Naga girls wore a tattoo on the back of the knee if they were married; in Western cultures a finger-ring usually makes this statement.

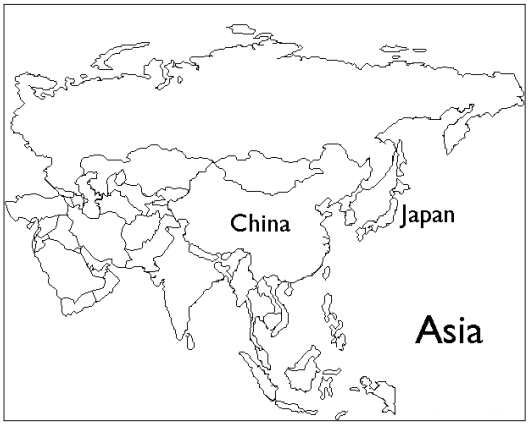
This photograph is a portrait of Hamwang, a Deputy Chief with the facial tattoos of a successful headhunter and warrior. War and headhunting formed an essential part of Naga ritual life in the past. A man was able to gain the right to wear certain ornaments, clothing, and tattoos only after he had killed an enemy in war and brought the head back to the village. The full facial tattoo could be worn only by an established warrior. Headhunting was practised until the 1960s in remote areas of Nagaland.

Photograph of Hamwang, an elder of the Ang clan of Konyak Naga, Mon village,Nagaland. August 1991. By Vibha Joshi.

Japan

The image overleaf is from a booklet of Japanese tattoo designs. Before the mid-nineteenth century, Japanese people from all walks of life had their bodies tattooed. Then the Emperor banned tattooing. He was worried that Western visitors would see tattoos as barbaric. The ban did not apply to foreigners and many sailors were tattooed there. The designs in this booklet were drawn during the ban on tattooing. They were probably made to appeal to Western rather than Japanese tastes, so there are many naval motifs. Tattooing became legal again in Japan in 1948.

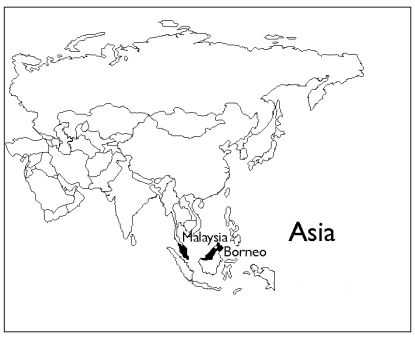
Tattoo designs from a tattooist's booklet, Japan, 1906.18.8



The following is an extract from The Japanese Tattoo by Donald Richie and Ian Buruma.

The process begins with a visit by the client to the tattoo master. Usually he comes with an introduction either from another client or from someone who already knows the master. Customers do not drop in off the street, and there is no equivalent of the Western tattoo parlour. The master may or may not agree to tattoo the applicant. Refusals are common. If it appears that the client wants the tattoo for the wrong reason – to show off, for example – or is otherwise frivolous in his attitude, he will be refused. … The client must be on time for each visit, there is much bowing, the most respectful language is used, and in the case of disagreement the tattoo master is always right.

Borneo, Malaysia



Tattooing has also been a common custom on the island of Borneo. The wooden pattern blocks, pictured below, were smeared with black ink and then pressed upon the skin to provide the tattooist with a template to follow. Such pattern blocks were always carved by men. However, it was the women who were considered experts on the significance and quality of the tattoo designs. Tattooing was only ever performed by them.

The designs pictured here are based on the image of a dog. The dog was highly regarded by the Kayan people and featured prominently in Kayan art. These patterns were tattooed on the forearm and thigh.

Blocks, Borneo, 1923.86.422 and 1923.86.402

Blocks, Borneo,1923.86.348

The small pattern to the left was tattooed on the wrist. The tattoo block represents an antique bead that was once worn by Kayan people as a protective charm. When a Kayan person was ill it was thought that his soul left his body and only returned when he was well again. After illness, to prevent their soul escaping for a second time, people tied a special bead called a *lukut* to one of their wrists. However, the string could break and the bead be lost so people began to tattoo this representation of the bead on their wrists instead. After some time the bead and the tattoo also came to be regarded as a charm to ward off disease.

Further Reading

BURUMA, IAN, and DONALD RICHIE, *The Japanese Tattoo,* New York: Weatherhill (1980).

Further information can be found in the Body Arts Gallery and on our Body Arts website: http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts

Sources

HOSE, CHARLES, and WILLIAM MCDOUGALL, *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo Vol I,* London: Macmillan (1912).

Objects featured in this fact sheet can be found in the following cases:

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L35B Naga tattooing tools

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L36B for Japanese designs and blocks from Borneo

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