

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

BODY TATTOO AND SOCIO-COMMUNICATIVE VALUE: THE NIGERIA PERCEPTION (A STUDY OF OGALLALA STUDIO OF ARTS AND TATTOOING)

Nicholas C. Akas

Abstract

Body designs have been an integral part of African Culture. In the olden days, people made use of makeup such as; Ufe, Uli, and Nwakasi, to design the body, but aside the purpose is meant for it also nourishes the skin medically. The current trend of tattooing is becoming too alarming, where its designs always come in various forms, styles, and shapes without knowing the intended message its sets to pass across and why it must be drawn in various sensitive parts of the body. This research aims to interpret the communicative values of tattoos drawn in various sensitive parts of the body here in Nigeria. Objectively, this paper would (a) emphasis why Nigerian Youths are beginning to value tattoos more than the westerns, (b) it would expose what motivates any tattoo is drawn and the reason(s) for such and it would interpret why Nigerian Youths select specific parts of the body where it would be drawn. For effective research on this paper, content analysis and interviews would be used as the methodology for effective interpretation. From the findings to an extent Nigerian Youths see the tattoo as a tool to differentiate societal status amongst themselves which is not meant to be and must be redressed. In conclusion, tattoos are aesthetically nice on the body, but it must always be done communicatively and not on the exposed parts of the body

Keywords: Body tattoo, Nigerian perception, communicative values and Ogallala studio of arts and tattooing

Introduction

Body design has been an old traditional act in Africa especially Nigeria. They at times come as tribal marks, not for beautification but have sociological implications when interpreted. Some of the traditional tribal marks can be in the form of lines, tiny opening, tiny ropes tied somewhere and so on. Daramola and Jeje as cited by Taije Aluko said that; Those tribal marks are not just put in any part of the body, but in the following places; forehead, chest, stomach, hack in some cases on the legs and hand, in other to explain some cultural undertones (3).

The use of tribal marks then and now especially in some ethnic groups in Nigeria is to represent situations, market days or events that attracted such marks. Those marks to the best of the researcher knowledge are not done with designs such; human face, colourful flowers or inscriptions, rather the lines are well placed as it is in some Northern/Western parts of Nigeria to depict something meaningful and not for beautification. In order, to showcase the sacredness of body design then, it is not done by just anybody or in any studio (as it is in the tattoo) rather some selected person(s) or families have been destined to do it. This is so because it is a belief in Africa or Igbo cosmology that some trades are not taught by humans'

rather ancestral spirits based on historical backups surrounding the family or the person to be taught respectively. Akas Nicholas stated that;

Body design art in Igbo tradition is usually done by a particular set of person or family, to continuously uphold the cosmological legacy which if uttered will affect hereditary lineage, thereby shifting the mantle of authority to another family (6)

The above quote shows how special body design was in the olden days against westernized style called tattoos. The invention of tattoos in Africa is an adapted act from the westerners, who always modified their bodies at times with or without reason(s). Some of the individuals who tattooed their bodies in the western world are celebrities, soldiers and individuals (either to remember special events like; when they were heartbroken, their birthdates, inspirational quotes, flowers or animals they have and cherish so much). All these about body modification as states are purely westernized against what some core body designs are meant for in Africa. Tattoo designs have taken a larger percentage in the lifestyles of individuals, youths and celebrities in Nigeria, just wanting to imitate their western counterparts or being identified as a star. So, tattoos in Nigeria now becomes a yardstick to measure social status where people wearing it are seen as fashion, rich people, classy, stars or Wannabes. Akas, Henry Anayo (tattooist interviewed) said;

'The Nigeria Ideology of tattooing at times is baseless because some do it because of peer pressure or want to be noticed which makes it totally abnormal. But when they are born again as they would always claim, they will start looking for how to remove it''.

So this research sets out to interpret some selected tattoos wore by individuals in Nigeria towards understanding its socio-communicative essence wherever they exist.

Cultural Perception of Tattoos

Culture is one major thing that determines people's way of life and ideology. The essence of culture is to give one sense of belonging or identification, which can come in any form either through dressing, feeding, dance, music or approved tribal marks. When all these are sighted anywhere, it automatically presents where one is coming. Each culture in Nigeria has what they are known for or identified without any doubt or seeking extra interpretation. But tattoos have been strongly frowned at culturally in Nigeria because people wearing it are seen as irresponsible, thieves, bad boy or girl and lack strong paternal training. Stemate D observed that;

Tattooing is not an African thing, rather it is purely westernized, where the western children to an extent have the freedom to do or tattoo anything on his/her bodies. But in Nigeria, to be able to precise anything you must inform your parents to avoid being the black ship of the family or wrongly misinterprets (6).

Furthermore, it is frowned culturally, because of its new style of body modification, where they are drawn in very selective and sensitive parts of the body like; the breast and private parts. These are parts of the body that culturally and morally wise, are not meant to be exposed anyhow (all in the name of fashion) nor being touched by anybody (like the tattooist). But, the act of tattooing has really devalued the sacredness of some human body parts and exposed some youths both male and female to diseases like; HIV, Hepatitis B or C

and while some are even raped in the process. Some of these tattoos drawn in selective areas of the body has forced a lot of individuals, celebrities, and youths to keep exposing it, which is totally against core Africa tradition where a woman or man, is only allowed to expose his/her body only in three clarified occasions such as;

- (1) When he/she wants to bath.
- (2) When he/she wants to have sexual intercourse with the husband or wife
- (3) When he/she wants to sleep

But with the advent of tattooing in Nigeria, it flaws the cultural essence stated rules on exposing the body into the following;

- (1) Tattoos drew at sensitive parts of the body make it sexually attractive.
- (2) Exposed tattoos make one more outstanding and recognized in several gatherings.
- (3) The inability to expose tattoos presents the person as having low self- esteem.
- (4) When exposed and from the style drawn, it automatically shows how much the person involved spent while acquiring such. So, it is against these bases that wearing of tattoos to an extent is not been acceptable culturally in Nigeria.

Socio-Communicative Essence of Tattoos on the Nigerian's body

Robert Leach opined that “No artistic work of art drawn is meaningless or uncommunicative; all that is needed is to understand the artist ideology while drawing and the value of art as requested by the individual”. (123). Some newly tattooed bodies among Nigerians either celebrities, individuals or youths are not totally abstract, rather they follow the bandwagon of westernized ideology in drawing communicative tattoos. The communicative essence of tattoos can be appreciated based on the parts of the body where they are drawn or the reason(s) surrounding each drawing. Akas Henry Anayo (a tattooist interviewed) said that “in my years of experience as a drawn fine artist and tattooist, people no longer follow the old ideology of Uli body design; rather the westernized format where some notable activities trigger each drawn tattoos is the in thing now”. To an extent from the interviews and content analysis method used, the researcher can say that cultural hybridity is really affecting the socio-communicative essence of current tattoos drawn in Nigeria. Some of the socio-communicative symbols drawn as explained by Akas, Henry Anayo (a tattooist and whose studio is under study in this paper).

- (1) **Lion/Tiger:** This is normally drawn by security officers and weight lifters to present themselves as strong people that must be feared by others.
- (2) **Eagle:** This is another iconic animal that people rarely draw here in Nigeria, just because of some reasons best known to them. But the tattooist (understudy) said 'any woman seen with this rare symbol is feared so much and seen as a strong person who cannot be intimidated'.
- (3) **Flowers:** This at times has no much communicative value, rather some individuals wear it in Nigeria to represent their role models especially celebrities who wear the same.
- (4) **Inscription:** Like the westerners, some Nigerians use this to portray special moments in their lives. Those inscriptions can be bible quotation, can be named of their spouse, and

can also be events in their lives or tragic moments (Eg a woman of fifty-sixty years old that wrote on the left -hand side of her breast the names of her six sons that died on the same day in a motor accident)

- (5) The Face of human beings:** Some draw the faces of their celebrities they love so much which can either be musicians, footballers, or actors to show how much they adore the celebrity as a diehard fan.

So from the aforementioned and some pictorials that would be analyzed later in this research paper, shows that some tattoos styles are adopted from the westerners and are very communicative when semiotically interpreted beyond aesthetics.

Types of Tattooed people

As tattoos drawn varies from individuals wearing it, that is exactly how we have different types of people seeking for tattoos on their body. So many scholars have tired giving various interpretation on people seeking for tattoos, but the most suitable for this research paper is Sanders and Vail categories as cited by Garica Merritt Gabriel, where tattooed people are classified as;

(A) Collectors Seeker

This type of individuals always seek out for specific artists and visualized a particular style before committing a significant amount of time while searching for that special studio and special tattooist. They always conceive their existence on their stylized tattoos

(B) Tattooed people

This set of individuals felt that their tattoos were an integral part of who they are and not afraid to be known via their tattoos.

(C) People with tattoos

This is another set of individuals do not primarily conceive of themselves as tattooed people and might feel more apprehensive on being known with their tattoos.

From these various types of people logically interpreted in this research paper, will assist in classifying each person wearing tattoos in Nigeria to know where they belong and how they feel wearing it.

Why Some Nigerians Remove Tattoos?

According to Akas, Henry Anayo (interviewed) said “There are several factors that make some people want to remove expensive tattoos on their body. When such desire starts becoming worrisome in them, it can force some people especially the ladies to do anything or use anything for it to be removed”. He further stated base on his 13years experience in tattooing the following are the major reasons;

(1) Parental Authority/Fear

Some parents who are not in support of it, when they see it on children or wards, they either

beat the person or threaten to stop paying his/her school fees. When such threats become intense, the individual involved will start seeking for removal.

(2) Job Security

Some might have drawn tattoos as students in the university due to peer pressure on fashion. But once maturity and responsibility sets in, especially if the person has been jobless and what is required of him/her to get a job is to remove a tattoo; immediately he/she will do so. The same is applicable to those working already and want to retain their jobs.

(3) Family Name

Some people with a myopic mindset always see and believe that drawing tattoos are meant for irresponsible beings and need not be associated with. So, when such pressure is much on a person with a tattoo not wanting to be tagged a disgrace to the family name. The next option is to request the removal

(4) Religion

When some said they are born again, so to prove it is by removal of their tattoos.

(5) Brain Washing

This occurs mostly when some are brainwashed with having iconic tattoos are demonic and will hinder their progress in life. In order to avoid such from happening today as prophesied by their prophet or Iman, they will request for removal immediately.

(6) Self- Accord: This last set of individuals, whenever he/she feels fed up with a particular tattoo, and then the next action is to seek removal.

He further added that perfect removal of tattoos must be done with a machine called Laze. With Laze Machine, though the removal process might take three or four months as the case may be, it must be achieved. See pictures of the following;

Plate 1: Laze Instrument used in removing tattoos





Tattoo Instrument



Plate 2: Already removed tattoo



Plate 3: Still in the second month of the removal process

A Brief History on the Tattooist

Mr. Akas, Henry Anayo is a well -known tattooist at Onitsha, Anambra State. He was a graduate of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State Nigeria. His area of specialization is Sculpture and he has over twenty sculptural works to his credit.

Furthermore, the act of tattooing was a passion he developed back then as an undergraduate, where he tattooed students just to sustain himself then in the university. But after graduation in 2015, the desire to be a tattooist and aside his core area of specialization was very high. So he went on three years' incentive apprenticeship under a Chinese man. According to him "I taught as a Fine art graduate; the act of tattooing would be very easy for me, but it is a different ball game. I was told by my Chinese master to debunk everything I have learned in the university and learn the new art". I will say it really helped me because is now my only source of feeding. People work into his shop in thousands on a daily basis to be tattooed which always varies in various ways. It is important to state also that am not in any way related to the interviewee, it was a concedes we bear the same name.

Analysis on Tattoos Drawn in Ogallala Studios of Arts and Tattooing

This section is going to interpret some of the symbolic tattoos drawn in the studio and socio-communicative implications attached to the base on Nigeria's perception. The interpretation would be based on interviews carried out on the tattooist by name Akas, Henry Anayo. Those tattoos are as follow;

(1) Eagle/Flower Plate 4



This iconic sign is very symbolic to the bearer. According to the tattooist (interviewed) said “she requested for this type of tattoo on her breast because of some painful experiences. She was heartbroken, raped and has been used as a sex object a lot by men because of fake love promise they always claim to have towards her. So, she decided to draw this as a way of scaring some men away with the assumed motion that she might belong somewhere, while the Rose flower symbol simply reminds her that love should be given only to true men who can sacrifice for their loved ones.

(2) Wise king

Plate 5



This tattoo reminds the individual what he experienced in the hands of his Uncle, who refused to train him in school. He tried pleading with the uncle several to train him in school but he rather advised him to go and learn a trade, the reason being that education is not meant for everybody. So one faithful night as reported by the tattooist base on what he was told by the individual, as he saw the late father in a dream who told him not to depend on anybody rather he should struggle for himself. The late father told him “you are a king so be wise”. So the dream he had inspired the tattoo on his body.

(3) Strokes

Plate 6



The drawing is very abstract in nature and the location to be the back is questionable where anybody can wonder what inspired such drawings. But according to the tattooist, the strokes tattoos remind the wearer how many obstacles a man will meet in life before he achieves success.



(4) The Rose flower on the Lap

Plate 7

From the tattooist, it serves as a seductive tool for the wearer. She said her lap is her sexual weak point, so any man that symbolically adores the flower on her lap can have her as much as he wants in bed. So, it takes a highly romantic mind to lure and turn her on through this tattoo.

(5) The Clef

Plate 8



Aside from this tattoo being a musical icon, its location is more communicative. This is another sexually sensitive area in some women. So, according to the tattooist, the wearer said it is only a man that understands the power of music that can be her boyfriend. The man must be a lover of music, not just any music but the ones with a romantic undertone.

(6) Silent
Plate 9



The tattooist said the wearer used this always reminds him to talk less in gathering and listen more. He said (the wearer) why he chooses the silent icon is because he has always been accused of one bad thing or other that has landed him in the police station several and cost him a lot of money for bail. So he decided to be more careful by talking less.

(7) Inscription
Plate 10



The tattooist said the wearer and his family have been victimized by one wicked uncle several over plots of land. They tried to fight him, but could not because he is rich and well connected. So the only solution they resolved to be prayers. According to the wearer, God Almighty fought their battle for them miraculously and the uncle dead. So, that was what gave rise to this tattoo. From the analysis, the researcher can take a stand by saying that some of the tattoos drawn in Nigeria by Nigerians as adopted from the westerners have their own indigenized socio-communicative undertone.

Conclusion

The desire to draw a tattoo is an adopted act that cannot be stopped in Nigeria as it is now. The researcher might be considered judgmental if he recommends ways for the act of tattooing to be stopped among Nigerians. However, the major thing this paper seeks to suggest is, if tattoos will be drawn at all on anybody, let it be interpretive, communicative and not exposed as seen in some of the pictorial analysis, because such is not our come tradition.

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Research Questions Asked To the Tattooist AKAS, Henry Anayo





Pictures of the Interviewee as a **Sculptor and Tattooist**

Interviewer: What is your name?

Tattooist: My name is Akas, Henry Anayo

Interviewer: Are you a Student or Graduate

Tattooist: I am a graduate of Fine and Applied Arts from Nnamdi Azikiwe University 2015 set.

Interviewer: Why do people draw tattoo?

Tattooist: To the best of my knowledge it either is for fashion or represents the situation of things as it is in a foreign country.

Interviewer: What inspires the type of tattoos drawn?

Tattooist: What mostly inspires the type of tattoo drawn is based on the person's likes, professions or how he wants people to see him.

Interviewer: Are there communicative essence attached to the tattoos you have drawn so far.

Tattooist: Yes, there is communicative essence attached to tattoos in drawn by Nigerians. People who love tattoos always use it to portray actions, situation, or day to day events. They believe having this will give them an everlasting memory.

Interviewer: Is there any special attachment to the parts of the body where tattoos are

- drawn.**
- Tattooist:** I will answer this by saying Yes or No. Yes, because choosing special parts of their body where tattoos can be drawn showcase how special such a particular tattoo is to the wearer, for instance a woman drawing her boyfriend's face on her chest, while is No because to some people it means nothing.
- Interviewer:** **The type of tattoo instrument used in drawing tattoos**
- Tattooist:** The instrument used for tattooing is called tattoo Gun, while the ink used in drawing is called tattoo ink and the tattoo ink is purely harmless.
- Interviewer:** **How do you know the styles to draw on your customers?**
- Tattooist:** I have a catalog of symbols normally requested by individual, so all I do is to present it to them and allow them to make their choice, whichever they select then I draw.
- Interviewer:** **Are there difficulties drawing tattoo?**
- Tattooist:** The simple answer to this is training and one must have the passion to draw before he/she starts drawing tattoos.
- Interviewer:** **What age bracket wants a tattoo more?**
- Tattooist:** Does who want it more is people between the ages of 18 – 34 years.
- Interviewer:** **Do you get arouse while trying to draw on the sensitive parts of a woman.**
- Tattooist:** (Smiles) it wasn't easy for me at the early stage, but as I go deeper into the trade it wasn't feeling anything again.
- Interviewer:** **is there any difference between olden days make up and the modern tattooing.**
- Tattooist:** There is a big difference especially in the area of style of drawing and instruments used. What is used then when there was no technology is totally different now.