
Tapping Ink, Tattooing Identities: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Kalinga Society, Northern Luzon, Philippines, Analyn V. Salvador-Amores, 2013, University of the Philippines Press, 467 pp., ISBN 978 971542 705 0.

BATEK, *BATOK*, AND *WHATOK* are various local words that denote a traditional tattooing practice among the peoples in the Cordillera Region, particularly in the province of Kalinga. Their bodies are inked with figurative designs of snake, centipede, frog, rice grain, and fern plant, among others, and interspersed with geometric motifs and patterns. These traditional tattoos speak strongly about the culture and landscape of the region: signifying rites of passage, or indicating their religious and political status, and sometimes, simply serving as physical adornment. Various meanings and significance of their tattoos are created and produced as the tattooed men and women of Kalinga articulate their own definition and meanings. Such is the foremost concern of the book, *Tapping Ink, Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Kalinga Society, Northern Luzon, Philippines* by Analyn V. Salvador-Amores. The constructed meanings attached to their tattoos are explored as Salvador-Amores grounds these meanings within the theoretical contexts of tradition and modernity.

Based on a long-term, detailed, and comprehensive ethnographic accounts of the tattooing practice in Butbut, Kalinga, the book offers a fresh insight regarding Kalinga's thriving tattooing practices, which have a long and significant history. Local and foreign tourists flock to this remote village in Northern Luzon to have their skin inked in a traditional manner using *gisi* ("stick with a thorn"); it is done through a continuous hand-tapping on the skin (93). This traditional method is practiced by Whangud (also *Fang-od*), a ninety-one year old female tattoo practitioner (*manwhatok*) in Buscalan, Kalinga, hailed by the local and foreign media as the "last" and the "oldest" tattoo artist (7).

The book provides a thick ethnographic description of tattooing practice in contemporary Kalinga. It delves into the discourse of the

theoretical constructs of “tradition” and “modernity,” and between “authenticity” and “revived” not only as the backdrop of the tattooing practice but also as the framework for understanding the meaning and significance of the practice across time and place. The study problematizes how the definitions of modernity and tradition were constructed. Ideologically and politically grounded, this dichotomy emphasizes the stark tension between the concepts of *advancement* and *development*, and *backwardness* and *traditional*. Salvador-Amores interrogates how these definitions and conceptual parameters are used by other literature in the study of culture and anthropology. She proposes another manner of looking at the practice and presents a more comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon by considering the varied meanings of the traditional/modern/authentic/revival concepts in “relation to the process of tattoo transformation, focusing on how the Butbut, Kalinga regard changes in tattooing given shifts in economic, social and political circumstances” (8).

The meanings of these concepts are considered fluid, dynamic, and adaptive to the given situations of the tattooed individuals and tattoo artists/practitioners. Salvador-Amores emphasizes the process and shifting of meanings of “traditional” and “modern” within the context of the “transformation and engagement of the Kalinga tattoos with technology, mobility, diaspora and globalization” (8). Wherever individuals—Kalinga and non-Kalinga, local and foreign—who were tattooed travel, they carry with them the form and image of Kalinga identity and culture. However, these tattoos are perceived not just as static and passive objects but also as objects that have an active social life. The discussion follows Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) position that objects and artifacts have “lives” or biographies that are acquired through social engagements, diasporic activities, and mobility of the owners/bearers/wearers within human and social contexts. The constructed meanings of the markings serve as entry points in discerning the individual’s and/or the collective’s notions about their identity. It is in this framework that the dichotomies of tradition and modern, authentic and revived, are explored and interrogated. Salvador-Amores uses content analysis of appropriated and recontextualized designs and processes, and relies on in-depth interviews and narratives of the tattooed individuals.

Another notable aspect in the book is the author's proposition to consider tattoo as an "unfinished object." Most of the significant and related anthropological literature on traditional and contemporary tattooing emphasized the meanings of the finished product—tattooed image on the skin as a reflection of the "society's social practices: the body is both a medium and a site of activity" (17). In Butbut tattoos, the value and significance of their tattoos lie not only in the physical appearance, or the physical pain associated in the process of hand-tapped tattooing, but also in their symbolic connotations as inscriptions of beliefs and customs. These traditions speak highly about their culture and identity, regardless of whether they are considered as finished or unfinished works.

As a comprehensive research work, the book yields further significant insights on the value of thick ethnographic descriptions that can be culled from prolonged and extensive fieldwork; in-depth interviews with tattoo artists, practitioners, and with Kalinga and non-Kalinga tattooed individuals; use of participant observation method through interactions with the locals; learning and acquiring the local language; engaging in conversations; artifact descriptions; oral narratives and stories from tattooed men and women in Kalinga; the author's having herself tattooed; and documenting the life of Whang-ud, as well as her approaches and practice in tattooing. Whang-ud's narrative reflects the condition and state of traditional art and culture in Kalinga, which is currently transitioning towards modern and contemporary practices with reference to traditional arts. Such approaches and methods in the study of traditional tattoos serve as a vital source of information and knowledge about Philippine traditional and contemporary tattooing practices; these include the dynamic interplay between traditional and modern, tattooing designs, forms, images, processes, techniques, and meanings.

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Reference

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