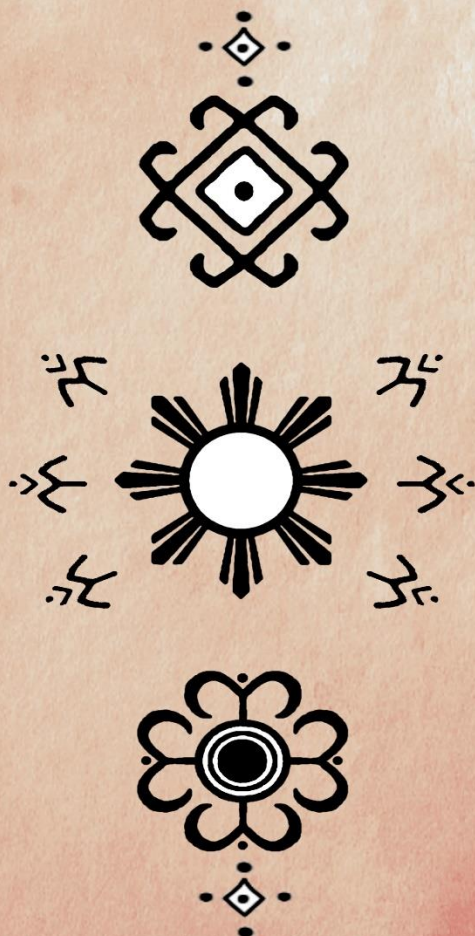


THE PAINTED PEOPLE





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1

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The red decorative motifs throughout the text are from *The Philippine Islands* by Ramon Reyes Lala, 1898, and are in the public domain and free for any use.





TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Disclaimer.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Overview of the Pre-Colonial Philippines.....	9
Why Was Tattooing Lost?.....	15
Tattooing in the Visayas.....	22
Introduction to the Visayas.....	23
Visayan Motifs/Patterns	24
Historical Attestations of Visayan Tattooing	36
Tattooing in Luzon	41
Luzon Motifs/Patterns	43
Historical Attestations of Luzon Tattooing	51
Tattooing in Mindanao	54
Mindanao Motifs/Patterns	58
Contemporary Revival.....	61
Examples of Contemporary Motifs	63
Conclusion	65





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Maraming Salamat to my teachers Elle and Zelle Festin. Without your guidance, dedication, and countless sacrifices, this entire revival movement would be lost. I will be forever grateful for having the opportunity to learn from you both.

Maraming Salamat to the many indigenous peoples in the Philippines and throughout the Austronesian world carrying on tattooing and other sacred traditions.

3

Maraming Salamat to my family. Without your unique sacrifices and love, I wouldn't have had the opportunities that led to the creation of this work.





Disclaimer

Filipino tattooing has been, is, and always will be a broad subject with a range of manifestations across time, place, and cultural context. Filipino tattooing has changed a great deal since the pre-colonial era and a great deal of knowledge from that time has been lost to history. Therefore, we should understand that this work and any other work pertaining to Filipino tattooing is a modern interpretation based upon the best information that is available to us. The views and information expressed in this book, while informed by study, real-world *tatak* practice, and first-hand observation of traditional and indigenous tattooing, are ultimately based on my own viewpoint and what I was taught by my mentors.

4

This work makes use of citation of academic and other sources when necessary; however, the vast majority of what is presented in this book is a product of my own ideas and previous knowledge, a good deal of which I acquired via oral teachings from my mentors, my travel in the Philippines (and the Pacific in general), common folklore, historical and present-day knowledge of the Philippines, and my own *tatak* practice. This book has been extensively reviewed for plagiarism by a highly reputable paid service and has found the work to be thoroughly academically honest. Any similarity to another person's content (that has not been cited) is entirely coincidental and can be attributed to the shared or common knowledge held by scholars and enthusiasts within the Filipino community.

Additionally, I will sometimes refer to the practice of Filipino tattooing as *tatak*, though several similar words exist throughout the islands, such as *batok* (as it was used in the Visayas) or *patik*. *Tatak* is the Tagalog word meaning “mark,” therefore, I feel it is the most generally applicable word for the practice of Filipino tattooing as it evolves with our people and becomes more accepted as a multi-ethnic practice.





Many of us in this modern age are on a journey of rediscovering our ancestral traditions regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or color. When our ancestors in the Philippines converted and altered indigenous traditions (such as tattooing) or abandoned them in the face of hegemonic forces – whether it was the Americans, Spanish, Chinese, or others - they were awarded generational privileges that the people who have kept and guarded these traditions have not. In our efforts to revive the traditions of all our distant ancestors, it can be easy to be oblivious or ignorant to the discrimination indigenous communities in the Philippines have faced over the centuries. Education is often the best first step to understanding the differences between appropriation of an indigenous identity and respectfully incorporating indigenous practices into modern life.

Lastly, the reader should be made aware that the section on Mindanao will be considerably brief compared to the sections on Luzon and the Visayas. This is since some tattooing traditions among the indigenous people of Mindanao are closely guarded, especially in today’s time when these people face discrimination and conflict at the hands of the government, rival ethno-political groups, and corporate interests. While many *Lumad* (indigenous) people are open to sharing their tattooing practices with outsiders, the traditions of these people are not my direct specialty; therefore, out of respect for the indigenous people of Mindanao, I have only provided introductory information on the region and tattooing practices that will allow the reader to venture further into their own study.





Introduction

As of the time of writing, tattooing has become an increasingly popular form of self-expression throughout the world and especially the United States and Europe. Stigma surrounding tattoos has decreased dramatically since the beginning of the 21st century.



Image of a Visayan Pintado noble couple - most likely Cebuano or Waray. From the Boxer Codex (ca. 1590)



Ifugao noble warrior heavily embellished with tattoos, ca. 1900

Tattooing is an ancient practice that has been a part of vastly different cultures across the world for millennia. According to Smithsonian Magazine article “The 61 Tattoos of Otzi, the 5,300-Year-Old ‘Iceman’” by Laura Clark (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/61-tattoos-otzi-5300-year-old-iceman-180954035/>, 2015), some of the oldest known tattoos belong to Otzi the Iceman, a 5,300-year-old mummy found preserved in the Alps. Otzi’s remains possess an impressive 61 tattooed markings. Given the number of Otzi’s tattoos, it can be inferred that tattooing was a common practice of the time and is very likely much older than Otzi.

Tattooing in the Philippines is an ancient practice and was once so widespread that when the Spanish arrived, the Visayans were called *los pintados* or “the painted ones.” Like many Austronesian peoples, the people of the Philippines had developed a highly sophisticated and





symbolically rich art form through tattooing. These tattooing traditions ranged from highly ceremonial and ritualistic to more personal and decorative. In many cases, tattoos marked personal achievement--similar to many tattoos today. While much of this knowledge was lost upon Spanish colonization and mass conversion to Catholicism, records from the colonial period and existing indigenous cultures in the highlands of Luzon have allowed for gems of knowledge to survive into the present day.

Unfortunately, there is still a stigma towards tattooing in general in the Philippines. Much of this can be attributed to centuries of colonial indoctrination and oppression from the Catholic Church that banned and demonized the practice of tattooing, along with many other traditions, in much of the Philippines. There is a lingering sentiment that tattoos belong to a “dark” time before the Spanish introduced civilization and Christianity to the islands. This mindset is not absent from the Filipino diaspora, where older generations of immigrants discourage self-expression and sometimes look upon tattoos as dirty or backwards.



Filipina women in baro't saya - the national dress of the Philippines which was heavily influenced by the Spanish Catholic ideal of modesty. The Spanish style is apparent, but these outfits also kept the native tapis/malong wrap as the base. Ca 1899.



Ilyang Wigan, Whang-Od Oggay, and her grandniece Grace Palicas during the KATHA Awards and Networking Night. Metro Manila, Pasay City 2017, public domain image courtesy of Republic of the Philippines Department of Trade

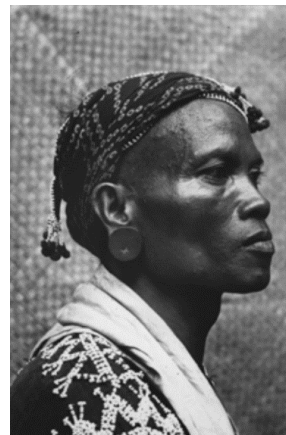
grand-niece Grace Palicas and other young women in her village, and has allowed anthropologists and other scholars to study her work and the tattooing traditions of the region in general. Also, a renewed interest in the pre-colonial history of the Philippines has brought newfound respect for tattooing traditions in the Philippines today, with some brave





practitioners taking up the tapping tools in honor of the old ways. These practitioners often learn alongside Polynesian practitioners who have generally been able to preserve more of their tattooing traditions despite European and Christian colonization/influence.

In my practice, I often receive the same questions, “what do these tattoos/patterns mean? What are the tattoos from [inset region here] like?” These always seem to be simple, well-meaning questions, but they never have simple answers. My hope is that this work will answer these questions and provide the reader with a clear and concise source of Filipino tattooing designs and their meanings using mostly primary source references and my own experience. This work will not be focusing on theory, long discourse, or academic “ivory tower” filler. My aim is simply to educate the reader about the various tattooing traditions as they were/are practiced in three main island groups of the Philippines--Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao, what the various patterns and motifs mean, and how we can move forward confidently and honorably in this artform. This work is meant to be used as a reference book anytime questions need to be answered and hopefully as a platform to understand our ancestors’ ancient way of life and incorporate that spirit into our lives today.



Images Left to Right: Bagobo woman with tattoos on her arm (1904), tattooed Visayan man (1668), Bagobo chief (1904 St. Louis World’s Fair), tattooed Bontoc woman (ca. 1900).





Overview of the Pre-Colonial Philippines

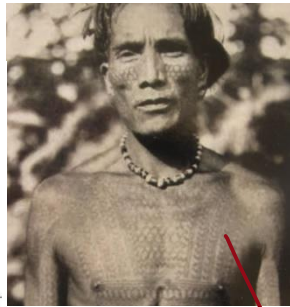


The map on the next page is sourced from the book *A History of the Philippines* by David P. Barrows, 1905, which I have connected to the captioned images of various peoples of the Philippines. Please note that the red lines drawn are meant to generally show where the various depicted peoples are/would have been approximately located on the islands.





Ilocano couple, *The Boy Travellers in the Far East Part Third*, by Thomas W. Knox 1882



Kalinga noble with heavy tattoos and heirloom beads, ca. 1900



Aeta warrior with heavy scarification, 1885



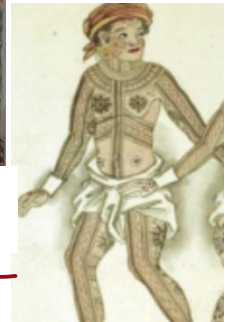
Tingan (Itneg) woman, ca. 1900



Sambal couple from Zambales, ca. 1590 Boxer Codex



Cebuano noble couple ca. 1590 Boxer Codex



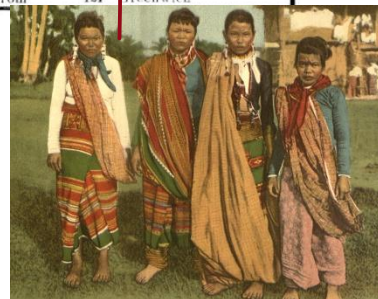
Cebuano tattooed warrior. 1590 Boxer Codex



A Mangyan woman in traditional clothing, ca. 1900



Moro women in Jolo, Sulu, ca. 1890



Colorized image of Tiruray women, ca. 1900



Colorized image of Bagobo woman in traditional attire, 1904





Before getting into the encyclopedic section of this book, I will start with a brief overview of the pre-colonial Philippines to set the appropriate context for the remainder of the book. Given the expansive nature of this topic, this will be a *brief* overview that will familiarize the reader with the landscape. Due to the broad nature of the subject, each chapter or topic could easily become its own book. There are many other works by contemporary historians and historical documents from the early colonial era that would provide a far better and more in-depth look at this period. Many of the historical documents have been translated to English from Spanish and are available for free online.



Noble Tagalog couple, ca. 1590 Boxer Codex. Titled “Naturales Tagalos”.

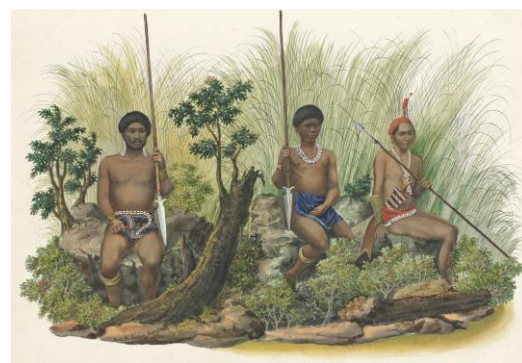


Aeta hunting couple, ca. 1590 Boxer Codex Titled “Negrillos”.



Noble Chinese-Filipino or Chinese couple in Manila area, ca. 1590 Boxer Codex. Titled “Caupchy”.

The reality of the Pre-Colonial Philippines was that it was extremely culturally, politically, and ethnically diverse. The earliest modern humans to arrive in the Philippines were the Australo-Melanesian Negrito people, who are believed to have reached the islands more than 40,000 years ago. They make up approximately 30 recognized ethnic groups in the Philippines.



Scene depicting two Aeta and Kalinga warriors from North Luzon, painted by José Honorato Lozano (1821-1885)





The second major migration to the Philippines was the Austronesian migration, which is



Image of a Tsou warrior in Taiwan, colorized ca. 1900

believed to have occurred around 3000 BCE from mainland Southern China and the surrounding islands. This same group of people also branched off and became the Polynesians, who eventually reached other island groups such as Aotearoa (New Zealand), Hawaii, Tahiti, Samoa, and many others. Austronesian peoples and the Aeta have intermixed for centuries, which has led to many modern Filipino ethnic groups having DNA from both groups of people. While the Aeta (a Negrito ethnic group) people practiced scarification and shared this knowledge with the newcomers, it was the

Austronesian people who introduced the rich tattooing culture to the islands as well as the greater Pacific

region. Many other migrations occurred over the centuries, but in the interest of time, it is important to remember these two major migrations.



Photograph of a Benguet warrior, ca. 1900s



Image of a young Moro girl with heirloom beads, ca. 1900

Many centuries worth of history in the Philippines are unknown due to the lack of written records before the 10th century. Much of

what we do know from that time comes from foreign accounts, such as those by Chinese traders who had numerous dealings with coastal communities. It is even hypothesized that the name for the island Luzon comes from the Chinese *Lusong*. However, by the 10th century, writing was present in the Philippines, such as in the form of Old Malay, and the Philippines experienced a blossoming of civilization.

We will briefly touch upon the political landscape of the Philippines prior to Spanish colonization to demonstrate the importance of the Philippines in the global system at the time. In this era (before the 16th century), the archipelago was divided amongst a huge number of political entities, including rajahnates, kingdoms, barangays (large independent village communities), tributary states, sultanates, and even segments of larger empires. Some of these political entities were formed by foreigners or were heavily inspired by the organization of states located in other parts of South and Southeast Asia.





Moro couple, Grasset Saint-Sauveur
1795

According to the article “The Pre-Colonial ‘Filipino’ Pirates Who Terrorized China in 1174 AD” by FilipiKnow.net (<https://filipiknow.net/visayan-pirates-in-china/>, Oct 7, 2018), an account reveals the “Sung Dynasty Imperial Court received an envoy from P’u-tuan (Butuan), a kingdom—which the Chinese described as a “Hindu country with a Buddhist monarchy”—ruled by a certain Ch’i-ling (Rajah Kiling) in 1001 AD.”

Later, towards the end of the 14th century, the Sultanate of Sulu started to form when Arab traders managed to convert the local Rajah to Islam.

In the Visayas, the Rajahnate of Cebu was founded in the early 15th century by the semi-legendary figure Sri Lumay, a prince of the Chola Dynasty of Sumatra and supposed ancestor of the famed Lapu Lapu, who faught Magellan at the Battle of Mactan in 1521. Further north, the bustling trading state of Caboloan (present day Pangasinan) was active for much of the 14th and 15th centuries. As a tributary state to the Chinese Ming dynasty, Caboloan benefitted greatly from an expansive trade network that dealt in a variety of local goods from Luzon and imported goods from China, Japan, and other parts of East and Southeast Asia. The area was even briefly ruled as a pirate enclave by the infamous Chinese warlord Limahong until being liberated by a coalition of Spanish, Visayans, and Tagalogs led by Mexican-born Juan de Salcedo in 1575.

In the highlands of Luzon (the Cordilleras), what would be considered a more “tribal” way of life has persisted for many centuries and even continues in a modern form to this day. In the pre-Spanish era, people from the Cordilleras would trade and receive fine goods from coastal people as well as foreign traders from distant lands. Foreign goods and connections were a sign of high status among the tribes of the region, though the ethnic groups



Unknown couple captioned
“Taipue” from the Boxer Codex,
ca. 1590s. It’s been thought they
were Filipino-Chinese living in
the tributary state Caboloan.





Colorized image of wealthy Kalinga woman adorned with many heirloom beads, ca. 1910. Beads and pigs were common payment for tattoos in the past.

of the Cordilleras were careful to not allow too much outside influence in their affairs. The heirloom beads seen in Kalinga, for example, were passed down from generation to generation. Many of the beads are native to Kalinga, but the most prized ones have their origins in ancient China, Africa, and even Europe and early colonial America.

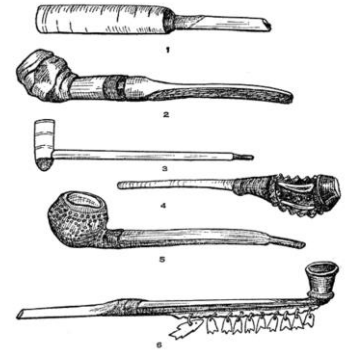
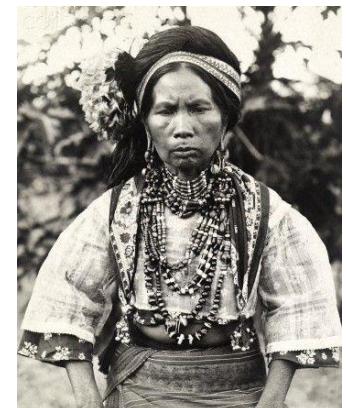


Image of tobacco pipe varieties in the Cordilleras, Fay-Cooper Cole ca. 1920. Tobacco in the Philippines arrived with the Spanish from the Americas. It has remained a popular trading commodity for centuries.

Today, this area is highly diverse, being comprised of numerous ethnolinguistic groups that have a long history of cooperation and conflict with one another. It should be noted that their way of life has endured for so long

because of their ability to keep outside invaders at bay. Even the Spanish, who had managed to bring most of the archipelago under their control by the 17th century, could not successfully occupy the Cordilleras region, allowing the people of this region to maintain most of their independence.



Images left to right: Tattooed Bontoc woman ca. 1910, tattooed Ifugao warrior ca. 1900, Gaddang couple ca. 1900 colorized, Noble Kalinga woman with heirloom beads ca. 1900.

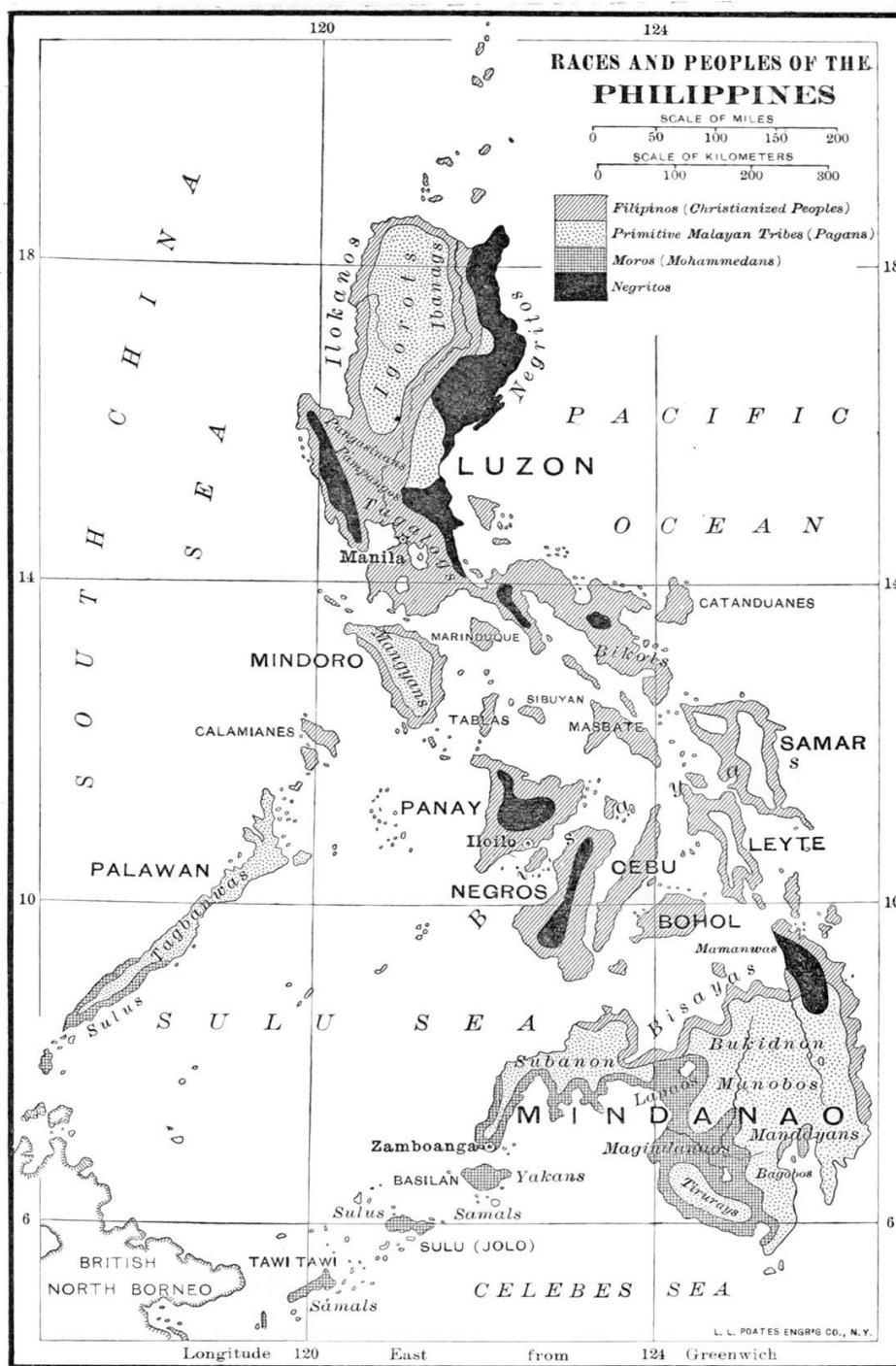
Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the Philippines were very much integrated with the existing global networks of the day. The islands were home to many different cultural groups that had highly developed civilizations, traditions, and relationships with other peoples and places. The vast ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the islands today reflects this colorful past.





Why Was Tattooing Lost?





This is a map of the Philippines from *A History of the Philippines* by David P. Barrows, 1905. This map generally shows the divide between Spanish-American Christianized people (i.e., Ilocano and Ilongo), Muslims (Moro people), and the indigenous people (Austronesian and Negrito) living a traditional lifestyle such as the Bagobos of Mindanao and the Kalinga of Luzon. This map highlights the influence of colonization, cultural exchange, and the cultural gap between lowland coastal people and highland indigenous people on the ethnic groups of the Philippine islands at the time.



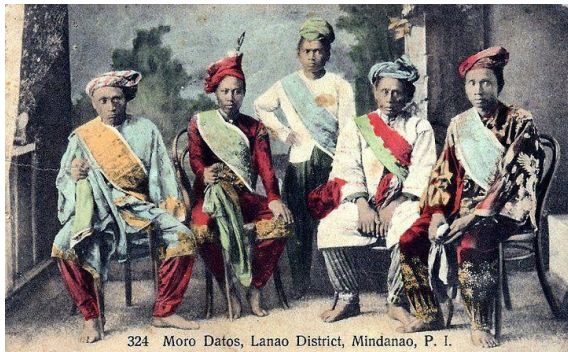
Foremost, it should be mentioned that this section does not pertain to those regions in the Philippines, such as the Cordilleras and regions of Mindanao, where tattooing traditions survived past the colonial period. This section directly addresses those regions in the Philippines where tattooing traditions were largely abandoned by the height of the colonial era (late 17th century).

Pre-Colonial Era

Contrary to popular belief, there were several factors at play already in the Philippines leading to the decline of tattooing prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century. One of the most important reasons is the spread of Islamic culture throughout much



Moro Tagalog women from the Boxer Codex, ca. 1590.



Moro Datus from Mindanao, ca. 1900

of the southern archipelagos of the Philippines. Islam was introduced to the Philippines by the 14th century, and for several centuries before Spanish arrival, much of the southern portion of the Philippines, particularly Mindanao, was under the direct control of Islamic Sultanates - this control also extended to parts of Manila. When the practice of Islam disseminated throughout the population, the doctrine of tattoos as

haram (forbidden) gained traction in the islands. This accounts for the present-day disparity in culture and tattooing traditions between highland Manobo peoples, who still practice tattooing, and the Moro (Muslims) of Mindanao who do not.

Further to the north, there were different pressures leading to the abandonment of tattooing. In regions where Chinese cultural influence was very strong, such as coastal Luzon, tattooing would have been seen by Chinese traders as taboo. This is due in large part to the Chinese and Japanese cultural association of tattoos with criminal activity. In the



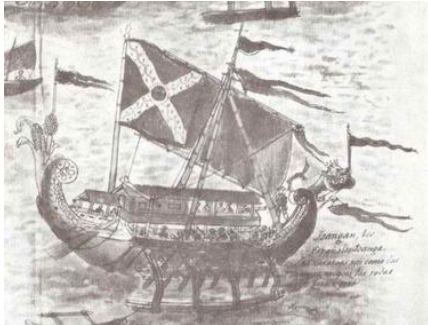
Christianized Ilocano merchants by José Honorato Lozano (1821-1885).

At this point the native wear was heavily influenced by Spanish, Chinese, and other surrounding cultural clothing at the time.





timeframe before and during Spanish colonization, the seas bordering East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Philippines were teeming with pirates and raiders. Chinese and Japanese pirates during this time were particularly notorious, with some of them even setting up petty kingdoms in the Philippines. Such outlaws would likely have carried tattooed markings from their travels that



Depiction of a Visayan karakoa from *Historia de las islas e indios de Bisayas* (1668) by Francisco Ignacio Alcina. These ships were used in naval battles all the way up to the Spanish invasion as well as for sea raids and piracy.

labeled them as outcasts and criminals and would have been looked upon with disdain by honest traders and merchants. Unfortunately, this association would have also been applied to tattooed people in the Philippines. This notion was not helped by the fact that tattooed Visayans also engaged in raiding and piracy as far afield as China, contributing to the negative stereotype. In areas where Chinese influence was particularly strong, such as the Ming dynasty tributary state of Pangasinan, being tattooed may have been a liability that led to poor business dealings with foreigners. It's important to remember that these factors would have affected individual decision-making regarding tattooing more than being systematically enforced behavior.

There were plenty of people, especially in the Visayas, who traded with the Chinese and other foreigners and were also heavily tattooed.

Spanish Colonization

Most importantly, Spanish influence during the colonial era led to the complete abandonment of tattooing in most of the Philippines. It is essential to note that the primary reason for the Spanish outlawing tattooing was a religious motive based in Catholic doctrine. There are provisions within the bible that explicitly forbid markings upon the body. Leviticus 19:28 states, “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord” (KJV/King James Version, public domain). While several Spanish accounts describe the tattoos as beautiful and masterfully executed, the fact remained that, to the Spanish, tattooing was seen as primitive, dirty, and ungodly. Tattooing also has heavy connections to ancestor worship, polytheism, ritualistic warfare, animism, personal glorification, and other practices and belief systems that were forbidden in the eyes of the Church. For the Philippines to become a suitable colony under the Spanish crown, the population would have to be Christianized and remade into the image of Catholic purity and subservience--something which the tattooed native most certainly did not adhere to.





The Spanish colonial government utilized the Church to systematically remove native tattooing traditions and many other practices. This was done by first indoctrinating the populace using Catholic missionaries to acquaint the people with Christian doctrine and societal standards. The Spanish colonial government made great efforts to spread multilingual religious literature and educate missionaries and priests in local dialects for them to convert the population more effectively. Additionally, for Datus and Rajahs seeking political and military alliance with the Spanish, the cost was often conversion to Christianity. The Spanish knew that subjects of native leaders who had taken up the new faith were far more likely to convert.



‘The Basi Revolt (XIV)’; this is the fourteenth painting in a series by Esteban Pichay Villanueva depicting the 1807 revolt of Ilocanos against Spain for the outlawing of private wine manufacturing (1821).



Dominican Spanish Friars in Piat, Cagayan 1875-1880. The composition of the photo illustrates the position of native Filipinos in the eyes of the Church.

When political and military dominance were achieved in the Philippines through a complex web of political alliances, military victories, and Christianization of the region, it was then easy for the Spanish colonial government to take complete control and enforce the outlawing of tattooing and other practices that were deemed unsuitable in the Christian context. The practice of tattooing was deeply ingrained in the cultural consciousness of the population and was perhaps the most visible symbol of cultural and ethnic identity. With tattooing not only gone, but also vilified, the Spanish colonial government was able to effectively redefine what it meant to be Filipino.

Due to these efforts, tattooing was virtually extinct throughout most of the Philippines by the end of the 17th century. Fortunately, highland indigenous peoples in Luzon and Mindanao, being far removed from the easily accessible coasts and intent on maintaining their independence, were able to preserve their tattooing and other native traditions.





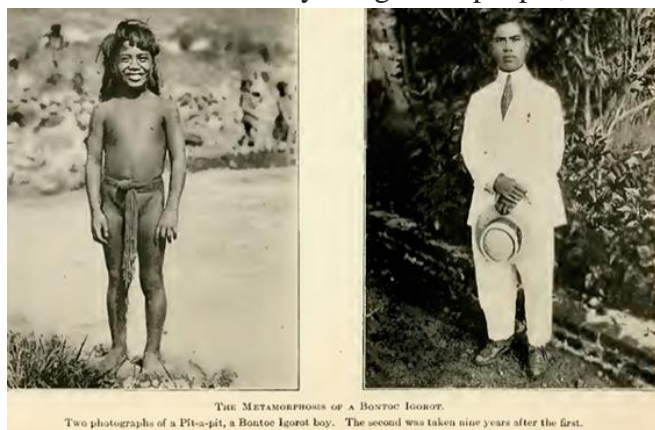
American Occupation

When the Spanish-American War came to its conclusion in 1898, the United State achieved a stunning victory over Spain that led to the US acquisition of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines as territories. In this era of Imperialism, many European powers were vying for control over large swathes of the globe. The United States, which was still an emergent power at the time, secured its place as an imperial power with the acquisition of Spain's island colonies. However, the people of the Philippines, after having formed the First Philippine Republic and briefly achieving independence, were not eager to trade one colonial power for another.

The Philippine-American War, which lasted from 1899-1902, was a hard-fought struggle that resulted in a heavy loss of life due to combat, atrocities, and disease and famine exacerbated by the realities of war. Ultimately, the United States defeated the First Philippine Republic, and it was forced to dissolve.

With the Philippines firmly in the grasp of the United States, much effort was put into acclimating the population to the ideals of modern Western civilization, the dissolution of the power of the Catholic church, and the introduction of English as the primary language in government, commerce, and higher education. Contrary to the Spanish, the Americans were able to successfully access the interior regions of the country and gain a foothold in highland areas dominated by indigenous people, such as the Cordilleras region.

20



Caption reads: *The Metamorphosis of a Bontoc Igorot*. The second photograph was taken nine years after the first, highlighting the adoption of Western culture. *The Philippine Islands: Past and Present*, Dean Conant Worcester, 1914

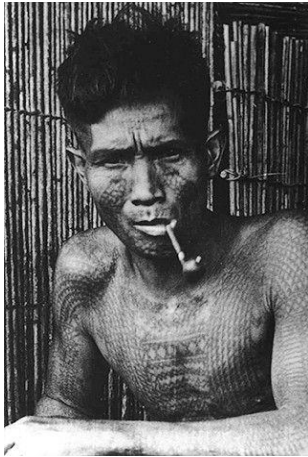
When Americans entered the interior of the islands, they discovered people who were vastly different than their coastal and urban counterparts. From the American viewpoint, these people were violent, primitive, and in need of civilizing. In the early 20th century, practices such as ritualized warfare, headhunting, and tattooing were very much still in place.

Christianity, despite the best efforts of the Spanish, had very little or no influence in the Cordilleras and other remote areas. Philippine





tribal people were so exotic to the American newcomers that a considerable number, along with many other indigenous people, were taken to St. Louis to be displayed at the 1904 World's Fair.



Kalinga man with *Chatlag* chest tattoo. This high-status adornment shows this man's prowess as a successful warrior/headhunter, ca.1900

In the following decades of occupation, the United States-controlled insular government attempted to civilize the tribal peoples of the Philippines by encouraging western dress and social customs, banning headhunting, and promoting the spread of Protestant Christianity. Even these efforts were only somewhat effective, as the demands of the region, the independent spirit of the indigenous people, and the limitations of early 20th century technology made it extremely difficult to achieve success. Furthermore, with the coming of the Pacific War and

Japanese occupation, the United States allowed and encouraged the practice of headhunting among the indigenous guerrilla fighters in Luzon, which led to a major resurgence in tattooing

in the Cordilleras region during the war.

When the Philippines finally gained independence in 1946, the impact of the United States occupation remained strong and remains strong today. Over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries, the practice of tattooing and headhunting, outside of special circumstances, fell into decline as forces of modernization truly began to reach the interior regions of the Philippines. However, renewed interest in ancestral and indigenous traditions, especially among Filipino-Americans, and the incredible rise in the popularity of tattooing in the west (especially in the US) has seen to a rebirth of traditional and contemporary tattooing in the Cordilleras and the Philippines in general.





Tattooing in the Visayas





Introduction to the Visayas



Chamorro people greeting a Spanish ship, Boxer Codex, 1590

The Visayas are the group of islands centrally located in the Philippines, and include the main islands of Bohol, Panay, Cebu, Leyte, Negros, and Samar. The Visayas are an ethnolinguistically diverse region, and over the centuries have been the site of many migrations and conquests.

23

During the period in the few centuries prior to Spanish colonization, the Visayas were heavily influenced by foreign cultures because of the vast trade networks and tributary polities that linked the islands to the rest of Asia. It would not be uncommon for locals to have dealings with Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Bornean, Malay, Indian, or even Arabic dignitaries,



Untattooed Visayan Nobles,
Boxer Codex, 1590

merchants, pirates, and explorers. Similarly, these places would have encountered Visayans traveling to their lands for similar reasons. Some of the main islands, such as Cebu, were parts of larger empires or rajahnates that had nobles from distant lands ruling in the Visayas. Referencing the *Boxer Codex*, it becomes clear just how diverse and interconnected with the outside world the Visayas were, which explains the heavy cultural influences from abroad.

Tattooing was no exception to foreign influence, with many other parts of the tattooed Austronesian and Southeast Asian world having encountered local Visayans. Malay and Bornean tattooing traditions, some of which still exist today, would have certainly influenced the practice of tattooing in the





Visayas, given that many prominent people from these regions migrated to the Visayas in the pre-colonial period. Additionally, native Aeta traditions of scarification were shared with Austronesian people, which also shaped the practice of adorning the body with markings.

This culmination of several ancient and complex tattooing traditions meeting in the pre-colonial Visayas is why, I believe, Visayan tattooing as of the 16th century was such a highly developed and sophisticated art form. From the references we do have, only highly skilled practitioners would be sought out by the highest status and most accomplished individuals to receive their markings.

Visayan Motifs/Patterns

In the Visayas, there are a handful of accounts that still exist describing how extensive Visayan tattooing was. The process, style, and general culture of the art was documented, but any personal or generational knowledge has been lost. This is due in large part to Spanish colonization, the introduction of Christianity, and the adoption of Western cultural norms. By the end of the 17th century, Visayan tattooing was virtually extinct. Unfortunately, the main sources we do have about the practice were composed by outsiders who did not have intimate knowledge of the art form. In addition, there are only a few existing illustrations of tattooed Visayans, most notably in the Boxer Codex, and much of what we know about how Visayan tattoos looked comes from these few sources--we still do not have the full story. For example, there is a heavily tattooed man and a heavily tattooed woman depicted in the Boxer Codex from 1590. It is clear from the depiction that the woman is tattooed on the hands, feet, arms, neck, and chest. However, in a written description by Pedro Chirino (quoted later in the text) from the early 1600s, he states he observed the women of Visayas tattooed only one full hand and part of the other, contradicting the illustration in the Boxer Codex. It is possible that Pedro Chirino encountered people whose tattoo traditions varied slightly from those observed by the illustrator of the Boxer Codex. We have no clear references that detail these practices any further.

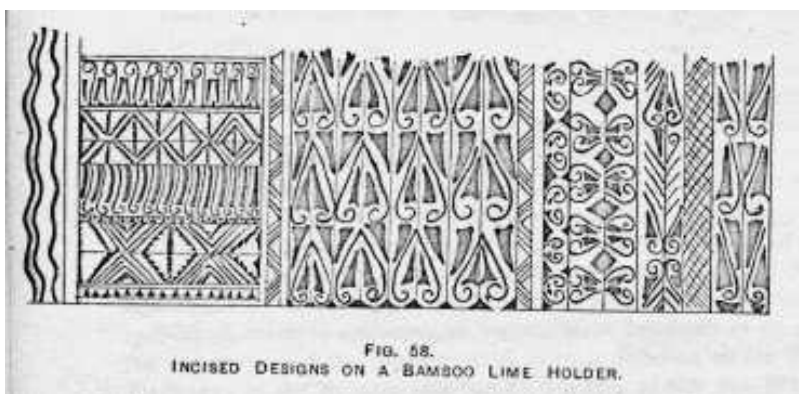


Illustration of a Visayan woman with tattoos on her hand and possibly her wrists and ankles. Ignacio Francisco Alcina, 1668





In the records we do have, there are a few examples - pictured and in text - of the different tattoo formats of the people of the Visayas. In my practice, it is important to pay homage to the difference in cultures between the Visayan islands as well as the distinct formats they each had. However, as previously stated, migration and trade between these islands has always been common. Even if one's grandparents came from a certain island or ethnic group in the Visayas, there is no way to tell if their ancestors from 300-400 years ago came from elsewhere, potentially bearing the marks from another region.



Incised Designs on a Bamboo Lime Holder, *The Wild Tribes of Davao District*, Mindanao, 1913

Due to the lasting impacts of the colonial period, there is much about these tattooing traditions we will not be able to understand. Even in the relatively short period between the illustrations of the Boxer Codex (1590) and those by Ignacio Francisco Alcina (1668), there were considerable differences in the depictions of Visayan tattoos. There are still many groups of people throughout the islands who may still have continued aspects of this art that we have very little or no contact with to this day. Most of us live very different lives than our ancestors and those in the present who have kept traditional practices strong in their indigenous cultures. It is up to us to interpret the practice of *tatak* respectfully and carry it forward into the future.

The designs featured in this section are comprised of Visayan motifs based on folklore, documentation, tattooing traditions, and motifs in neighboring cultures (both within the Philippines and in other regions such as Borneo, Taiwan, Micronesia, and Polynesia), and the research and traditions taught to me by my mentors. I'll also be including my own conclusions from my own research and experiences, but I'll be stating them as such: my opinions and not absolute facts.





Visayan Flower- The Visayan flower is one of the more recognizable tattooing motifs in the Philippines, and as of this writing, can even be seen on new monetary notes in the Philippines depicting Lapu Lapu. These stylized floral and sun designs appear on the buttocks, chest, and face of tattooed individuals.

It is theorized that the Visayan flower is equivalent in



Traditional Panay Bukidnon clothing, public domain image courtesy of Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, photo by Stacy Garcia, 2019

symbology to the Luzon Kappi Crab, which references mythology about creation as well

as the archetypal traveler. In mythology, the Ilocano deity that is often associated with the kappi crab is also found in the folklore of Visayan culture, but is also found in carvings, weavings, and tattoos throughout the Philippines, as well as the Austronesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian worlds with similar meanings. The center mass is interpreted as the start of creation, or the first land, and the outer figures are birds flying away, carrying creation with them in all directions. The Visayan flower could also have been a marking received specifically for military achievement, to mark skill as a sailor, or to signify high



Image of a Visayan nobleman from the Boxer Codex (1590) -- facial and upper body tattoos clearly visible, Visayan flowers on cheeks

status.

The Bukidnon people of Iloilo have traditional weaving called *panubok*. Their weaving tradition is steeped in deep cultural and mythological significance. Many floral designs on the *panubok* are like the traditional tattoo placements of both Borneo and the Visayas and bear similar





spiritual significance. Such is the case with many other patterns like the tattoo designs recorded in the Boxer Codex.

Due to the high volume of trade and cultural similarities to the peoples of Borneo, I believe that the placements and circular style may have been influenced by or directly evolved from the Bunga Terung design of the Iban people of Borneo (or possibly the other way around). In its essence, the Bunga Terung is an eggplant flower and marks the beginning of a coming-of-age rite known as Bejalai - a journey of wisdom and fortune where one passes into adulthood. These are located on the front of the shoulder (never the chest or center) to symbolize where a bag strap lies to carry the weight of one's life. My teacher had taught me that in a similar sense, the Visayan flowers were placed over the nipples to symbolize the life and strength a mother gives a child through breastfeeding.

Looking over the examples of these flowers in the Boxer Codex, they follow a similar format. Furthermore, in *The Maragtas* (1907) by Pedro Alcantara Monteclaro, there was the tale (which was also orally transmitted to me) of the ten Datus from Borneo that came to Panay and struck deals with the Aeta Datu of Panay, Datu Marikudo, to secure land for them and their people in the 12th century. Many aspects of the original story are agreed to be fabricated but based on genuine historical events gathered from oral and written sources. I believe that both the Bunga Terung and the Kappi crab motif, alongside the abundance of flower patterns from these islands such as hibiscus, lilies, jasmine flowers, and so on, played a large role in shaping the Visayan flower tattoos we can reference today.

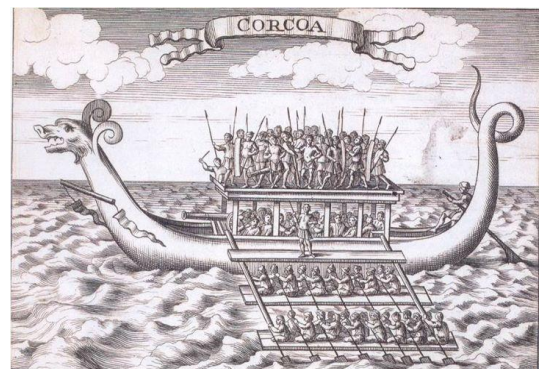


Bunga Terung flower, by the author





Canoe- Overall, Visayans were a seafaring people and were known to travel far and wide for migration, trade, fishing, and raiding. Boats, specifically outrigger canoes, were of immense importance to the Visayans and held practical and spiritual significance. The karakoa was an especially large outrigger war boat used by Visayans and Kapampangans. In the Southern Visayas, legend has it that the sea goddess Magwayen was so grief-stricken over the loss of her daughter, Lidigat, that she gave up her duties to become the ferrywoman of souls - guiding them on her canoe into the spirit realm. Canoes also represent ancestral knowledge as the skills of navigating the seas and charting a course by the stars were passed on by elders and other sailors. In Pampanga, karakoas were used in naval battles against the Spanish. In the late 16th century, the Spanish heavily discouraged the construction of karakoas, later leading to the outlawing of the karakoa and associated customs.



Early 18th-century engraving depicting a karakoa from *The Discovery and Conquest of the Molucco and Philippine Islands* (1711) by Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola. The raised decks were a key deciding factor for the karakoa's performance in naval battles.

In the figure above, one can see that the middle section resembles the main body of a canoe, and the elements coming from the sides are oars propelling the canoe forward. The straight vertical lines represent the outriggers, but traditionally, they would be farther apart from one another. The design of the body of the canoe varies, but always represents crocodile





or snakeskin. I was taught that the ancient Visayans would view serpents and crocodiles as ancestral omens or messengers from the spirit world and would revere them for the power they still show on this earth. Snakes were literally brought aboard by sailors for voyages, war, and

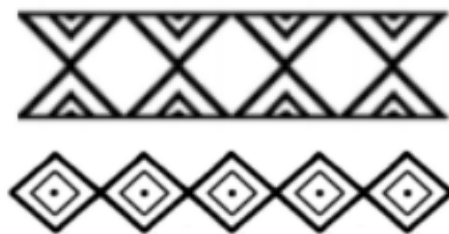


Illustration of a tattooed Pintado man, from *Historia de las islas e indios de Bisayas* (1668) by Francisco Ignacio Alcina

raids to bring the blessings and power of the ancestors with them. This may have connections as to why the snake symbol in the Cordilleras is synonymous with good luck, but that could have arisen independently.

All throughout the Visayan folklore (most notably West Visayan, Cebuano, and Bicolano traditions), the Bakunawa is a large sea serpent that is the cause of earthquakes, storms, and so on. The large sea serpent is often viewed as the desired companion or energy wanted around the warship. It is my view that the symbolism of the reptile skin and the karakoa itself are inseparable. Traditionally, the canoe design would be tattooed vertically on the legs first - called a *labid*. Hundreds of formats have arisen over the centuries (specifically ours) but only a few original documents show how they may have looked.





Crocodile/Snake- As previously mentioned, I was taught that the ancient Visayans viewed serpents, the crocodile, and other reptiles as spirit messengers and represented the presence of the ancestors. Snakes were often taken on sea voyages to allow the will and wisdom of the ancestors to



Philippine Crocodile in Cologne Zoo, 2014/2015, CC0 public domain image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, user Vassil

be present on the journey. Reptiles were also respected for their strength and ferocity, which is why many warriors would have reptilian designs tattooed on their bodies to draw strength and protection from the spirit of these creatures.

The famous Kampilan sword found throughout the Philippines traditionally incorporates a bakunawa (sea serpent) or crocodile as the hilt as well, showing how even inland, where tattooing traditions have been completely eradicated, the spirit of these reptiles still resonates with warriors and martial artists. Overall, the traditional Visayan bodysuit in all its variants were meant to emulate not only clothing, but also the appearance of reptiles and contained many motifs that honored them. In the figures above, one can see the resemblance of these patterns to the scales on a crocodile's back, the pattern of snakeskin, or even the animal itself. Documents from the early colonial era describe Langi face designs as teeth tattooing on the jawline to represent the open mouth of a crocodile. Receiving these scale-like markings to represent these creatures showed reverence for the warrior spirit and ancestors which allowed one to receive their guidance.

The famous Kampilan sword found throughout the Philippines traditionally



Pintado warrior with leg tattoos and shield. Francisco Ignacio Alcina, 1668





Plant/Fern Design- Plants designs are interpreted as symbols of growth, fertility, and prosperity. These motifs have been found throughout the Philippine islands in textiles, tattoos, pottery, and even in barong Tagalog designs today. In the Cordilleras, these designs in tattoos are known as growing rice, medicinal plants/herbs, and as *pongo* designs (decorative heirloom beads). They traditionally represent ideas of abundance, fertility, healing, and growth.

Fortunately, with the Visayan flower designs, we see multiple styles that show detail in depicting different species, including hibiscus, lilies, and jasmine. Similarly, there were probably many ways to depict the various wild plants, trees, and crops throughout the islands. These designs were very likely subject to change as artistic exchange and trade became commonplace and more sophisticated throughout the centuries. Many of these designs can still be found in traditional clothing, weaving and pottery today. Plant designs such as the figure above also can represent local plants along riverbanks and are a form of paying homage to one's homeland. In accordance with neighboring tattooing traditions in Iban and Mentawai cultures, designs derived from nature brings one closer to their environment both spiritually and physically - being marked as a person from the land with symbols of the land.



Farmland in the Philippines, 2019, CC0 public domain image courtesy of Pixabay user fabersam





Teeth and Mountain Designs- To put it simply, triangles are one of the most basic shapes - not just in tattooing - but in all human art. In tattooing practices throughout the Philippines, this shape can be found as the base of many motifs, as standalone figures, repeated in rows, as mirrored images, and so on. In general, these designs are depicted as teeth, mountains, or less commonly as waves. These designs are found in many Austronesian styles of tattooing and are common across



Heavily tattooed Cebuano warrior,
Boxer Codex (1590), teeth motifs on the collar

the Philippines. For example, traditional Hawaiian tattooing features teeth in big bold repeating patterns. In the Visayas, these designs as teeth were meant to mimic those of crocodiles, sharks, snakes, and other feared or revered animals. They are also the most prominent repeating design in the Boxer Codex drawings.

Just like in the Cordilleras, the greatest show of status and strength was of covering oneself in the scales, teeth, or “armor” of fierce animals. Receiving teeth designs was meant to invoke the strength and ferocity of these mighty creatures. Documents from the early colonial era describe Langi face designs as teeth tattooing on the jawline to represent the open mouth of a crocodile. Such markings would demonstrate the skill and ferocity of a warrior receiving them and would serve to intimidate foes.





Bird Designs- Bird designs are commonplace across Austronesian tattooing. Birds play an important role in the creation stories of several ethnic groups in the Philippines, including Visayans.

According to (public domain source) *The Robertson Translations of the Pavon Manuscripts of 1838-1839*, Dr. James A. Robertson, University of Chicago, 1957, (#389, #391 p.3-p.4), Mangyan and Negrito folklore from the island of Mindoro features an important character, Manaul. This vengeful figure was imprisoned by his enemy King Tubluck Lawi. When Manaul finally escaped, he “declared himself the enemy” (Robertson, #389 p.3) of heaven and earth. As a result of his actions, Manaul eventually incurred the wrath of the sky god Kaptan, who began throwing down rocks from the heavens. Manaul (who was able to fly) dodged the rocks, leading to the creation of land, where Manaul eventually settled.

33

The manaul bird was again mentioned in Panay via the *Law of the Regulos* (Robertson, #189 p.21), a supposed legal document of the island from 1433. While the historicity of the document is highly suspect, it does contain some interesting points of discussion. According to the code, “all those who shall be beaten for two days who: ...kill the bird Manaul...” (Robertson #193, p.23). This code is now widely considered to be a fraudulent and created by historian Jose Marco in 1913, who provided the document to Robertson (see Robertson #17, p. iii). While a work of fiction, it is clear Marco drew inspiration from his knowledge of Visayan history and folklore, which can provide some insight into the mythic landscape of our ancestors.





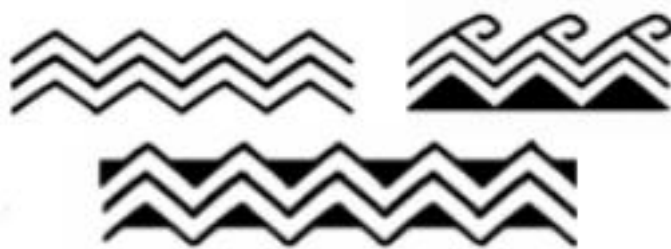
Other myths exist relating to Manaul. I was taught that, according to Tagalog folklore, a *tigmamanukan* (omen bird) Manaul was sent by the god Bathala to peck bamboo. As a result of the bamboo pecking, the first man and woman, Malakas and Maganda, were revealed when the bamboo opened. From these myths, it can be inferred that the figure of Manaul is commonplace in the Philippines, crossing ethnic and geographic boundaries, and that birds are very often linked to creation myths, the sacred, or supernatural entities.



A Black-Headed Seagull, a species found in the Philippines, 2017/2018,
CC0 public domain photo courtesy of Pixabay user manfredrichter

Birds are seen as travelers, messengers from the spirit realm, and as omens. In the Cordilleras, the Ifugao people had very clear motifs of birds on the chest and arms of the men. They were seen strongly as omen messengers there, showing which paths - or not - to hunt or travel. In the Visayas, the birds were seen more as spirit messengers, showing the ancient Visayan voyagers where to go for land. In my practice, I have seen an extension of the meaning of the bird, bringing together both the Kappi Crab design and the Visayan flower. Upon inspection, the stylized petals of the Visayan flower and the legs of the Kappi crab both resemble birds flying away from a central point of creation. In the old context, these birds could have symbolized traveling from home to new islands. In today's context, the bird motifs in the Visayan flower and Kappi crab have gone on to represent the Filipino diaspora, the immigrants and children of immigrants who have left the home islands of the Philippines in search of new lives and opportunities.





Waves and Wind- As seafaring people, the Visayans interacted with the sea and other waterways daily. Fishing, trade, warfare, and travel were conducted on the waves, and it took a great deal of knowledge and experience to master the seas. The Visayan people were known to be everything from great sailors and traders to feared pirates as illustrated earlier. Sailing required a deep knowledge of ocean currents, star navigation, and working with the flow of the wind.

Waves and wind, therefore, were important symbols to the Visayans. They not only held practical meaning for our ancestors, but a lot of spiritual weight regarding the flow of energy or spirit. These designs symbolically draw attention to one's own "flow" in life and the search for harmony. These water symbols also represent movement and transformation. 'Zig zag' designs such as these are common throughout Austronesian and Polynesian culture, representing movement and life. They also represent ancestral pathways taken both on land and sea. For thousands of years our ancestors were able to traverse vast waterways and tame the land they inhabited, and they passed this knowledge down to their descendants. The markings shown above honor this knowledge and assist the bearer of these marks in finding the right direction in life and, more practically, during physical journeys.





Historical Attestations of Visayan Tattooing



36

Tattooed Visayan Men, Boxer Codex, 1590

Highly decorated warriors of Cebuano or Waray decent. This style of tattoo is popular in modern renditions of the famous Lapu Lapu, who was more than likely to have similar markings.





Tattooed Visayan Man and Woman with stretched ears, Boxer Codex, 1590

Most likely nobility of Cebuano or Waray decent. It's been noted before that the woman on the right is in mourning due to her cut hair and lack of jewelry.





Datu and Binukot, Ignacio Francisco Alcina, 1668

A Binukot is a maiden secluded from the outdoors and society and studies song, dance, and weaving to be prized by martial suitors and be offered a large dowry. Close examination of the illustration reveals that her left hand is tattooed, and the man's legs, arm, and face are tattooed.





Lower class Visayans, Ignacio Francisco Alcina, 1668

The caption above each figure identifies them as “Esolava/Esolavo” possibly meaning “servant” or “slave”. The woman appears to have no tattoos and large earrings, but the man is adorned with intricate tattoos that are like the Boxer Codex “Pintados” but with more vertical bands around the limbs and a wider variety of patterns.





Excerpt From:

Blair and Robertson

The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898: Volume XII, 1601-1604, 1904

PEDRO CHIRINO

*Sent to our very reverend Father Claudio Aquaviva, general of that
Society, by Father Pedro Chirino, procurator for those islands*

“The people of the Bisayas are called the Pintados, because they are actually adorned with pictures--not because this is natural to them, although they are well built, of pleasing countenance, and white; but because they adorn their bodies with figures from head to foot, when they are young and have sufficient strength and energy to suffer the torment of the tattooing; and formerly they tattooed themselves when they had performed some act of valor. They tattoo themselves by pricking the skin until the blood comes, with sharp, delicate points, according to designs and lines which are first drawn by those who practice this art; and upon this freshly-bleeding surface they apply a black powder, which is never effaced. They do not tattoo the body all at the same time, but by degrees, so that the process often lasts a long time; in ancient times, for each part which was to be tattooed the person must perform some new act of bravery or valiant deed. The tattooed designs are very ingenious, and are well adapted to those members or parts whereon they are placed. During my stay in the Filipinas, I was wont to say, in my satisfaction and admiration for the fine appearance of those natives, that if one of them were brought to Europe much money could be made by exhibiting him. Children are not tattooed, and the women tattoo all of one hand and part of the other.”





Tattooing in Luzon

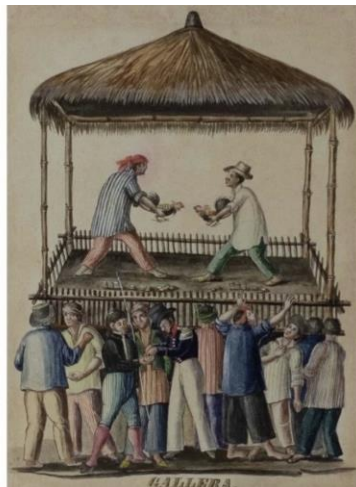
Introduction to Luzon

Luzon is the largest and northernmost major island in the Philippines and is also home to the capital of Manila. Luzon has been the site of many past civilizations, kingdoms, and cultural enclaves. Luzon, presently and historically, can be separated by the coastal regions and the mountainous interior--also known as the Cordilleras region, which is home to many of the Philippines' indigenous ethnic groups.

The coastal and interior regions of the island differ widely due to cultural and lifestyle reasons. Specifically, the ethnic groups inhabiting the mountainous region, under the umbrella term Ifugao, had little to no contact with the colonial Spanish and therefore maintained many of their cultural practices, such as rural communal living, clan warfare and headhunting, and pre-Christian religion. They were known to stay secluded even before Spanish arrival, coming down from the mountains mainly to trade, if at all. On the other



Photograph of possibly a group of Datus or high-status men, ca. 1898



Left: Tagalog man and woman; Right: Image of a cockfight
José Honorato Lozano, 1821-1885

hand, coastal ethnic groups such as the Ilokano and Kampampanga were introduced to Spanish colonization and Christianity early in the colonial period. As a result, Spanish and Western culture, political systems, and religion have heavily shaped the way of life for coastal and metropolitan people. However, from the sources we have, it can be determined that tattooing traditions among lowland Ilokanos, for example, were like





those found in the Cordilleras region prior to their abandoning of the practice. Juan Pacheco Maldonado, speaking on the Ilocos region, said of the people, “the greater number of the people are Mahometan Moros and Indians; besides other Indians who tattoo themselves in the fashion of their ancestors” (E.H. Blair, *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1803, Volume III, 1569-1576*, 1904). The Tagalog people, the major ethnic group in the region surrounding the capital of Manila, have long forgone tattooing - if they ever had a strong tattooing tradition in the first place.

Fortunately, archaeological records, anthropological studies, and still-living practitioners of the tattooing arts have allowed for us to know a great deal about tattooing traditions in Luzon, especially in the Cordilleras.



Tagalog nobles from Boxer Codex, 1590

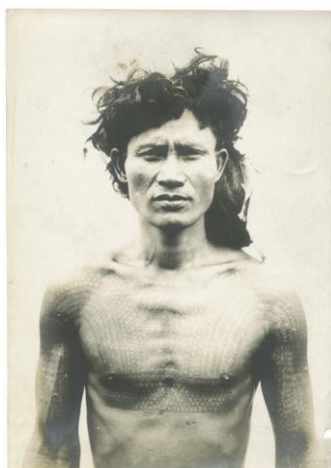




Luzon Motifs/Patterns

Unlike with Visayan tattooing, tattooing in Luzon persists to the present day thanks to Apo-Whang Od, her apprentices, and revivalists in the Philippines and abroad continuing the tradition. Therefore, we have a much better idea of what the motifs and patterns in Cordillera's tattooing signify. However, we do not have this luxury regarding the coastal tattooing traditions that existed in the pre-colonial period, and thus we must make educated and respectful assumptions based on the information we have available to us.

Specifically, regarding Ilocanos, much of the extremely little we know of their tattooing traditions comes from a brief mention by Juan Pacheco Maldonado (shown later in the text). Maldonado may not have even been referring to Ilocanos specifically. Being a coastal people and subject to foreign influence, Ilocanos most likely stopped the practice of tattooing due to continued Spanish influence and conversion to Christianity. Many of the patterns found in the tattoos of highland groups (which had maintained independence from the Spanish) near the Ilocos region very closely resemble patterns used in Ilocano

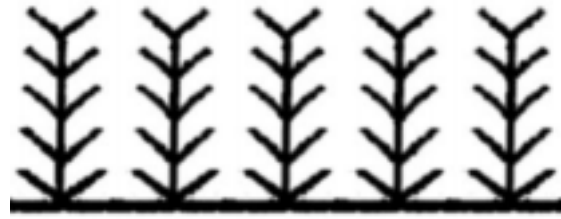


Kalinga man with *Chatlag* tattoos (look closely as black and white image washes out tattoos), ca. 1900

textiles. Therefore, it can be assumed that Ilocano tattooing, when it existed, was nearly identical to that of the highland region further inland. The designs below are

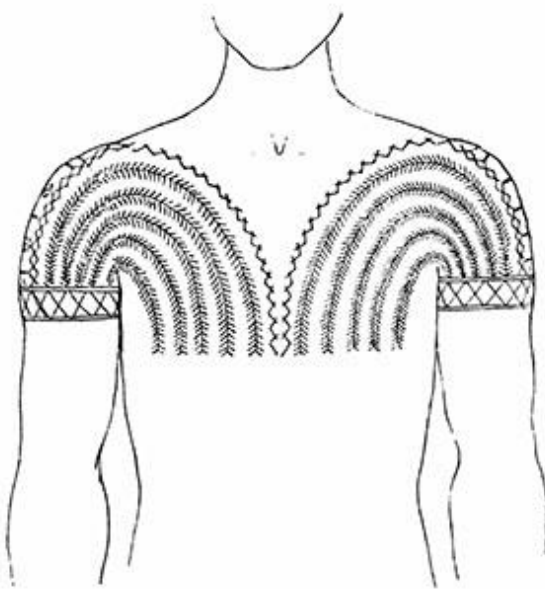
comprised of Ilocano and Cordillera motifs based on folklore, documentation, tattooing traditions, and motifs in neighboring cultures (both within the Philippines and in other regions such as Borneo, Taiwan, Micronesia, and Polynesia), my research, and traditions taught to me by my teachers.





Plant Designs- Common across the Philippines, plant design tattoos are especially prominent in Luzon. Specifically, these tattoos are called *pongo* among the Bontoc and Ifugao peoples, and resemble triangles, plants, water, or diamonds on the arms. Many of these same designs feature heavily in textiles and pottery. As markings on the skin, *pongo* can represent the wealth, prosperity, and status of an individual, sometimes resembling arm-rings, bracelets, and other jewelry.

In the Cordilleras, one's status in the village community is of great importance. Many tattoos, especially for men, are only earned upon completion of rites of passage or success in

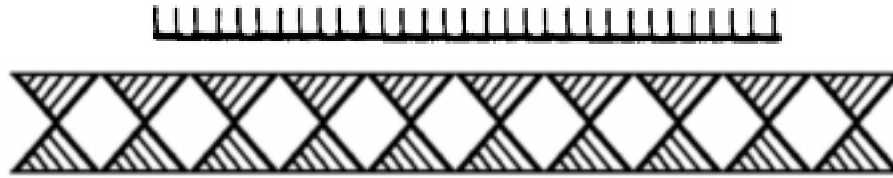


Kalinga *Chatlag* Illustration by Hans Meyer, 1885

battle. In essence, these markings function to show others that the individual is an accomplished adult, worthy of respect. If someone bears markings of wealth and status, it is likely they have accomplished a great deal in their life and are widely respected by their peers for their prowess in battle, wisdom in handling communal affairs, and overall character.

Variations in the plant design can also signify where the tattooed individual is from if the plants tattooed are specific to the region or are simply the preference of the client or artistic liberties taken by the artist.





Rice/Crop Designs- Rice is the main crop in the Cordilleras region of Luzon and is a staple food source in the Philippines. As the lifeblood of the community, there are countless symbols of rice and all aspects of it found in tattooing. Rice designs are not only common in tattoos, but also textiles. Rice designs cover the entire lifecycle of rice, from planting, to harvesting, to feeding the family and community. Symbolically, rice designs represent abundance, fertility, and family. Diamond shaped designs are meant to resemble bundles of drying rice and carry the symbolic meaning of the *mata*--the all-seeing eyes of the ancestors. Sometimes similar designs are meant to represent other crops or plants than rice.

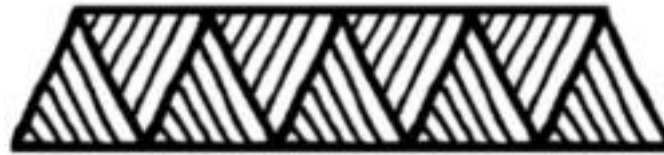


Bontoc Woman with rice motif tattoos,
early 1900s

Rice is so important to the people of the Cordilleras that the region has become world famous for the local people's ability to grow and harvest it. This is due in large part to the staggering rice terraces found in the Cordilleras, built with simple hand tools over many generations. Many rice terraces in the Cordilleras are now World Heritage Sites.

Harvesting and preparing rice is an especially important task for Cordillera women. Kalinga women, for example, have the essential task of pounding rice to remove the hull on the grains, allowing it to be processed into a more edible form.

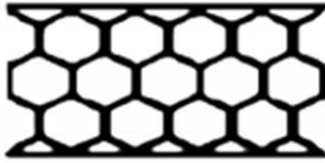




Banig/Weaving Design- The *banig* or weaving design is a universal pattern that exists all over the world in many forms of art. Nearly all groups of people in the world have a practice of weaving to make clothing, furniture, baskets, rope, décor, textiles, structures, and countless other practical and decorative items. In the spiritual beliefs of many cultures, weaving is seen as divine in the metaphysical sense, in that all of existence is interconnected like woven strands.

In the Philippines, the *banig* motif represents braids and woven fibers, drawing inspiration from textiles, floor mats, and other woven items. Symbolically, the *banig* pattern is meant to represent the strong bonds between families and clans needed to hold society together. Specifically, the woven floor mats found in many traditional homes in Luzon literally support the family above them, thus informing the meaning of the *banig* pattern in Cordillera tattoos. Many traditional homes are also roofed with materials that have been woven together to keep out the elements, as are walls, fences, and other structures bound together with rope or woven fibers. Therefore, the *banig* pattern also represents protection, shelter, and security.





Weaving, Snakeskin, Fruit Skin Design - One of the most well-known motifs throughout the Cordilleras, the hexagonal or “honeycomb” pattern is found across the Philippines. Known by many names, this design’s interpretations vary widely based on region and ethnic group. Some interpretations include this design representing the all-seeing eyes of the ancestors, the scales of a snake or centipede (both highly revered animals) -- representing avatars of the anito, human figures woven together to represent one’s family and ancestral lineage, fishing traps, or the skin of rattan fruit--representing growth and fertility.

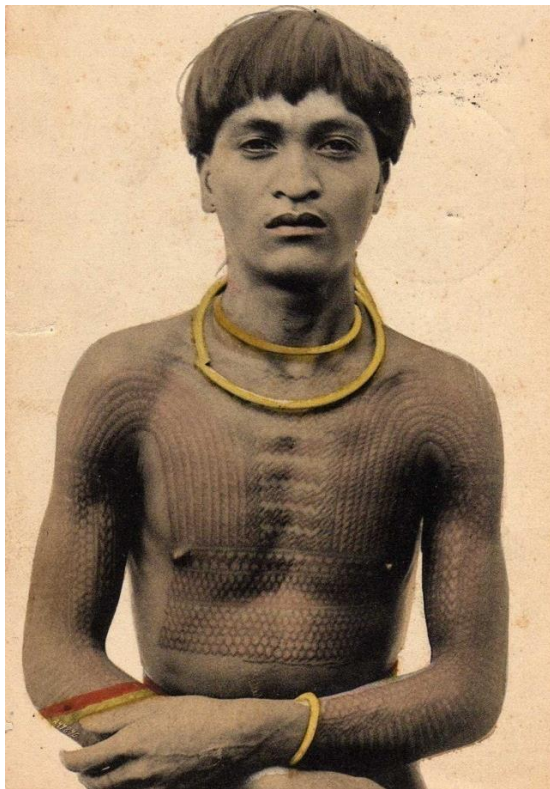


Image of a young, tattooed Igorot man from a 1908 post card



Head of a Python, CC0 public domain image courtesy of Circe Denyer, date unknown (likely late 2010s), publicdomainpictures.net





Crab Design- The ‘kappi crab’ design was once absent from tattooing in the Philippines, but Apo-Whang Od has popularized it again in modern times. The crab design can be found from Northern Luzon to the Manobo people of Mindanao, and throughout the Polynesian and Austronesian worlds. The crab design has many ties to mythology, fishermen, creation stories, and specific deities throughout the islands. Specifically, this design represents Angalo the Giant, who is the ancestor of the Ilokano people (and features in some Visayan myths as well). When in a row, the kappi crab resembles python and crocodile skin. Whang Od calls this design ‘the traveler’ - the crab travels far but always keep home on its back. I have found this to be a powerful symbol of the diaspora through my own practice - drawing on the various original meanings of this design. The arms and legs of the crab represent birds flying out in all four cardinal directions. These birds symbolize how our parents, grandparents, and other relatives left our home islands to start new lives elsewhere. The body of the crab represents the mother ocean and the islands we came from - reminding us not to forget our origins.





Teeth-Designs- The ‘teeth-like patterns’ as they’re called in Kalinga are found all throughout Austro-Malaysian culture in pottery, textiles, tattoos, and so on. Often, they represent the teeth of crocodiles, bird beaks, snake teeth, or mountains. The meanings from village to village can differ, but generally these patterns symbolize protection, defense, and ferocity. In Central and Northern Luzon, these designs function as a defense against evil spirits- they stop to count the teeth and become too disoriented to do harm.

As is the case with many designs, it is important to note that these teeth motifs can carry several meanings simultaneously, with each meaning bearing significance to the wearer of the markings. For example, a warrior could have the teeth motif tattooed to show ferocity and power on the battlefield, but also have them symbolize the mountains around his village. When put in conjunction with many other motifs, an individual’s personal story and journey become evident on the skin.



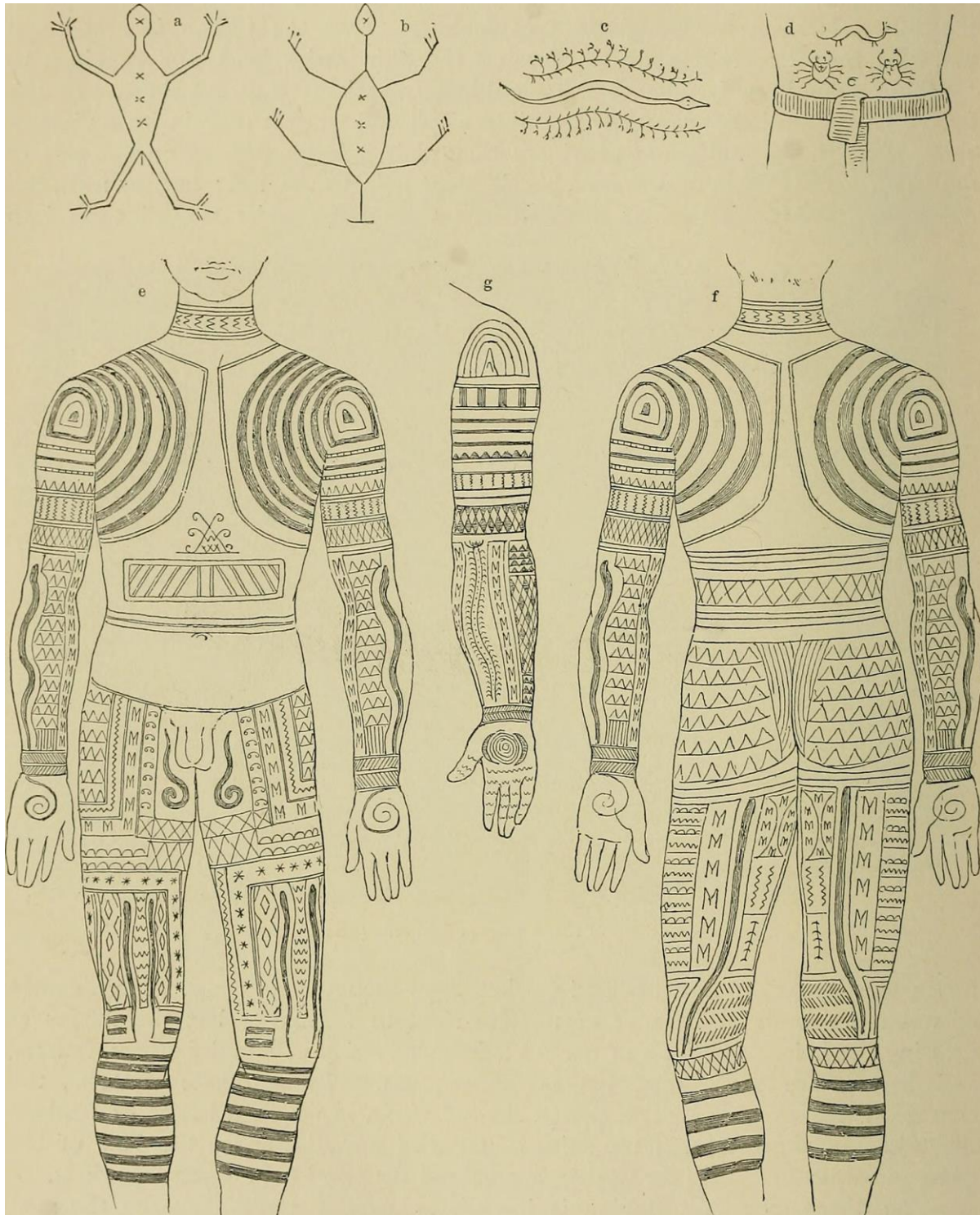


Stripes- The stripe designs are my tribute to the various designs found on pottery and textiles throughout the Philippines-- most notably in Ilokano art. In the Cordilleras, large geometric stripes cover the arms of a strong warrior. On the mummified body of Apo Anno and other tribal leaders from centuries past, large black stripes are featured on their legs. Like most designs from this region, the meanings and variations can change from village to village. Traditionally, they represent the steps and rows of rice terraces, but also represent endurance and strength. Stripes can also symbolize boundaries between worlds, such as those between the living and spirit world, civilization and the wild, or between the Earth and the heavens.



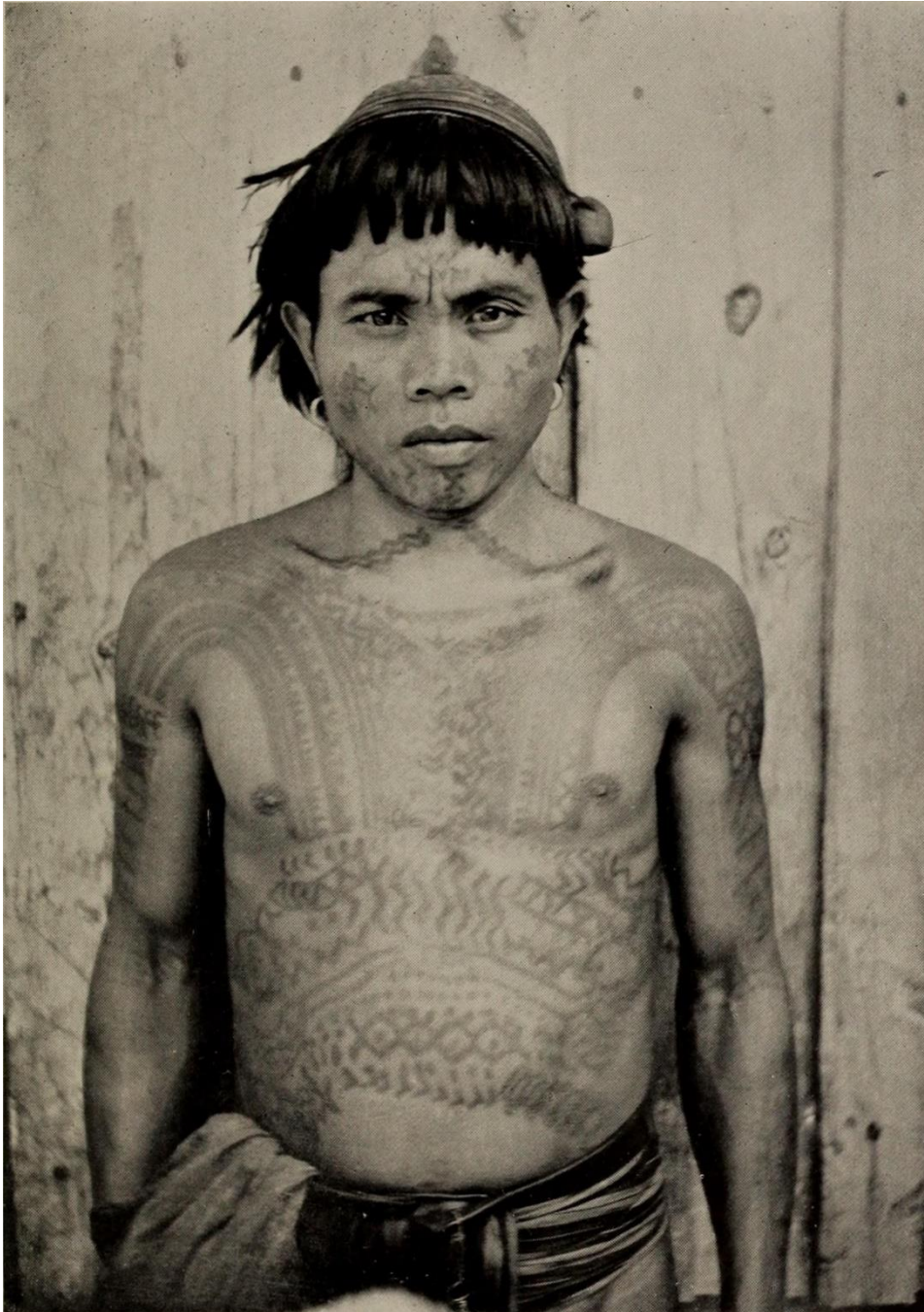


Historical Attestations of Luzon Tattooing



Hans Meyer's illustration of Apo Anno's tattoos and of other ancient leaders, 1880s. Apo Anno is a famous mummy from the Philippines and among the Cordillera Kankanaey people. According to local Kankanaey legend, Apo Anno is viewed as both a revered ancestor and a demigod. You can see a variety of different patterns like birds, crops, snakes, and teeth represented in the tattoos.







Excerpt From:

E.H. Blair

The Philippine Islands, 1493-1803, Volume III, 1569-1576, 1904

LETTER FROM JUAN PACHECO MALDONADO TO FELIPE II

“The governor was diligent in reconnoitering the said island, which he found to be very rich in many gold mines, which the natives improve and work, especially in the province called Ylucos [Ilocos].

The latter [Ilocos] is very fertile, abounding in provisions: rice, fowls, swine, goats, buffaloes, deer, and many kinds of lake-birds, all in great abundance. In this island there are many provinces, and in each one of them there are different tongues and customs. The greater number of the people are Mahometan Moros and Indians; besides other Indians who tattoo themselves in the fashion of their ancestors, and invoke the demon. They have no native king. Certain of the richest individual chiefs rule the country. They wage war with one another, take prisoners in their wars, enslave them, and sell them from province to province.”





Tattooing in Mindanao

Introduction to Mindanao

Mindanao is the southernmost major island in the Philippines, second in size only to Luzon. Mindanao is home to many indigenous ethnic groups. Like the rest of the Philippines, Mindanao has a complex cultural history that has been shaped by native and foreign influence for many centuries. This is particularly true for influence from Borneo, as Mindanao lies in very close proximity to Borneo.

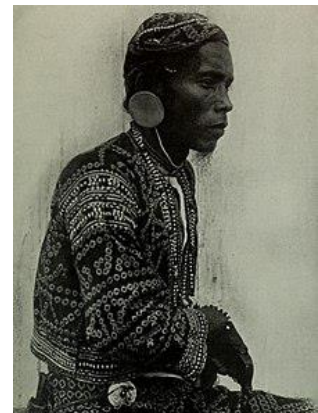


Unlike other regions, much of the southwest of Mindanao was under the dominion of Islamic sultanates for centuries, and these powers resisted Spanish colonization all the way until the Philippines were granted to the United States after the Spanish-American War. While Spain was able to attain some degree of geographic dominance in Mindanao, their rule was never nearly as complete as it was in the rest of the Philippines. With this being the case, foreign, non-Spanish influence remained strong in Mindanao and is reflected in the ethnic and cultural diversity in Mindanao today. Additionally, the Muslim Moro people, who inhabit Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, and Palawan, form the largest non-Christian population in the Philippines.

54

Among the indigenous people of Mindanao, the Lumad are one of the largest indigenous groups not only in the southern island, but in all the Philippines. Lumad is a Cebuano word officially being adopted by the indigenous people of Mindanao in the 1980s meaning “native.” Much like in Luzon, indigenous groups living in the high mountainous regions of Mindanao were often removed from the politics of the lowlands and retained their independence and many of their cultural traditions.

Unfortunately, in the present day, many of these indigenous people are facing oppression and struggles due to loss of



Bagobo Chief, 1904 St. Louis World's Fair





ancestral lands, decreasing population, armed conflict with other ethnic groups, and discrimination at the hands of the government. In recent years, Lumad communities have been faced with extrajudicial killings, land seizure by the government and corporations, conflict with Moros who claim the same land, the murder of indigenous leaders, and the harassment of indigenous activists. Armed conflicts between the communist New People's Army and the government Armed Forces of the Philippines also endanger Lumad communities. Sadly, Mindanao has been ranked as one of the most dangerous places in the world for indigenous people. However, appreciation for indigenous crafts abroad, such as T'boli *t'nalak* weaving, has brought awareness of indigenous cultures in Mindanao and the need to preserve them. Additionally, organizations within the Lumad community and NGOs have brought international attention to the challenges faced by the Lumad and are striving to educate indigenous people on how to protect their rights, property, and culture.

History of Lumads

In about the 11th century, the interactions and cultural exchange between the indigenous groups native to Mindanao and migrants from the Visayas resulted in the emergence of new distinct ethnic groups in Mindanao. Pigafetta, who was the chronicler during Magellan's voyage, noted in 1521 the presence of various ethnic groups on the island.

55

During the early Spanish colonial period, these natives were called *infieles* (infidels). To the Spanish, bringing the *infieles* under control of the Crown and the Church was just as much a priority as subduing the Muslim population. Therefore, Jesuit missions were established near *infieles* territories.

Historically, Lumads practiced slash and burn agriculture depending on the land's productivity. Resources harvested from the land, which were viewed as sacred, were dispersed among the community. The belief in the divinity of nature and its gifts defined the Lumad relationship with the environment. Socio-political arrangements varied based upon tribe and ethnic group. Among some groups, the warrior class held the highest rank in society. Among most Lumads, a Datu held the position of authority.

Due to the isolated nature of the hills and forests where they dwelt, Lumads were difficult for the Spanish to subdue. Therefore, the Spanish colonial strategy was to dominate the coastal regions and plains for purposes of trade and political dominance in more heavily populated areas. This also served to isolate the Lumads further and raised tensions between the Lumads and the Spanish. During the Philippine Revolution of 1896, Lumads joined with revolutionary guerilla forces who started a revolt against the Spanish in Marawi City.





Portrait of possibly a Moro Datu and Moro woman, ca. 1900





Bagobo Woman, St. Louis World's Fair, 1904



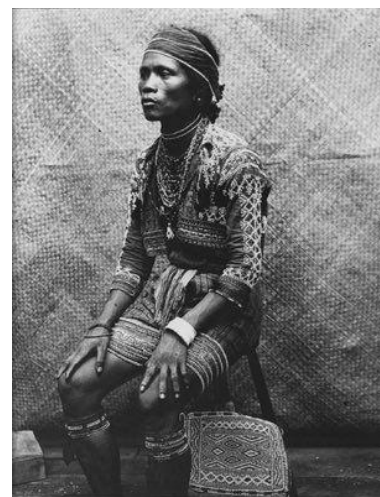


Mindanao Motifs/Patterns

Mindanao is often forgotten when we talk about Filipino culture – pre-colonial or post-colonial. The story of Mindanao and the surrounding islands is very different from the rest of the Philippines. Out of respect for the indigenous people of Mindanao, I will keep this section brief, given that tattooing traditions among the various indigenous ethnic groups are closely guarded – however, locals are very open to sharing certain traditions with mindful visitors. Therefore, I will present what information is appropriate to share and provide a few direct examples of Manobo (one of the major indigenous ethnic groups) tattooing from the region.

Tattooing for the Manobo is called *pang-o-tub*, and in contrast to tattooing in the rest of the Philippines, is conducted with a “cut and rub” method, which involves making incisions with a *burong* blade and then rubbing soot/pigment into the cuts.

Manobo tattoos have several meanings depending upon the individual and circumstance. Foremost, tattoos are an identifying mark for the tribe. Women, who are often tattooed around the midsection, consider tattoos as a rite of passage to complete their transition into adult womanhood. Other tattoos are meant to provide strength and endurance. Tattoos also carry the significance of serving as guiding lights in the afterlife, which has similarities to myths from the Visayas. Additionally, of course, tattoos also have aesthetic, ornamental purposes for the Manobo people. I have included on the following pages a few examples of Manobo tattooing for the reader’s reference.



Portrait of a Bagobo chief, 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair



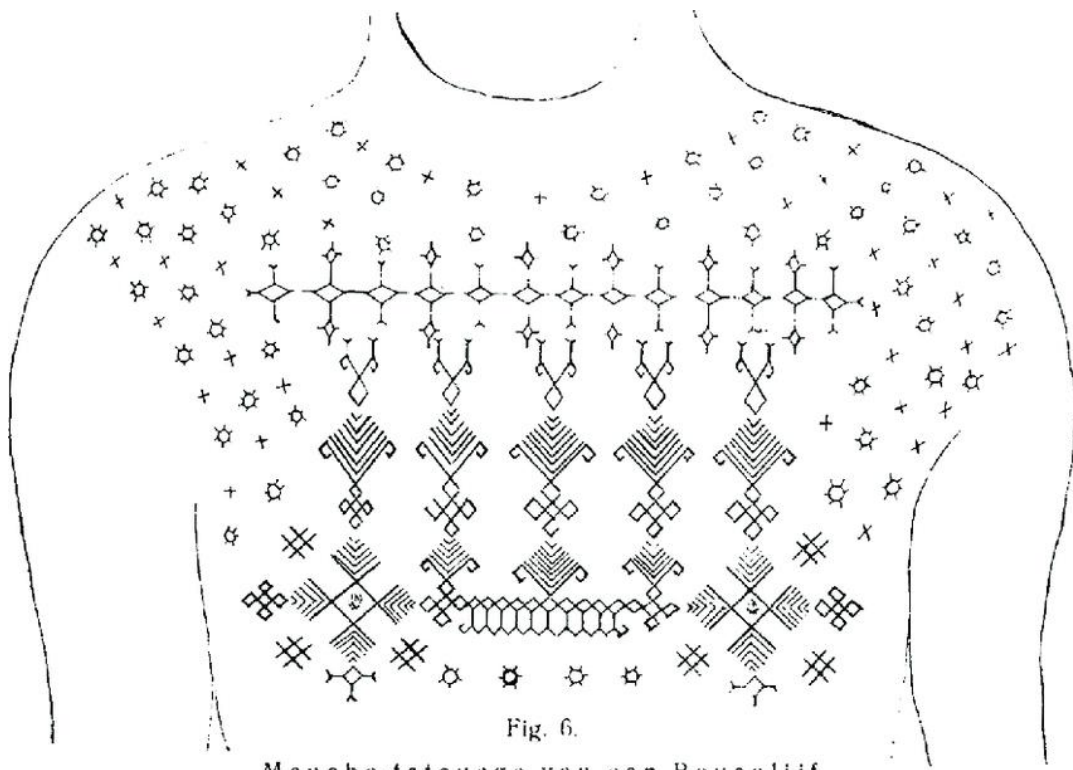
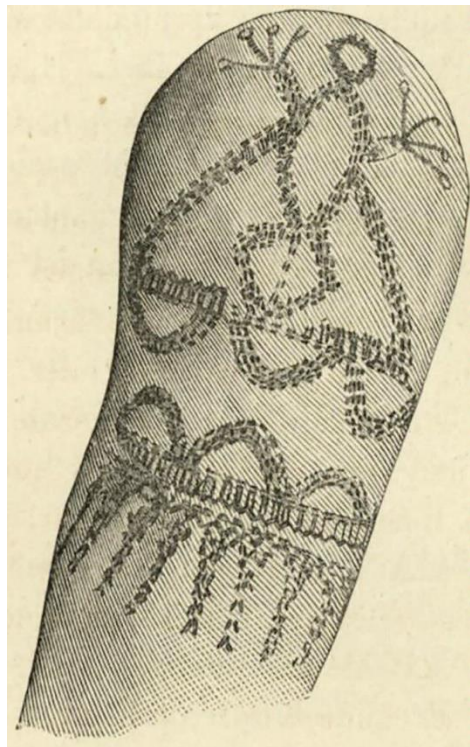


Fig. 6.

Manobo-tatouage van een Bovenlijf

Illustration of a Manobo chest piece, depicting a night sky above the sea, from Antonius van Odijk (1925) Source: an Agusan Manobo Chest Tattoo

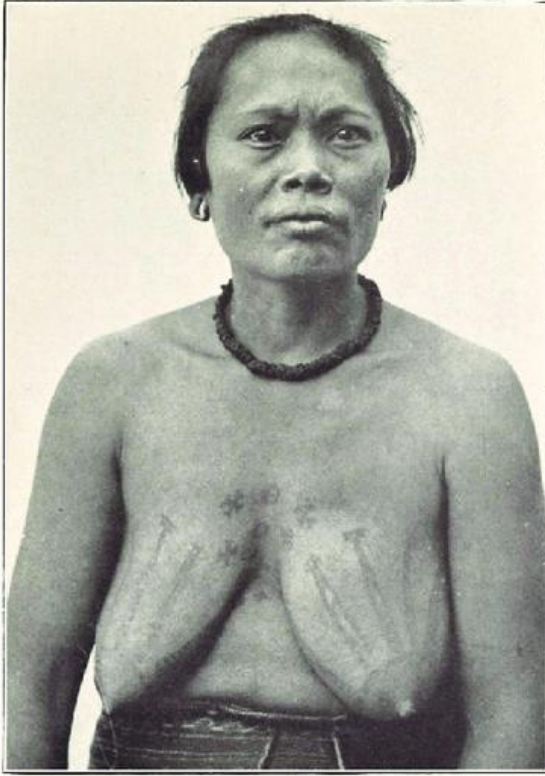


Bagobo (a branch of Manobo) Tattoo on the Upper Arm, from Alexander Schadenberg (1885)





PLATE 1



a



b

Agusan Manobo Designs, from John Garvan, public domain image courtesy of USGPO/US Government Publishing Office, Formerly US Government Printing Office at time of photograph (1931)



Breast Ornament Designs, *The Wild Tribes of Davao District*, Mindanao, 1913



Moro Shield, David P. Barrows, 1905





Contemporary Revival



Filipino tattooing and traditional culture in general are currently undergoing a revival both in the Philippines proper and among the diaspora, especially in the United States. The internet and social media have allowed for a massive transfer of information about the past and current tattooing traditions that would have required access to university libraries in the past. With this knowledge in hand, more and more people are beginning to learn about and embrace traditional tattooing culture from the Philippines.

61

The revival is particularly important for members of the diaspora, who by nature of living away from the homeland are often in search for ways to reconnect with their culture. Often, grandparents and parents discouraged learning about such things for their children to assimilate into the culture of wherever they immigrated to. Unfortunately, this led to a mass feeling of emptiness and separation among the diaspora, which was already heightened due to the realities and impact of colonialism in the Philippines. With thriving communities forming online and practitioners promoting tattooing and other traditional arts and lifeways, members of the diaspora are now able to connect with their heritage and culture in a way that forwards tradition while living in the modern world.

Due to the demands of assimilation, and the separation of thousands of miles and several generations from the homeland, many diasporic Filipinos have little knowledge of their ancestors in the Philippines. It is not uncommon for Filipinos to only be able to go back to their grandparents' generation before things become unclear. Include the fact that Filipinos over centuries have moved from island to island for various reasons, and that the islands are home to





numerous ethnolinguistic groups, it becomes even harder for diasporic Filipinos to get in touch with their roots. It is important to remember that this does not mean obtaining a DNA test is the difference between being a member of a culture or not. DNA tests are a modern phenomenon and can also be inaccurate or ambiguous. The reality of cultural identity is far more nuanced, and nothing can replace the individual's lived experience of a culture.

Contemporary Filipino tattooing--modern, yet based on traditional culture, motifs, and academic research, is one of the ways that diasporic Filipinos have found to reconnect with their ancestors and their homeland, even if they are unsure of all the details. These markings also serve to strengthen us as a community striving to honor the old ways and bring ancient wisdom into relevance in the modern era. Over the course of generations, tattooed Filipinos both in the Philippines and abroad will be able to form a new, strong foundation of this traditional art form and ensure that it survives and thrives well into the future.

I have included on the following pages some of my original contemporary designs for the benefit of the reader.



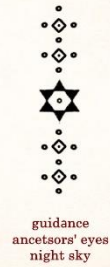
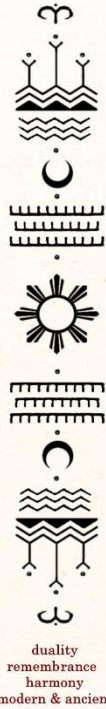
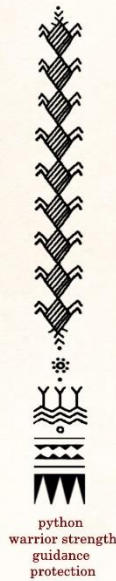
Examples of Contemporary Motifs

MINIMALIST FILIPINO TATTOO DESIGNS

BASED ON TRADITIONAL TATTOO, POTTERY,
AND TEXTILE MOTIFS FOUND THROUGHOUT THE ETHNIC GROUPS OF LUZON, VISAYAS, MINDANAO.

THESE MOTIFS WERE DESIGNED TO REPRESENT THE TRADITIONAL LIFE OF AUSTRONESIAN CULTURE, NATURE, AND THE DUALITY IN LIFE WE LEARN FROM THE SEA AND SKY, NIGHT AND DAY, LIFE AND DEATH.

THE ADDED DESCRIPTIONS IN RED ARE TO GIVE MORE DETAIL INTO THE INTENTION BEHIND EACH DESIGN.

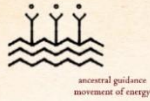


MINIMALIST CONTEMPORARY FILIPINO TATTOOS

BASED ON TRADITIONAL TATTOO, POTTERY,
AND TEXTILE MOTIFS FOUND THROUGHOUT THE ETHNIC GROUPS OF LUZON, VISAYAS, MINDANAO.

THESE MOTIFS WERE DESIGNED TO REPRESENT NATURE AND THE DUALITY IN IT THAT WE LEARN FROM.
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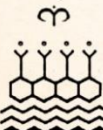
ancestral guidance
movement of energy



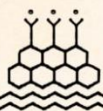
ancestral guidance
movement of energy
(sun energy)



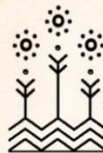
ancestral guidance
movement of energy
(moon energy)



ancestral guidance
movement of energy
strength
growth



ancestral guidance
community/family
flowing energy



stars in the sky on a mountain
ancestral energy
celestial energy



strength
growth
stability
spiritual guidance



spirit of duality
cycles
flowing energy



rice fields / crops after rain
growth
abundance
fertility
cycles



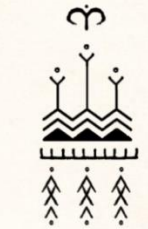
honoring homelands
growth
remembrance
healing



cycle of a harvest
growth
cycles
duality
traditions
harmony



spirit of duality
cycles



animal omens
flowing energy
stability
harmony



day and night duality
ancestral guidance
cycles
harmony



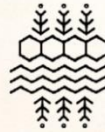
growth
healing
flowing energy



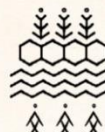
growth
healing
flowing energy
(sun energy)



growth
healing
flowing energy
(moon energy)



plants that grow in rough soil
plants that grow in rough waters
stability and perseverance



abundant fishing grounds
fertility
flowing energy
natural order



ancestral guidance
duality
pathways





Conclusion



Filipino tattooing is an ancient and complex practice that, when studied, sometimes leads to more questions than answers. Much of what we know is based on secondhand information, and in the age of the internet and social media, misinformation can be spread rapidly. Fortunately, there are good sources that exist, including individuals in the Philippines still practicing the old ways, that can help us separate fact from fiction.

Part of what makes Filipino tattooing special is the emphasis on the deep, spiritual meaning of certain patterns and motifs that goes beyond mere aesthetic value. Not only are these tattoos beautiful when executed properly, but they also tell the story of one's life and one's people on the skin. Receiving and studying these tattoos forces one to look within to receive the ancestral wisdom of the past and learn how to carry this sacred knowledge and experience into the future.

My hope is that this short reference book has allowed the reader to learn more about the meanings of Filipino tattoo motifs and, if they have already received markings, find an even deeper connection with their ancestral culture. For those who have yet to receive markings, I hope this work has allowed them to gather the confidence and knowledge necessary to perhaps one day have their people's story told on their skin.

Maraming Salamat, Mabuhay, and Many Blessings to you!

Ayla Roda

