



# Tattoos between Psychological Significance and Religious Perspective

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**How to cite this paper:** Djemel, B. (2023) Tattoos between Psychological Significance and Religious Perspective. *Open Access Library Journal*, 10: e10088. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1110088>

**Received:** March 30, 2023

**Accepted:** May 14, 2023

**Published:** May 17, 2023

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## Abstract

In this study, I have dealt with the phenomenon of tattoo from a psychological perspective as an attempt to find out the extent of its spread in the Algerian society and to analyze it and its symbolism psychologically. The study was conducted on a sample of 145 cases of different ages and sexes. We relied on the clinical interview and direct scientific observation. In addition, this study has come up with different and various psychological symbols and meanings of tattoo.

## Subject Areas

Psychology

## Keywords

Tattoo, Psychological, Symbols, Religious

## 1. Introduction

Tattoo is a dangerous phenomenon that spreads among young people.

It is related to psychological disorder and behavioral deviation, as a tattooed person expresses his/her discontent and distinction in society and blindly copies artists, heroes, and celebrities, such as singers, actors or athletes.

This phenomenon has been proven in societies and civilizations over time for several factors and reasons. I have tried to study this phenomenon from a psychological perspective. What is a tattoo? What are the reasons leading to make it? What are its clinical symbols for psychologists?

## 2. Definition of Tattoo

The dictionary defines “Tattoo” as an act of sticking a needle on a body with

spraying “dates” on it to make drawings and lines in it, *i.e.*, using needles to insert ink under skin to form symbols of words or drawings that have meanings related to its owner.

### 3. Root of the Word

“Tattoo” refers to the word “Tato” in the Tahitian language, which means “putting a mark”. This custom is very old and dates back to many years BC. It was practiced by many people and civilizations, such as the Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, etc., for the purpose of beautifying the body (Adrian Mayo. 1999 p. 75) [1].

Tattoos symbolize to identifying identity and social status, demonstrating religious standards, obtaining membership in a private or national group, or getting rid of sorcery and witchcraft.

### 4. History of Tattoos

Going back to the roots of this phenomenon, we find that tattoos have been known for thousands of years and have been used by ancient people for several purposes in the past. The tattoo was related to the pagan religions, which spread in the East and West, as the tattoo expresses their religious symbols and the shapes of their gods. It was also used as a talisman against death and against the evil eye and to protect against witchcraft. Also, primitive beliefs defined it as crows for self-food in front of the gods. Moreover, the Arabs used it as a means of adornment and beautification and a symbol of distinguishing and belonging to a tribe, and the ancient Egyptians used it as a remedy that prevented envy.

The phenomenon of tattooing was once widespread. In “The Descent of Man” (1871) Charles Darwin wrote that there was no country in the world that did not practice tattooing or some other form of permanent body decoration (Amy Oison 2010 p 01) [2].

### 5. Youth and Tattoos

Very boring free time - Lack of confidence and safety from people around them - Non-having a national and religious culture, Unfeeling of the value of life. Therefore, the responsibility lies with the parents before children because they neglect following-up their children and observing their behaviors. Recent studies have linked tattoos to behavioral disorders, as it has found that the majority of people who get tattoos suffer from disorders, deviations and mental problems.

There are many reasons why young North Americans get tattoos. A tattoo can be part of a group’s uniform. It can be a sign of fashion. It can be an expression of individuality. The decision to get a tattoo is most often a result of the influence of friends or media or the desire to express oneself (Charlotte Sheldrake, 2005 p. 01) [3].

### 6. Types of Tattoos

The American Dermatology Association has identified several types of tattoos

based on tattooing method, machines used in it, the traditional method, and the injury. The tattoos types are as follow.

### **6.1. Wounded Tattoos “Natural”**

It is a tattoo formed as a result of the dust of coal and gunpowder or some materials, such as asphalt, so these materials cause deep wounds. These wounds occur as a result of an accident, for example. The wounds spread over several layers of the skin leaving scars that are difficult to get rid of.

### **6.2. Professional Tattoos “Amateur Tattoos”**

This type is done by technicians specialized in tattoos and is characterized by its clarity and unity. The colors used in it are red, yellow, green and blue which injected by a machine called “tatto gun”. As for amateur tattoos, it is done by a person himself/herself or his/her friend.

### **6.3. Identification Tattoo**

People were forcibly tattooed. An example of tattoos used for identification is prisoners in camps, who were tattooed to be distinguished among armies, such as Nazis and Roman gladiators. Also, many people who were exported in the event of defection or fleeing were tattooed with the words “Stop me. I have fled”, and other symbols of identity.

### **6.4. Cosmetic Tattoos**

This type is used for cosmetic purposes, as this type of tattoos is made to change skin’s color, to enhance eyebrows and lips or to draw dots and other symbols on skin.

### **6.5. Medical Tattoos**

Medical tattoos are used to determine a body area in radiotherapy, which depends on repeating the treatment on the same area more than one time and is used to draw an aura as a form of breast reconstruction. This type of tattoos is also used to put medical signs of pregnancy and vitiligo disease, such as blood symbol and medical condition. Also, it is used to color skin areas affected by that disease.

## **7. Tattooing Process**

In some ancient societies, tattoos were made by cutting designs of skin and then rubbing the wound resulting from these cuts with ink, ash or other materials. Some societies make tattoos by injecting ink by pitting. The manual (Horimono) method is still used by using sharp tips sticks or animal bones. Traditional Japanese tattoos, which are known as “Hand Pricks” or “Traditional Manual Pitting” and made by injecting ink under the skin using non-electrical means, such as hand and sharpened bamboo-made or sharpened steel-made “tobori” needles,

has witnessed a renaissance, after it has been almost dormant for many years, due to the contact with the West. The process of making tattoos involved prayers and lengthy protocols and was considered a sacred quote rather than an application of artwork.

The most prevalent method of tattooing in the modern era is the electric tattooing machine which injects ink into skin through a single needle or a set of fused-on-rod needles, and the rod is connected to an oscillating unit which healthily and cleanly leads the needles into and out of the skin. The needles are useable once and come individually wrapped.

A tattooist must not only wash his/her hands, but he must also wash an area of body on which a tattoo was made. He/she must wear gloves throughout the tattooing process and constantly wipe wound resulting from tattooing with a certain type wet towel, which is to be thrown in trash immediately after the tattooing.

## 8. Tattoo Damages

It has serious damages, including:

- Contamination of human blood due to piercing skin.
- Body becomes vulnerable to many diseases and inflammations, especially those related to liver.
- Skin diseases such as skin cancer, psoriasis and allergies.
- Scarring, ulcers and cell oxidation.
- The spread of the HIV virus causing AIDS.
- Affecting a person's reputation.
- A Tattooed person is considered criminal as he/she has a tattoo covers his/her entire body. That makes him/her faces difficulty in making social relationships especially in terms of marriage.
- Tattoo constitutes as a barrier to get a job opportunity as a tattooed person is considered untrustworthy person.

## 9. Tattoos from Psychological Perspective

Upon proving many research and psychological studies of this issue, it has been found that tattoo is a way of self-identity expression in a different way, as it reflects the components of a person personality (who I am, what my personality is, and what my desires and goals are). This is the way by which tattooed people express their identity.

It is a phenomenon resulting from an individual's inability to linguistically, socially, intellectually and emotionally express his/her spiritual life. In addition, people use tattoo to get rid of repression and psychological pain, as it gives a individual a sense of strength and self-satisfaction. In other words, he/she exposes the biggest part of his/her psychological life by tattoo and thinks that people will understand him/her through that. A tattooed person doesn't feel shy of having it, but in instead, he/she displays it in prominent areas of his/her body, such as

arm, hands or shoulder) as a way of expressing his/her identity and as a way of fulfilling his/her psychological desire as he/she feels from his/her own perspective. Moreover, a small group makes tattoos as a kind of self-harm, especially when toxic materials are used.

Excessive tattooing indicates that a person suffers from personal disorders consisting of paranoia caused by the feeling of inferiority, hysterical personality that is characterized by trying to get attention, and poor emotional, intellectual and behavioral maturity. Many of people who make tattoos are those who engage in misbehaviors, such as alcohol and drug addiction, as they are characterized by a lack of sense of responsibility and respect for races and social traditions.

Tattoos From a psychological perspective, the opinions show five core themes: self-empowerment, identification with a group, remembrance, a “message to the self” and turning pain into beauty (Laura Buss and Karen Hodges 2017) [4].

## 10. Tattoos from Islamic Perspective

Dr. Raafat Othman, Professor of Islamic Sharia at Al-Azhar University, believes that religion forbids tattooing. According to the Prophet, may God’s prayers and peace be upon him, “Allah cursed the maker and wearer of a wig and a tattooist, the one who is tattooed, the remover person of eyebrow’s hair and the one who get the eyebrow’s hair removed, who alters God’s creation.” Any beautification and adornment based on fraud and deception is obviously forbidden by Islamic Sharia, and instead, it urges people to remove them and treat their damages (Rokib & Sodiq, 2017) [5].

## 11. Research Methodology

I have adopted the clinical approach to achieve the objective of the research and answer its questions. For collecting data, I used clinical interview and scientific clinical observation.

I used free interview because it is flexible and gives freedom to ask questions and answer them. The examinee can freely express his opinions, tendencies and feelings.

## 12. Interviews with Cases

We conducted two or three interviews with tattooed persons two or three interviews in order to collect information and gain trust.

## 13. Symbols and Meanings of Tattoos for Young People

**Table 1** shows the symbols and meanings of tattoos for young people.

## 14. Clinical Analysis of Tattoo Symbolism

From a psychological point of view, tattoo includes a kind of “masochism” or

**Table 1.** Symbols and meanings of tattoos for young people.

Tattoo Type	Its meaning for a case
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawings of animals such as: scorpion, dinosaur, dragon, snake, birds, dogs, and insects.</li> <li>• Drawings of the cross, figures, knife, heart, sun, steamers, stars, crescent, rivers.</li> <li>• Drawings of people, such wicked women.</li> <li>• Drawings of Arabic and French letters, such as T. K. S. Z.</li> <li>• Drawings of dots, such as three dots.</li> <li>• Drawings of witchcraft and demons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom, leave friends, revenge, betrayal, and loyalty.</li> <li>• I hate Arabs, month of nights, freedom, love, light, lack of luck, immigration</li> <li>• I hate women, maternal love, and treachery, and the country is blind.</li> <li>• I irreversibly hate villains, freedom, mother's love, lost things, and women.</li> <li>• Being against the State and its regime and security forces. I mean by tattoo getting attention.</li> </ul>

enjoyment of physical pain. It also includes a rejection of a body and feelings of inferiority. In addition, some people make tattoos to get attention of others, and they love appearance and being distinctive and unique. Some women and men make tattoos to display parts of their bodies which are not usually exposed as acts of narcissism and physical seduction. Tattoos designs include simplified figures, such as a name and initials of boyfriend or girlfriend, figures of predatory or scary animals, and exotic or decorative figures, some of which made on the entire body, and some of them in certain areas.

The meanings of the figures vary. However, they usually symbolize to violence and power for men and express various sexual suggestions for women, noting that expressing violence and power by tattoos does not necessarily mean that a person is actually strong, as a weak and frightened person may show people that he is strong by tattoos in order to give him a kind of secure.

## 15. Prospects and Suggestions

Organizing awareness-raising campaigns due to the danger of tattoo to human health and his/her image in the Algerian culture and avoiding blind copying of the Western cultures.

Tattoos are not a good way of expression, but there are other religiously and healthily acceptable ways for expressing our thoughts, beliefs and feelings, strengthening the spiritual and religious aspect.

## 16. Conclusion

Finally, physical beauty remains a dream and a demand which a person seeks. We should accept ourselves. Also, we should develop a balanced and integrated personality and positively rectify its defects. The caring should be concentrated on substance and content, rather than shape. It is necessary to build a correct and beautiful body and take care of it by fixing what can be fixed without extremism and neglect.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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