

# A Cultural-Pragmatic Investigation of Tattoos among the Youth in Kampala-Uganda

Susan Olajoke Akinkurolere\* and David Masereka••

**Abstract:** It is increasingly becoming a common practice to get people with tattoos, especially the youth, in Uganda today. In the past, tattoos were reserved for special subgroups like seamen (sailors), and motorcycle riders (bikers). However, it is now prevalent in other segments of the population, especially the young people. To many, tattoos are still strange and mysterious. It is, therefore, imperative to investigate perceptions of such an act in order to bring to fore meanings that either justify or invalidate the trend. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods in the analysis. It was discovered that tattooing is premised on deep-root cultural meaning and beliefs. This study, therefore, concluded that ancient tattooing was intricately woven around the cultural perception of tattoos among the young people and their underlying reasons for the practice, which is generally accepted, whereas, modern tattooing is a practice that majority of the youth do not seem to embrace, considering it foreign, merely imported and obscene, relating it mostly to negative behaviours or vices in the society.

**Keywords:** tattoos, culture, foreign, fashion, Uganda, Africa

## INTRODUCTION

Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior (Spencer-Oatey 2008). No doubt, tattoos are becoming a common trend among young people in Uganda today. However, there are pertinent questions that raise concern about tattoos.

---

\* Susan Olajoke Akinkurolere (✉)

Department of Arts and Languages, Kampala International University, Kampala, Uganda

e-mail: olujoke2126@yahoo.com (corresponding author)

•• David Masereka (✉)

Department of Education Foundations, Kampala International University, Kampala, Uganda

Do we have tattoos as part of the Ugandan ancient culture or is it a new fashion? What are the ancient and modern perceptions of the people in Uganda? Is it an acceptable trend in Uganda perceived practice or?

Tattoos are associated with the process of making a pattern or design on the body by inserting pigment into the skin through a sharp device already dipped in an ink to make a pattern or a design. The etymology of the word 'tattoo', according to DeMello (2000), derives from the Tahitian word *tatau*, which was first brought to Europe by Captain James Cook in 1769. Indeed, it was further stated that after Cook and his crew returned to Europe, some of the crew already tattooed, which marked the historical development of modern tattooing. Moreover, Levy (2008) opines that, "with tattooed British sailors, the art spread to other parts of Europe and to North America". Therefore, it could be evidently stated that sailors introduced modern tattoos in Europe.

Worldwide, there is rise and popularity of body marking and modification. No wonder, Olowoyo (2019) observes thus:

Today, there is a fast growing crave for cosmetic enhancement of the human body which is considered by a drastically growing population globally as imperfect owing largely to the attendant dissatisfaction by humans across the world, especially in Africa. This is stemming from the concept of self-perception, which informs the diverse choices humans make.

Aside self-perception, society is also a major factor as far as body marking is concerned. In many societies, tattoos are evidently part of the cultures and practiced by men, women and even children to signify different meanings. Tattoos are associated with spirituality, power, gender and occasions. Looking back, the necessity of body marking could possibly be for gaining control over something through a symbol that is a tattoo, done on the body since the body is a relevant means of communicating personal and collective messages and individuals have total control over such. In tribal communities, as Dey and Das (2007) rightly observe, tattoos are done after puberty as the symbol of being sexually matured, or sometime, after achieving some certain ranks in society. In case of men and often married women are marked by tattoos as a symbol of marriage.

To Olowoyo (2019), the quest for body enhancement portrays a change in societies' value system. For generations, perceptions of tattooing and tattoos have supposedly undergone significant changes.

To some people, especially in tribes where tattooing is less practiced in Uganda, tattooing was and is still regarded as a practice for thieves, gang members and prostitutes. A tattoo carried a negative connotation by it, regardless of who has it. This belief is still prevalent among people as it is not considered as an act, earlier practiced by the ancestors. To majority of the ancestors, one's body was pierced only when a specific ritual was performed, like casting out a bad spirit in children, or elders, removing a bad substance considered dangerous in one's body or protecting people from eminent evil attacks by inscribing specific symbols or marks on the body. The rituals, in ancient times, were typically divine and revered. It was done during a specific period of time, by very specific people.

In present society, young people are engaging in tattooing, since it seems to meet their specific identity as a form of self-expression. To some young people now, a tattoo carries a meaning, a message, a story, which is highly subjective. No wonder, the same image of a tattoo implied different meanings to different people.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tattooing, a widely scattered practice worldwide, is premised on different motivational factors especially as a new fashion. Dey and Das (2017) observe that people have their own motivations for their tattoos and different perceptions are attached with it. People are seen to be motivated by something that they personally feel close to, or by someone whom they idolise or sometimes just because of fashion. The personal motivation often comes from peoples' beliefs and interests.

The labeling theory, as developed by George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, emerged in the field of Criminology in the early 1960s, explaining an off shoot of Symbolic Interactionism theory. The labelling approach to deviance seeks to explain the problem of how and why certain individuals get labeled and the effects of the label on subsequent deviant behavior (Gove, 1975).

The early Christians tattooed themselves with religious symbols but it was later prohibited in order to obey God's commandment in the Holy Bible, according to Leviticus, Chapter 19, and Verse 28, which states that "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord" (New International Version). Dye (1989), however, observes that even though tattooing was officially banned by the church, many crusaders and pilgrims on their visits to Jerusalem bought tattoos, apparently in order to prove that they had been there.

The values derivable from this are considered as of great influence in the Church, as a pilgrimage. These values border on identity. It is in consonance with this that Olowoyo (2019) argues that:

The idea of identity stemming from an assessment of 'self' in relationship with the socio-cultural value system operational within a given society forms a basis of the choices (medical) individual members of a given society make per time. This concept of self-perception is a function of individual psychological capacity and behavior in relationship with the society at points of self-evaluation.

Though, body modification has over the centuries been discovered and rediscovered by a wide range of societies, scholarship affirms that tattoos and body piercing have a long history, and are well known in various cultures in Africa, America, Asia and Oceania (Rubin, 1988). In an attempt to capture the difference that exists between two, which geographically differ as they always possess a very specific meanings in particular cultures. Therefore, it is imperative to state that piercings are often used in initiation rites with the purpose of assigning their bearer to a certain social or age group (Gritton 1988; Jonaitis 1988) whereas tattoos are utilised to signal religious affiliations, strength or social status (Gilbert 2001; Schildkrout 2004).

From Utoh-Zeajugh's (2009) position, body adornment is a significant cultural activity in many ethnic groups in Africa. These body modifications which may be temporary or permanent are often used for social, ritual and aesthetic purposes. Tattoos are narratives that comprise meanings that could be unraveled through pragmatics, a sub-field in linguistics. At the centre of pragmatics is meaning embedded in context.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using multi-faced qualitative and qualitative approaches like interviews and observations. The data was collected by conducting a series of interviews with 24 students of different African nationalities, including both men and women, tattoo owners and non-tattoo owners of a specific age group (20-45), who were randomly selected at Kampala International University, Uganda. Primary Data narrative analysis was used to achieve a comprehensible clarity on whether tattoos today are a reflection of Ugandan culture or a new trend of fashion in Uganda today. The respondents were asked three questions stated below:

- 1) What is your perception towards tattoos?
- 2) Are tattoos a reflection of Ugandan culture or just a copied trend?
- 3) Would you marry a partner with a tattoo?

The linguistic approach for the research is pragmatics, the study of meaning in context, using the theory of cultural-pragmatics, a theoretical framework that marks human social organization and performance, whether as individual or collective, based on cultural quality (Alexander, 2005).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Socio-Demographic of Respondents*

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents covered in the study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristic of Respondents

Characteristics	Categories	Frequencies	Percentages
Sex	Male	11	45.8
	Female	13	54.2
	Total	24	100.0
Religion	Christianity	18	75
	Islam	06	25
	Total	24	100.0
Nationality	Ugandan	14	58.3
	Burundian	4	16.7
	Somali	2	8.3
	Nigerian	3	12.5
	South Sudanese	1	4.2
	Total	24	100.0
Age	20- 25	15	62.5
	26-30	4	16.7
	30-35	3	12.5
	36-Above	2	8.3
	Total	24	100.0

As indicated in the table, more than half of the respondents were female at about 54% and male at about 45%, most of whom were Christians at 75%. Ugandans were the majority of the respondents with over 58%. With regard to age distribution of the respondents, the dominant age was 20-25 with 62.5%.

*Individual's Perception towards Tattoos*

Information was sought on respondents' attitude towards the prevalence of tattoos among the young people in Uganda today.

Table 2: Respondents' attitude toward tattoos

Attitudes	Frequencies	Percentages
Negative	21	87.5
Positive	2	8.3
Neutral	1	4.2
Total	24	100

Table 2 shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents are negative about tattoos and associate tattoos with all sorts of negative connotations. The various responses, in this section, were underlined by individual's culture. A good number of Christians said it is not a godly practice. Among the many reactions, *Individual A*, opine thus:

It is a bad habit. If God created us without tattoos, why should we labor to have them on our bodies? Are we trying to prove that God missed doing that during creation?

This finding agrees with the stand of the Church, in reference to the Bible, justifying the ban, "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord. (Lev. 19:28, New International Version.)"

*Individual B* said:

Those people who use tattoos are 'bayaye' (to mean criminals and perverts). Have you ever seen respectable people in society with tattoos like Priests and teachers? Do you ever imagine what a mess it would cause if we found them with tattoo? But it is common among footballers, musicians, boxing champions, bikers and celebrities, people who get little or no respect in society. They are just taken as celebrities and it ends at that. However the young people today take those as their models and copy their trend.

This observation of tattoos as a deviant behavior is because of cultural beliefs, which shaped the research subjects' perceptions. Therefore, modern tattooing was perceived as a deviant behavior which was not meaningful and significant culturally. This could only be discovered

by a group or society that does not share a belief in the appropriateness of the behavior, and it must subsequently be called deviance.

However another *Individual C* observed that:

I have no problem with it as long as it is not on my body. People have different reasons and motives to tattoo their bodies, and should not be limited. Some people look at tattooing as a bad practice yet to some people it is just an art or a story to tell or for remembrance. So it is not entirely bad.

*Individual D* was rather quick to point out her love for tattoos as she quickly stated as follows:

Oh, I love tattoos. I love them so much. Actually a friend is having some on her body and I am yet to seek her guidance on having one, and I will get it. Even, if my religion does not accept it. Actually, when you die and they find it on you, they cut off that part from your body. Well, I will be dead and that won't be my concern anymore.

The notion above is in agreement with what Dey's and Das's (2017) observation that people have their own motivations for their tattoos, and different perceptions are attached with it.

*Tattoos as a reflection of Ugandan Culture today or just a trend copied*

Table 3: Respondents view of whether tattoos are a reflection of Uganda's culture or just a trend copied

Views	Frequencies	Percentages
Uganda's culture	1	4.2
Trend copied	22	91.6
Neutral	1	4.2
Total	24	100.0

About tattoo being a Ugandan culture or a copied trend today, a responded from South Sudan vehemently asserted that:

My friend, whether it is Uganda or Africa as a whole, the trend of tattoos is imported. Now look at my body, dark as it is and tell me you want to mark it. What color or technique will you use to make that possible? But I believe it is possible to people with light bodies in Europe, America and Asia; not Africa.

A respondent from Burundi observed thus:

Even if I am not from Uganda, I believe we are all Africans. And we share most beliefs. Tattoos in my country are like a taboo. So, since people are even still hiding them here, that is a clear indication that they fear being labeled outcasts or outsiders. That to me is a big reason to believe that it's just not our "thing".

Another respondent from Uganda said:

I didn't see my grandparents or my parents with tattoos. If it is a culture in Uganda, why don't they have tattoos and even pass on the culture to us? Why must it be among a few and mostly in urban centers? That leaves me believing that it is just a trend that young people are picking up, just as they tend to pick up anything from the western world.

A respondent from Somalia also asserted:

I have no problem with tattoo, but Islam is against them. But people use them just for fashion and copy the big celebrities who have them. However, some tribes use body marks for certain occasions, but most of the tattoos I have seen, I think people just copy world celebrities and associate or share beliefs with them.

However, another respondent is optimistic that tattoos will soon be part of Ugandan culture, in case they are not yet already:

I strongly believe that just as women putting on trousers mini-skirts is now trendy, tattoos will soon, if not yet already, be part of the Ugandan culture too. It doesn't matter whether it is imported, copied or fashion, as long as we embrace it, people like it.

*Whether respondents would marry a partner with a tattoo*

Table 4: Respondents views on whether they would marry a partner with a tattoo

Responses	Frequencies	Percentages
Yes	3	12.5
No	20	83.3
Neutral	1	4.2
Total	24	100

Majority of the respondents expressed skepticism especially with the view to accepting a partner with a tattoo. More than 83% gave a whopping no to that notion as another fraction expressed no problem with it. Majority of the respondents expressed that they would not trust

such a partner to be sober, since tattoos in Uganda and Africa as a whole, are still highly and mostly used by people with questionable characters and habits.

A fraction of respondents however stressed that one might have used a tattoo out of influence of a youthful stage, peer influence or just for fashion, than out of conviction and devotion. In that case, they would marry the partners.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the views, attitudes and dispositions of Kampala International University students towards tattooing as a practice and its presence in Uganda, though some respondents considered Africa, as a whole. The study revealed that though this practice is on an increase, it still faces strong resistance due to meanings associated with culture not only by Ugandans, but Africans as at large. Tattoos are still considered foreign and considered a practice that the young people today are copying from the western world, as more trends continue being popularized by increased social media interactions, the new global village, and freedom of self-expression.

Just like other know foreign practices have infiltrated African cultures and the Ugandan culture as well, it is only a matter of time, modern tattooing will continue to be prevalent while ancient tattooing will become unpopular. The conflict of perceptions on modern tattooing is culturally- motivated among the youth and adults, and not only in Uganda, but Africa as a continent.

## REFERENCES:

- Alexander, J.C. 2005. Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy. [https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2013/SOC571E/um/Alexander\\_Cultural\\_Pragmatics.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2013/SOC571E/um/Alexander_Cultural_Pragmatics.pdf) [accessed: 23.01.2019].
- Dey, A. and K. Das. 2007. Why We Tattoo? Exploring the Motivation and Motivation and Meaning. *Anthropol.* 5:174.doi:10.4172/23220915.1000174 [accessed: 23.01.2019].
- DeMello, M. 2000. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dye, I. 1989. The Tattoos of Early American Seafarers, 1796-1818. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 133(4): 520-554.
- Gilbert, S. 2001. *The History of Tattoo: A Source Book*. Juno Books.
- Gove, W.R. 1975. *The Labelling of Deviance: Evaluating a Perspective*. New York: Halsted.

- Gritton, J. 1988. "Labrets and Tattooing in Native Alaska". In *Marks of Civilization*. A. Rubin (ed.). Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, pp. 181–191.
- Jonaitis, A. 1988. Women, Marriage, Mouths and Feasting: The Symbolism of Tlingit. In *Marks of Civilization*. A. Rubin (ed.). Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, pp. 191–207.
- The Bible (New International Version).  
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus/19:28&version=NIV>  
[accessed: 10.01.2019].
- Levy, J. 2008. *Tattoos in Modern Society*. New York: Rosen Publisher.
- Olowoyo, O.T. 2019. "Literature, Self and Imperfection in Medical Narratives". A PhD Proposal Seminar submitted to Kampala International University, Kampala.
- Rubin, A. (ed.). 1988. *Marks of Civilization*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History.
- Schildkrout, E. 2004. Inscribing the Body. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33: 319–344.
- Spencer-Oatey, H. 2008. "Culturally Speaking". In *Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*. 2nd edition. London: Continuum.
- Utoh-Ezeajugh, T. 2009. Body Adornment Practices in Nigerian Culture: A Multi-Ethnic Investigation. *Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*, 2(1): 117-132.