

# Tatooing Among the Tharus of Dang Deokhuri, Far Western Nepal

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Making drawings on the human skin and then inserting these inside the skin by punching it with a small bunch of needles and so making them permanent is called the art of Tatooing. This art is called Tika Chhedaune or Godna Garaune in some parts of Nepal.

The word 'tatoo' or 'tatu' was derived from the Tahitian word 'ta' which means 'to strike'<sup>1</sup>. Captain Cook was the first person to introduce this word and art in Europe after his first voyage in 1768-71.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact date of the beginning of this art. There is no solid evidence to prove the existence of it during pre-historic times, but, according to Déchelette, there is considerable likelihood that the finely pointed implements discovered in the Magdalenian deposits were used for tatooing<sup>2</sup>. This idea seems logical and fits in with the fact that the pre-historic cave-dwellers were clearly artistic and had a good knowledge of colour for painting. Ancient Egyptians too were not unfamiliar with this practice. The marks on the rude human figures in the tomb at Tukh suggest it<sup>3</sup>. In the second Theban Empire too the Egyptians, according to J. Capart, tatooed on their breasts or arms the names or symbols of deities<sup>4</sup>. The prohibition against tatooing in the old testament of the bible proves that the ancient Jews already practised this kind of work. Tatooing was prevalent in ancient China and Japan according to Chinese tradition. While, according to A.T. Sinclair, 'among the ancient natives in the West Indies, Mexico and Central America, tatooing was general if not almost universal'<sup>5</sup>.

From the above mentioned examples, it becomes clear that men decorated their naked bodies with this art from early times. But this art is popular not only among primitive tribes but among some modern societies of the East and West also. Soldiers and sailors in particular have been interested in this art. In modern Japan it has become very popular and is highly elaborate<sup>6</sup>.

At different times and places and with greater or lesser interest, different styles and techniques of this art have evolved. As it is not possible to describe them all here, this article will be limited to the art prevalent among the Tharus of Dang, Deokhuri and Surkhet valleys of Far Western Nepal.

Tatoo work among these Tharus can be classed as two kinds:-

- (1) Main or compulsory tatooing.
- (2) Ordinary or optional tatooing.

The first type of tatooing is done on the legs of married women only and for them it is compulsory.

The time or season for the usual type of marriage as well as for tatooing falls in the same months- FALGUN and CHAITRA. The work is generally done during the month which follows marriage. But in the case of unusual circumstances at that season, such as long illness, pregnancy or childbirth, the work may be postponed till the following season or till the situation normalizes.

There is no prescribed rule or tradition about making a person liable to undertake this kind of work. Traditionally it is done by aged and experienced ladies. A lady belonging to any clan of a Tharu family, rich or poor, can do this work if she is skilled in drawing because great efficiency is needed for the making of the drawings and great care is necessary to avoid pricking the unmarked or undrawn portions of the skin.

#### MATERIAL NEEDED

The following materials are necessary for Tharu tatooing.

(A) 'CHHEDANA SUI' (Pricking needles).

Eight to twelve medium-sized sewing needles are tied tightly together and their blunt ends are covered and tied with rags and threads so as to make it easier to hold the needles while working.

(B) 'LIKHAN DARI' (Marking-rod).

This rod is a 5 or 6 inches long iron rod a little thinner than a pencil.

(C) 'KAJARAMASI' (Carbon ink).

This is a semi-liquid substance, prepared with carbon and water. Previously such carbon was procured from a mustard-oil lamp but now-a-days it is obtained from a kerosene lamp.

(D) Some plain water for thinning the liquid when it dries.

#### PREPARATION

The lady who does the tatooing is called 'TIKANNYA' and the one to be tatooed is called 'GWARA DOSUIYA' (the leg server).

The woman to be tatooed has to wash both her legs well (up to the knees) with cow-dung, rubbing it firmly on to the portions to be tatooed and later rinsing them well with plain water. Finally she has to dry her legs well, with the help of textile-pads, and when they are dried a small quantity of mustard-oil is rubbed on them. This is to make the surface to be tatooed soft but not greasy.

TIME AND PLACE FOR TATOOING

There is no special day or week fixed for this work, the only restriction being that it should take place in the months of Falgun and Chaitra. The work is generally done in the CHHOTKI ANGANA (a little courtyard on the side of the house, opposite to the street), in the shade. The major or the compulsory type of tatooing is done on two consecutive days; on the first day the right leg is tatooed, on the next day the left. The work begins in the morning and stops in the late afternoon or early evening when work finishes on one leg.

There is not a TIKANNYA in every village. Where there is no local person, the woman to be tatooed has to go where a TIKANNYA lives. Sometimes if the 'tatooer' and 'tatooe' are close relatives, the latter may be invited to the house of the former lady, to be tatooed. Food and lodging facilities for the lady who goes to the tatooer in another village, are generally provided by relatives of that woman if they reside in that village, otherwise the woman to be tatooed has to go to the house of the TIKANNYA with some rice, salt, mustard oil, vegetables, and JAD in sufficient quantity for both of them for two or three days along with some alcohol and a pair of pigeons or a cock if possible.

The current cash fees for tatooing is two rupees per leg or four rupees per head, given to the TIKANNYA by the other in addition to the food and gifts.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

There are several beliefs related with the art of tatooing. For some people if it is a form of sexual expression and a powerful sexual stimulant, it is considered as permanent jewelry too<sup>7</sup>. The tatooing marks are also considered as the only things that are certain to go with a person to the next world<sup>8</sup>, while the Jyapu women practise it on the hind part of the calf muscle as they believe that tatooing is helpful in securing a means of sustenance in the world after death where the tatooes can be sold off to buy food<sup>9</sup>.

The main reason for tatooing among these Tharus is aesthetic. According to them young and unmarried girls do not need and hence do not have to decorate themselves by tatooing because their bright and colourful CHOLYAS (a kind of blouse with its opening in the back) are beautiful and decorative; but a married woman has to get herself tatooed to compensate for the lack of beauty or decoration brought about by donning JHULWA or DAINAHA JHULWA, a kind of ladies' shirt with full sleeves, double-breasted and opening in the front. It is always made of white coarse textile and is generally worn by ladies who have already given birth to child. The lower garment, the GONNYA, is always white and is similar for married or unmarried woman; so it is considered that beauty and decoration are equated



with blouses (for unmarried girls) or tatoeing (for married women). Though DAINAHA JHULWA is the recommended dress for married women, in practice the women do not give up wearing the colourful CHOLYA till they have had a child. So it seems that tatoeing generally is considered as compensating a certain lack of colour in dress by these Tharus.

### PARTS OR DIVISIONS OF TATOOING



Tatoeing on legs, can be divided for description into three parts.

#### (1) Lower Part

This part is spread on the portion situated one inch above the ankle-bone and one, or one-and-a-half inches below it. The designs made in this portions from top to bottom are

- (a) — — SITHA (Stick or Straw)
- (b)  CHULHA (Stove)
- (c)  PHUNNA (Hanging motifs)

#### (2) The Middle or Main Part

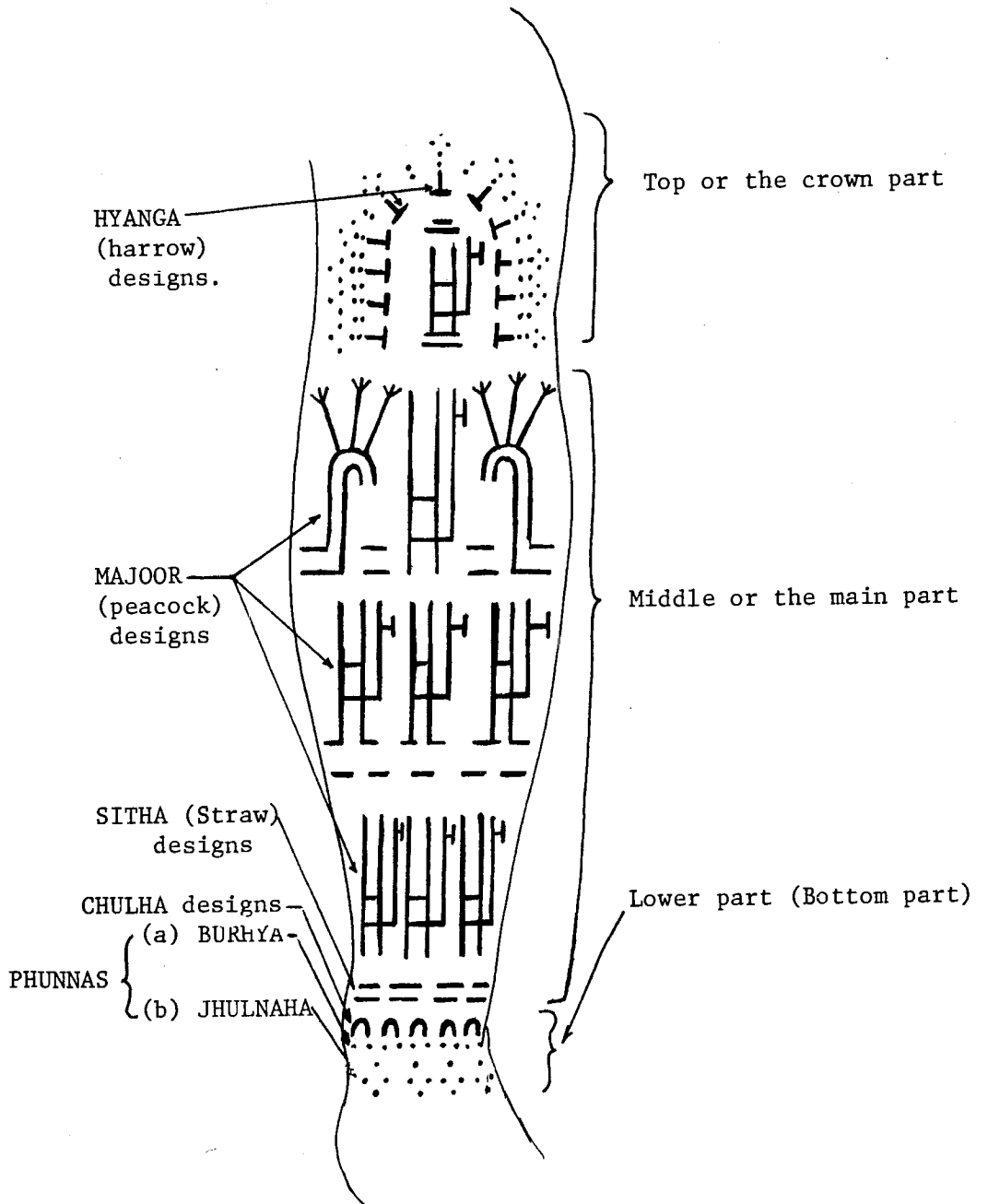
This part covers about the three quarters of the area between the ankle-bone and the knee. This portion consists of three rows of MAJUR (Peacock)   designs and SITHAS between.

#### (3) The Top or The Crowning Part

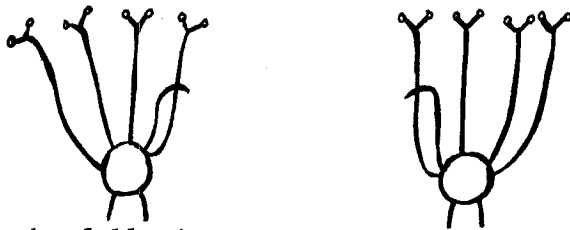
As the name itself indicates, this portion lies on the top. It consists of a single peacock in the centre and some PHUNNA or other motifs on three sides (Top, left. & right) of it, making a frame for the single peacock in the centre.

The main difference between this part and the other parts is that the tatoeing in this part is made only on the front half (vertical) portion.

DETAILS OF A TATOOING ON LEG



According to the interests of either the TIKANNYA or the GWARA DUSUIYA (Women to be tattooed), sometimes minor changes may occur in this set of tattooing designs. For example the peacocks can be drawn in this style too.



instead of the following.



or the framing of designs around the single peacock part may differ, as HYANGA (harrow) —|—€|—>— and CHALANI (Filter) :::: motifs too can be made between the top-most peacock and the PHUNNA motifs.

#### ORDER OF TATOOING WORK

Before beginning tattooing, the leg to be tattooed is stretched forward and put on a cushion (generally a BENRRI made of paddy straws), so that it is easily accessible to the tattooer. The TIKANNYA then sits down in front of the leg and takes it in her left hand, while her right hand is busied either with the LIKHANDANDI or the CHHEDANA SUI. The working procedure begins from bottom to top of the leg with the alternations of marking with carbon ink and then pricking with needles. First of all the TIKANNYA marks the CHULHA designs which pass all around the ankle-bone. After that the line of BURHYA PHUNNA (mother, or the supporter - PHUNNAS) are marked below the CHULHAS. Then the JHULNAHA PHUNNA (hanging PHUNNAS) are marked below the BURHYA PHUNNAS, and lastly (for this portion) the SITHA designs are made above the CHULHAS (of the ankle bone). The marking work stops for a while; and then the tattooer begins to work with the CHHEDANA SUI or the small bunch of needles. She pricks the whole markings that she had already done. Pricking for the tattooing is slightly more painful than the prick of a small-pox vaccination. Some blood leaks out of the skin and if the month is CHAITRA, a lot of flies gather around it to suck the blood.

When pricking work on the lower part ends, then comes the turn of the middle or the main part. This portion is slightly more difficult to work on. The tattooer first prepares a JWAKHA (straw for equal measurement) of an exact quarter of the lower leg length,

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

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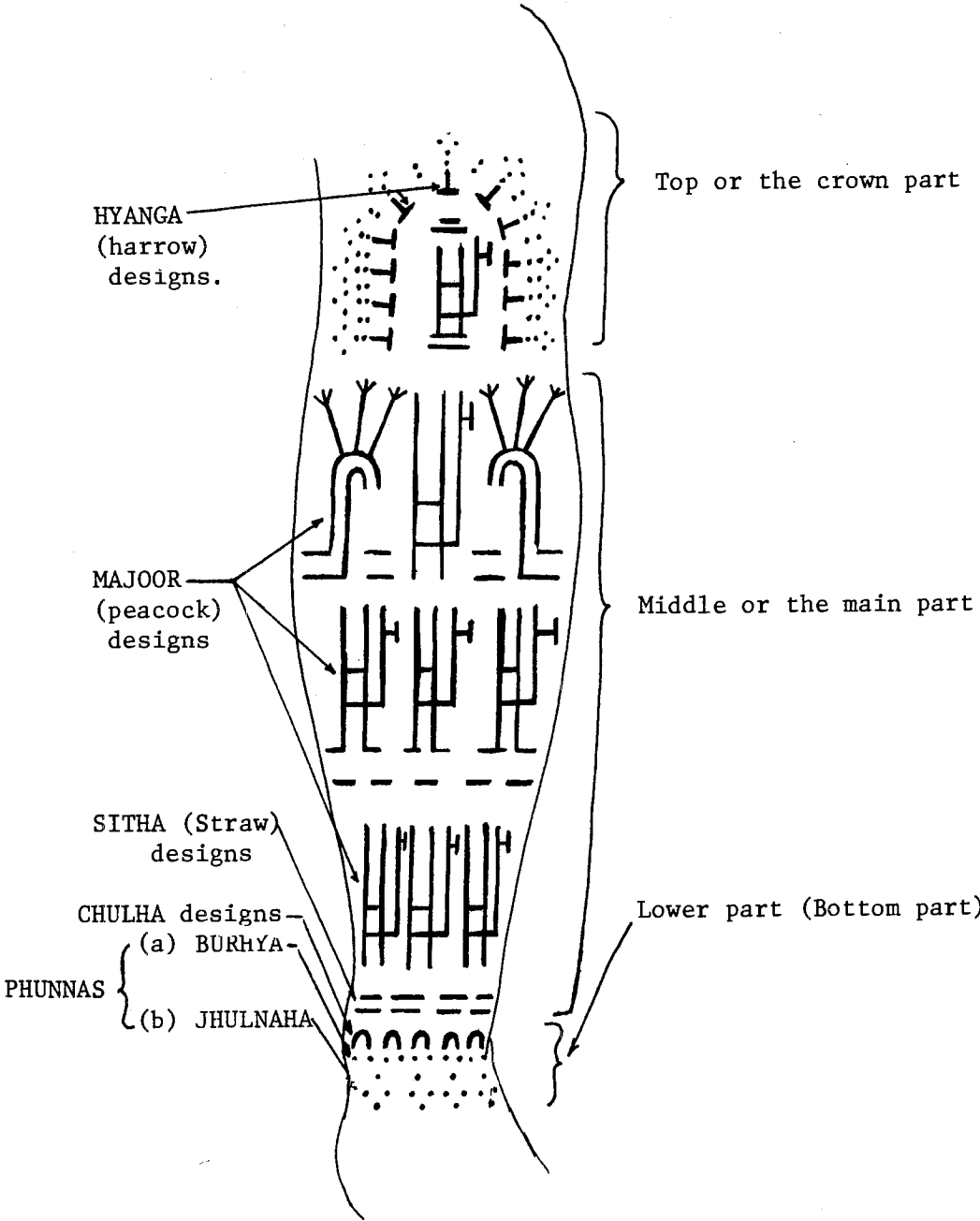
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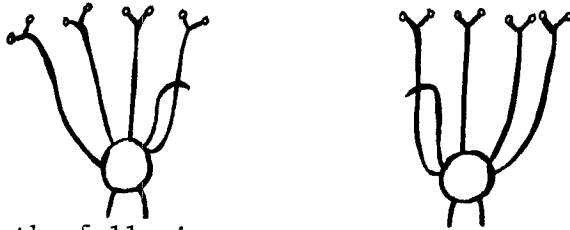
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A woman in the process of tatoeing. Marking rod, sack containing the carbon powder and the bowl with liquid carbon are also visible on the side.



Making designs with needles. Flies for the blood brought out by pricking.



A general view of tatooing.



Tatooing in its final stage.

that covers the whole of the unmarked leg (up to the knee). Now the topmost quarter is left for making the crown, and on the remaining three quarters, three rows of peacocks are to be marked.

While working on the middle or the main part, the tattooer puts vertically (for measuring) the JWAKHA above the SITHA motif (near the ankle-bone) and marks two rows of other SITHAS and thus makes a space for marking the first row of peacocks. When the space is made she goes on marking that whole row of peacocks, and after it she begins to work with needles. After finishing the work on the first row of peacocks, she pulls out the same JWAKHA out of her hair, carried there to avoid its being misplaced, puts it above the first row of peacocks (for measurement) and again draws SITHAS for making the space for the second row of peacocks. This time too, the markings are first drawn and later on those marks are pricked, until the whole three rows of peacocks are finished.

After the completion of the marking and the pricking work on the main part, the work for the crown part begins. With the help of the same JWAKHA, a peacock of the same height is drawn on the top-most or the crown part and then several selected designs (according to preference), like HYANGA or CHALNI are drawn on three sides of that peacock and are overlapped by a frame of Phunna designs. Lastly this part too is tattooed in the same way as the previous ones. After the work is finished as mentioned above on one leg, the other leg is done on the next day.

Something should also be said about the general or optional type of tattooing. Except on the skin of infants, very young children or a seriously ill person, this kind of tattooing can be done on any person's skin if he or she so wishes. Such tattooing is generally done on the hand, arm or the face. The designs made on these parts are miscellaneous, like CHULHA, CHALNI, HYANGA, or occasionally the name or the names of some Hindu deities like Ram, Sita, Krishna etc or sometimes the name of the individual concerned. In some cases a spot design too is tattooed on the chin or the cheek, but is practised on females only.

#### CONCLUSION

Though some of the rich and educated Tharu families like the Chaudharis of Hekuli and Baibang in Dang or of Gobardiha in Deukhuri, no longer practice tattooing and are now prescribing Sari for their women, ordinary Tharus still practice tattooing and consider it as an act which beautifies. In fact, for them it is the main trait which distinguishes a married woman from an unmarried girl. Though in one of their songs that I have recorded, there is mention of vermilion powder (SINDUR), in practice they never use it for make-up purposes (though it is very often used in religious activities) and consider tattooing as a "Sindur" of a Tharu woman. Sindur is used and applied by Hindu married woman only and so it is the mark of a married woman among all Hindus, higher, lower or untouchables).

Tattooing, practised mainly by married women on their legs, can be displayed for admiration only if the woman wears a skirt-like or skirt-length dress on her lower limbs, i.e. the dress must not go beyond the knees. So the practice is limited to the women who wear GONYA (Skirt-size dress for the lower portion). In the whole of Dang and Surkhet, and in some parts of Deukhuri and other Terai districts of Western Nepal women wear GONYAS and still practise tattooing. But for others, who have already used or are now introducing LAHANGA (a loose and petticoat like cloth coming down to the feet, worn by some rural or tribal women, mostly Tharu of Terai) or Sari (a quite popular Indian dress for women), this practice has no advantage because these clothes cover the whole portion where the tattooing is done and so is not practised.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jame Hastings' Encyclopaedia of Religion & Ethics, Vol 12, Third ed. Edinburgh, 1954 pp. 208
2. Manuel d' Archéologie, Paris, 1908-13, i, 203.
3. W.M. Flinders Petrie, Naqada, London, 1896 p. 59.
4. J. Capart, Les Débuts de l'art en Egypte, Brussels, 1904, p. 32.
5. "Tattooing of the American Indians", American Anthropologist, New Ser. XI, 1909, p. 399.
6. B.H. Chamberlain, Things Japanese<sup>2</sup>, London, 1891, p. 399.
7. Verrier Elwin, The Baiga, London, 1939 p. 18-19.
8. Verrier Elwin, The Baiga, London, 1939 p. 19.
9. G.S. Nepali, The Newars, Bombay 1965, p. 70.