



## Body Modification

Valérie Rolle, Sébastien Galliot

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**First author: Full name and affiliation; plus email address if corresponding author**

Valérie Rolle, Centre nantais de sociologie (CENS – UMR 6025), Université de Nantes, France, valerie.rolle@univ-nantes.fr

**Second author: Full name and affiliation; plus email address if corresponding author**

Sébastien Galliot, Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS, EHESS-CREDO, UMR 7308, Marseille, France, sebastien.galliot@univ-amu.fr

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**Abstract**

Since the early 20th century, anthropology has considered body modifications as the expression of cultural systems specific to indigenous communities. Whether manifesting as beautification techniques, ritualized stages of the life cycle or markers of belonging to a group, skin and body modifications are universal and essential to the socialization of their subjects. While body modifications are sometimes analyzed as the end result of a technical process, they are generally interpreted through a more or less semiotic (as a form of communication) or political (as a governing of the body) lens. Contemporary approaches to body modifications, focused primarily on tattoos, ultimately recreate this dichotomy, considering body modifications as either subjective narration (an expression of the self) or resistance to the power structures that govern Western societies. Nevertheless, some alternative approaches also examine the professional aspect of tattooing as a service industry.

**Keywords**

Body modification, Tattooing, Rite of passage, Subjectivation, Deviance

**Main text**

Any individual or collective action with the purpose of intentionally changing all or part of the body can be termed “body modifications.” This complicates the definition of a precise category, as all societies practice some degree of body modification albeit with extreme diversity in terms of both its visible form and its place within its social setting. Consequently, the inclusion of techniques such as body painting or plastic surgery within this generic definition is open to debate. Technical criteria, such as the depth and irreversibility of the act, do not significantly refine this definition. The decline of some irreversible, visible or mutilating practices (genital mutilation in Pohnpei, neck extension among the Kayan people and lip plates among the Surma) and recent expansion of other reversible and/or superficial practices (bodybuilding, fasting and tattooing) suggests that body modifications should be reconsidered from a more socio-anthropological than technical standpoint. Whereas observation and study of physical appearance predates the emergence of an anthropology of the body, it is the progressive consideration of the body as an interface and an operator for social relations (particularly since Mauss, 1973 [1935]) that led to an understanding of the cultural basis of body modification. Nevertheless, analytical frameworks have still been adjusted throughout history.

**From “primitive” to “governmentality”**

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, European explorations in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania expanded and the bodies of indigenous peoples were observed through an ethnocentric lens imbued with Christian moral values. “Barbarian,” “savage,” “pagan”: body modifications were interpreted from a utilitarian standpoint (Kant 1951 [1790], Darwin 1871) but very often simply disqualified with no further scrutiny. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their study was developed due to the naturalistic paradigm specific to Western science and the taxonomic approach that intended to describe diverse lifestyles and human “races” via a study of morphological characteristics. Given this framework comprising physical anthropology and criminology, physical characteristics deviating from aesthetic standards inherited from Greek statuary were analyzed as divergent, inferior. The nature of body modifications, whether deliberate, accidental, or caused by environmental factors, was thus of little importance.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, criticisms of evolutionary theories led anthropologists to study social institutions and practices as interdependent parts of a cultural system. Body modifications were henceforth considered an integral part of a society as a whole. Detailed ethnographic studies defined them as life crisis rituals or the corporeal expression of the esthetic values of a given society (Ashley-Montagu 1937, Bohannan 1956, Jeffreys 1951, Van Gennep 1909). As demonstrated in the review articles of Benson (in Caplan 2000) and Schildkrout (2004), many ethnographic works describe numerous potential interventions on the skin and body as surfaces and materials molded by socialization processes. Conversely, more directly theoretical approaches to the body and its transformation remain rare, if not marginal.

In classical anthropological works, the surface of the body is similar to a canvas, on which it is less the subject choosing to share its inner self with the society than the society acting towards a subject that must be transformed by its peers in order to be extracted from its primal state and take an acknowledged role within the group (Clastres 1973, Godelier & Panoff 1998, Bourdieu 1982). All body modifications thus convey a belonging to a given culture, which can be deciphered if the codes of that culture are known. Non-Western body modifications, studied in more recent monographs focus primarily on tattooing revivals or contemporary skin markings. They are described as beautification techniques, ritualized stages of the life cycle but also as empowerment practices, or markers of belonging to a given clan, ethnic group or society (Mallon & Galliot 2018, Krutak 2014, Kuwahara 2005, Salvador-Amores 2013, Te Awakotuku & Nikora 2011). In these diverse contexts, individuals are endowed with greater autonomy insofar as they convey more conscious political statements as well as postcolonial and patrimonial discourses, thereby contributing to reduce the so-called “great divide” between modern and pre-modern societies.

Talal Asad (1997) stated that classic anthropology studied only body symbols (particularly within ritual contexts) at the expense of the perceptions and instruments that act directly on participants by way of their bodies. In his classic study, Turner (1980) demonstrated the importance of modifications to the skin and body surface as part of a progressive socialization. Between the lines, he initiated an exploratory study of the transformative acts performed on the body and their effects on the subject. The major epistemological obstacle to an anthropological study of body modifications is thus the individualistic nature of the body and the inaccessibility of the mind that inhabits it, as though the body and its perception were intimate and incommunicable. Alfred Gell (1993) built on this critically using the psychoanalytical works of Didier Anzieu (1989) on the “skin-ego” (the development of subjectivity and basic relational skills through the skin as a medium) and examined processes that pre-date body modifications as a symbol, exploring how the thematic possibilities of the underlying technical schema of tattooing (wounding-scabbing-permanent ornament) were exploited in different ways by different social regimes. This approach inspired research on technical and instrumental aspects of body modification (Galliot 2015).

Beyond these redevelopments, the works of Michel Foucault (1994) remain decisive for the anthropological approach to body modifications. The notion of “governmentality,” as a combination of power and subjectivity, repositions the social dimension of the body, the subject, and the individual into a biopolitical and historical reality. For Foucault, the subjectification process lies, on the one hand, in a set of social and technological devices (armies, schools, prisons, hospitals) that completely

confiscate the availability of the body and its acts through some kind of capillarity via multiple micro-powers, and, on the other hand, in “technologies of the self” with which subjects respond to this biopower and establish themselves as social beings. This association of “technologies of power” with “technologies of the self” can explain body modifications as diverse as bodybuilding, tattooing and plastic surgery. This approach of the body as a strategic space of intervention for political subjectivation is found in anthropological works such as Bloch’s (1986) or Warnier’s (2007) and has guided more recent studies, such as those labeled “somatechnics” (Murray & Sullivan 2009).

The criticism expressed by Nikki Sullivan (2009) towards studies interpreting tattooing as an “external expression of the inner self,” can more generally be applied to approaches that consider body modifications as an attempt of personal narration. In that manner, the subject tries to define itself vis-à-vis others by exploiting the iconic power of a graphic expression with varying degrees of coding and idiosyncrasy sometime confining to floating signifier. This semiotic paradigm tends to be predominant in approaches to body modifications as negative, pathological, and compulsive markings (most psychology and criminology studies) as well as in those that perceive them as positive, deliberate, and liberating acts (most contemporary studies of body modifications).

### **From “narrative” to “industry”**

In 1989, Clinton Sanders published a groundbreaking ethnographic work on contemporary Western tattooing, analyzing the practice – already partially rehabilitated – from an interactionist angle: how do tattooists and the tattooed pre-empt the social risks of acquiring a potentially discrediting marking by promoting a positive image of their occupation and themselves? Subsequent works developed the reflections initiated by Sanders, documenting the process of social rehabilitation of the tattoo, its appropriation by a recomposed population still partly consisting of sub-cultures labeled as “deviant,” and the professionalization bordering or “artification” of the field.

In the 1980s, the “Tattoo Renaissance” (see Fleming in Caplan, 2000) in the West involved improvements and changes in terms of technique (needle assemblies, colors), health and safety (cleaning and sterilization), iconography (increasingly diverse styles, customized designs) and representations (a history grounded on immemorial tribal roots, a redefinition of tattoo as a form of self-expression and artistic practice). The expansion of this new material and representational economy within and without the tattooing world (by way of international conventions, specialist magazines, cyberspace, as well as general news, literature, and media) had non-negligible effects on the social make-up of the populations involved. While tattooing never left the male-dominated, blue-collar, deviant milieu in which it was popularized in the West over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it additionally conquered the mainstream with an increasingly female clientele over the 1990s. Margo DeMello (2000) noted a polarization and hierarchization of the “tattoo community,” whereby some tattoos were relegated to the working class (particularly bikers) while others were prized as a middle-class conception of the art. This normalization of the practice ensured its respectability: those with tattoos state that they very carefully considered their project and chose the best tattooist for a custom, unique, and artistic design that expressed their personality (Irwin 2001).

Michael Atkinson (2003), inspired by the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias, analyzed the enthusiasm for tattooing as views on the body began to change. Acceptance of tattoos in contemporary Western societies is based in a conception of identity dominated by self-expression. However, the reconciliation of body projects remains just as guided by the norms prevalent in the social spaces (friends, romance, family, work) through which the tattooed move. With one exception (Lo Sardo 2009), this interpretation of the practice contrasts with French post-modern anthropological approaches in which the body is studied as space for individuals to express their “sovereignty,” where the tattoo becomes an “intimate rite of passage” resulting in “rebirth” (Le Breton 2003). Anglophone works in the field conceptualize bodies more as a space of power, consistent with works in Cultural Studies, Gender studies and deviance.

The commodification of tattoos as a rebellious symbol of identity would include them in the “supermarket of style” (as defined by Polhemus), particularly when the level of commitment to the

practice is low (Sweetman 1999). Nonetheless, the inevitable pain associated with acquiring a tattoo does distinguish it from consumption products displayed as “pure signs”. Tattoos are thus an “ironic fad” (Kosut 2006), as they are permanent and incorporated while also conveying meaning and statements.

Body modifications are sported as forms of self-affirmation bordering on empowerment, and may therefore reflect both an adherence to and rejection of dominant norms. Where the literature generally agrees that tattoos are consistent with female (Atkinson 2002) and male (Gill, Henwood, & McLean 2005) norms, feminist literature is keen to study their subversive potential (as defined by Butler). In a review of two centuries of tattooing among women, Margot Mifflin (1997) demonstrated the extent to which the practice reflects an appropriation of the female body by men, although it became a means to reappropriate one’s own body during feminist movements of the 1970s. The case of heavily tattooed women clearly testifies to this contradiction: whereas tattoos allow an individual to reclaim her body from a subjective standpoint, the societal result is a re-establishment of gender norms. The “monster beauty” (Braunberger 2000) of “heavily tattooed women” may be considered a source of distinction within the tattoo world. However, as described by Beverley Thompson (2015), this alternative beauty is often subject to sanctions mitigated by compensatory (good behavior) or avoidant (tattoo covering) strategies in family, professional and public spaces. This construction and management of a transgressive body has also been observed in intersectional frameworks (Santos 2009, see Hutter, Castellani & Thompson in Kloss 2020). The skin thus appears as a surface marked with “texts of race, gender, sexuality, class, and age, before it is marked with ink” (MacCormack 2006, 59).

Commitment to “non-mainstream body modifications” often reflects adherence to a non-conformist lifestyle (Wojcik 1995). Following on from Howard Becker’s notion of “career deviance,” Angus Vail (1999) examined the processes of affinity, affiliation, and meaning that allow the tattooed to become “tattoo collectors” and manage their ensuing deviant identity in spaces outside the tattoo world. Although “radical body modifications” (such as genital piercings, branding, cutting, and burning) are less common, such practices arise from a similar process of affiliation to sub-cultures that sometimes claim to be disaffiliated with mainstream society and its norms (Myers 1992). However, protests by these sub-cultures (such as those self-proclaimed or labelled “radical queers”, “modern primitives”, and “cyberpunks”) have little impact in subverting the social order, as their practices remain pathologized as a form of “self-mutilation”. Moreover, their conception of identity and body modification is aligned with the Cartesian (“mind over matter”) and neocolonial (authenticity of so-called “primitive” practices) ideologies of Western societies (Pitts 2003).

Unlike body modifiers, tattooists may claim the recognition of their craftsmanship as an art form thanks to their graphical skills. For Katherine Irwin (2003), this quest endeavors to acquire a privileged position within the tattoo world, which prefers to remain at the fringes of society by affirming a form of “positive deviance”. This “internal artification” (Kosut 2006) went hand-in-hand with a stratification of the profession based on a generational gap and difference in educational background (with a loud minority being first trained in an art school). Anyhow, the profession is still a provision of services, which requires professional tattooists to run their studio as a business, negotiate the production of visual elements from a primarily uninitiated client base, and found and maintain an occupation governed by informal exchanges yet subject to a partial, forced professionalization process due to its regulation (Rolle 2013). David Lane (2020) focused in particular on cultural transformations of the profession due to the redefined limits of and hierarchies within this group which is still predominantly organized around the model of “traditional tattoo shops.”

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