

Silent Symbols: Gendered Adornments and Bodily Beliefs among Adi Women of Upper Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract:

This paper explores the fading traditions of bodily adornment among Adi women of Upper Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. It focuses on two distinctive practices: the Lekkeng, a finely braided cane anklet made from a different bamboo cane called Tagil (*Dinochloa maclellandii*). It was worn by the married women of the Pasi and Padam sub tribes of the Adis. And the other were the ritual tattoos once etched onto the faces and legs of the young girls in the northern village of the district, namely Gette and its adjoining areas. Though aesthetic in form, these adornments carried profound cultural and spiritual meanings, symbolising marital identity, social recognition and the metaphysical belief in the afterlife. Drawing upon ethnographic interviews, this study interprets these adornments as expressions of embodied folklore and non-verbal narratives inscribed upon women's bodies. The Lekkeng functioned as a signifier of womanhood, community belonging and continuity of tradition, while tattooing represented an act of spiritual preparation, believed to grant women agency in the realm of death through symbolic barter. Through feminist folklore theory and anthropological insights into the body and material culture, the paper argues that such adornments reveal how gender, belief and ecology are interwoven in Adi cosmology. The discontinuation of these practices in the 1960s and 1970s marks not merely the erosion of tradition but the silencing of a symbolic language once spoken through women's bodies.

Keywords: Adi women, Arunachal Pradesh, ecofeminism, embodiment, folklore, gendered adornment, tattoos

1. Introduction

In many oral societies, the body functions as a text upon which culture inscribes meaning. Among the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, women's bodies once served as vital surfaces of cultural expression, adorned with intricate signs and symbols that conveyed both social and spiritual belonging. The *lekkeng*, a delicately woven anklet made out of a special species of cane bamboo called *Tagil* and the facial and leg tattoos within some cluster of villages of Upper Siang, were not mere decorative ornaments; they were living emblems of identity, femininity and continuity. The present study, situated within the ethnographic and cultural milieu of Upper Siang District, investigates how these adornments encapsulate the relationship between gender, belief and embodiment in Adi society.

The Adis, a major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabit both the hilly and riverine zones of the state. They are distributed across districts such as Upper Siang, East Siang, Siang and parts of Lower Siang, Lower Dibang Valley and Shi Yomi, the Adis comprise of several sub tribes, including the Pasi, Padam, Panggi, Millang, Karko, Shimong, Tangam, Asing, Bori and Bokar. Their culture is closely tied to the Siang River, whose tributaries sustain both ecology and the spiritual imagination of the people. Despite geographical variations, the Adis share a common worldview rooted in animism and oral tradition that emphasise reciprocity between human and natural realms.

This paper draws primarily on oral testimonies collected during fieldwork between May and September 2024 from six informants aged between 53 to 84 years. These accounts provide rare first hand recollections of practices that have now almost vanished. While *Lekkeng* anklets were last commonly till 1970s, the practice of tattooing girls aged ten to twelve ceased around the mid-1960s. Through these accounts, the research seeks to reconstruct the cultural logic and symbolic functions of these adornments within a framework that combines feminist folklore studies, material culture and the anthropology of the body.

2 Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in the theoretical perspectives of symbolic anthropology, gender theory and folk studies, with special reference to the works of Clifford Geertz (1973), Sherry Ortner (1974) and Mary Douglas (1966). These theoretical positions provide the interpretative lens through which the cultural symbols, beliefs and bodily adornments among Adi women of Arunachal Pradesh are examined.

Clifford Geertz's concept of culture as "an interpretive system of meanings" (Geertz, 1973, p.5) forms the foundational base of this study. Geertz's assertion that symbols and rituals are "models of and models for reality" allows the study to read the material and bodily adornments such as tattoos and cane anklets not merely as decorative but as meaningful texts that express social identity, spirituality and gender roles. The symbolic act of tattooing among a cluster of villages in the northern part of the Upper Siang District, for instance, extends beyond aesthetics and becomes a metaphoric negotiation with mortality and the afterlife. Through this symbolic lens, adornments function as communication codes of cultural belonging and gendered selfhood. Sherry Ortner's essay, *Is Female to Male as Nature is to culture?* (1974), serves as a critical framework for analysing the cultural positioning of women within Adi society. Ortner posits that the association of women with nature and men with culture contributes to gender hierarchies across societies. However, among the Adis, women's bodily inscriptions such as tattoos and anklets subvert this binary by embodying both biological and cultural agency. These adornments symbolically assert women's active participation in the cultural and ritual life of the community, thereby repositioning them as custodians of lineage and continuity. Mary Douglas's theory of purity and danger provides another interpretative layer. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas argues that cultural notions of cleanliness, order and taboo are central to maintaining social boundaries. The Adi practice of tattooing young girls before puberty and adorning married women with braided anklets can be read

as ritual acts of purification and incorporation, marking the transition of the body from one social state to another. The tattoos, believed to serve as barter in the afterlife, suggest the moral economy of exchange between the physical and spiritual realms, reflecting Douglas's idea that "the body is a symbol of society" (p.115). The framework also draws upon feminist folkloristic, which treats the female body as a living site of cultural inscription (Kodish, 1987; Narayan, 1997). The tattooing and anklet weaving traditions among the Adi women are acts through which the social body communicates meaning. As observed through fieldwork, these practices were not merely aesthetic but embodied cultural philosophies of continuity, reciprocity and belonging. The women, who wore braided anklets, locally crafted it from a specific cane bamboo locally called Tagil (), were often tattooed during their childhood between the ages of ten to twelve. The compensation for braided anklet weavers was often offered in labour by working in the artisan's fields which indicated a system of exchange deeply rooted in communal ethics rather than monetary transaction.

By synthesising symbolic, gendered and anthropological perspectives, this theoretical framework enables a holistic understanding of adornment as a narrative of identity and cosmology among Adi women. It situates the bodily symbols within a system of cultural signification where the female body, far from being a passive recipient of meaning, becomes an active site of ritual agency and memory. This interpretative lens thus underpins the larger aim of the paper to decode the silent symbols that articulate gendered belief, ritual aesthetics and the continuity of indigenous epistemology.

3. Ethnographic and Descriptive Analysis

The adornment practices among Adi women of Upper Siang District reveal a complex interplay between gender, belief and embodied expression. The *Lekkeng*, a finely woven anklet of delicate and flexible bamboo cane and the tattooing tradition observed among women of the region stand as two of the most striking symbols of feminine identity and spiritual continuity in the community. Among the Pasi and Padam sub tribes, the *Lekkeng* was once a marker of marital status. It was made from thin sliced delicate cane strands and was braided by skilled elder women and placed slightly above the ankle. The anklet was light, flexible and rarely removed, merging almost seamlessly with the wearer's skin. To restore its sheen, women smeared it with the leaves and flowers lending the accessory a subtle colour. The custom also involved a form of reciprocal labour economy. The woman for whom the anklet was crafted would work in the field of the weaver as payment. This system reflected a moral economy of mutual respect and feminine solidarity within Adi society. Notably, no equivalent adornment existed for married men, underlining the gender specific embodiment of marital identity. Oral testimonies suggest that *Lekkeng* disappeared from cultural practice by the 1970s, as modern clothing and changing social values redefined bodily aesthetics.

Similarly, the tattooing of young Adi girls, especially among those from the Gette and nearby areas, represented another dimension of bodily belief. Tattoos were inscribed on the face and legs when girls were about 10 to 12 years old, carried out by elder women using thorns and plant based pigments mixed with ashes. As recounted by elderly informants, this practice was grounded in a cosmological belief that upon death, the soul would enter another realm where survival depended on barter and the tattooed marks on a woman's body served as her spiritual currency. This faith, deeply rooted in the moral economy of reciprocity, elevated the tattoo from ornamentation to metaphysical necessity. However, with the advent of modern education, tattooing ceased around 1960-1965. It marks the end of a visual language that once connected the body to belief and the earthly to the divine. Together, these silent symbols embodied a uniquely feminine articulation of identity, faith and community. Their disappearance illustrates not merely cultural changes but a gradual silencing of the body as a canvas of tradition. What remains today are memories preserved through oral

testimonies, a living folklore that continues to whisper through the voices of the elderly women who once bore these marks with pride and reverence.

4. Interpretation

The adornment and tattooing practices among Adi women reflect the intimate relationship between body, belief and social identity in a pre-literate culture where the body itself served as a living manuscript of tradition. As Mary Douglas (1996) proposes, the body is a microcosm of society; its markings both mirror and reinforce the boundaries of the moral world. Within the Adi community, the *Lekkeng* anklet and tattooing tradition perform precisely this function as they transform the physical body into a medium of cultural order, where gender and spirituality converged. The *Lekkeng*, made from fine cane bamboo and worn by married women, was more than a decorative artefact. It was a symbolic contract between the individual and society. Through its material endurance and continuous renewal, it represented the permanence of marital ties and the moral stability of the community. The practice of compensating the anklet weaver through field labour echoes Marcel Mauss's (1954) concept of the *gift economy*, where exchange sustains social relationships rather than economic gain. In this context, labour, craft and kinship become intertwined in a web of reciprocal obligation, binding women through shared production and mutual respect. The gendered exclusivity of the anklet and its absence in the male domain further highlights how women's bodies were repositories of social symbolism. Sherry Ortner's (1974) notion that women are culturally linked to nature, while men represent culture, is subtly reconfigured here. Adi women through adornment and bodily inscription, actively transform natural materials like cane bamboo, plant dyes and skin into cultural texts. Their adornments are acts of creation, asserting their agency within the symbolic economy of marriage and community life.

The tattooing of young girls adds a spiritual dimension to this bodily authorship. The belief that tattoos functioned as barter in the afterlife reveals a cosmological understanding rooted in exchange and continuity. This aligns with Victor Turner's (1967) idea of ritual as "transformative performance", mediating the transition between life and death, self and society. Through tattooing, Adi women's bodies became both earthly and transcendent carrying marks that would serve as spiritual currency beyond the mortal world. The cessation of tattooing by the mid-1960s thus signifies more than a cultural decline; it represents the erosion of an order metaphysics in which the body itself was the site of belief. The decline of these practices underlines what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) describes as the "invention and erosion of tradition", wherein modernity, education and external influence reshape the symbolic vocabulary of indigenous life. For Adis, this change is visible in the transition from a culture of embodiment to a culture of narration, from wearing identity on the skin to recalling it in oral memory. Today, the *Lekkeng* and the tattoos survive as stories rather than substances, their meanings preserved through the recollections of the last generation of women who embodied them. Ultimately, these adornments illustrate the folklore of the body. They remind us that folklore need not always speak in words; sometimes, it whispers through design, gesture and belief. The Adi women's practices, once woven and inscribed upon their very skin, now stand as testimonies to a vanishing world in which the female body was both a canvas of culture and a vessel of continuity.

5 Conclusion

The traditional adornments and tattooing practices of Adi women, as explored through the ethnographic evidence from Upper Siang District, embody a sophisticated system of gendered symbolism and belief. The *Lekkeng* anklet and facial tattoos were not mere ornaments; they represented cultural codes, inscribed and performed upon the body that articulated ideas of identity, continuity and cosmology. In both cases, the female body was the canvas upon which the Adi worldview was aesthetically and spiritually expressed. These adornments signified not only marital and social roles but also the metaphysical conviction that the body carried moral and ritual value

extending beyond life itself. The study underscores how these bodily practices formed part of an indigenous epistemology, a system of knowledge transmitted through embodied folklore rather than written text. Within this worldview, every material act of weaving the anklet, etching the tattoo was an articulation of belonging and belief. The *Lekkeng* created and exchanged within a moral economy of labour and reciprocity, reflected a social order grounded in cooperation and feminine solidarity. Likewise, tattooing represented an early moral lesson, teaching young girls that their bodies were not personal but also spiritual vessels, prepared for life, death and what lay beyond.

However, as modern education, religious conversion and changing aesthetics reshaped the social landscape, these practices gradually faded. The discontinuation of tattoos and the disappearance of anklets mark a significant cultural transition from a society where meaning was worn to one where meaning is remembered. Yet, through the recollections of elder informants, these silent symbols persist in memory, testifying to a time when adornment was both identity and belief and the body a sacred archive of communal wisdom. Preserving and documenting such intangible heritage is therefore essential. It not only contributes to understanding women's roles in indigenous knowledge systems but also helps to revalue the body as a site of folklore and historical memory. In the end, the anklet and the tattoos of Adi women are not lost traditions but muted voices, whispers of an aesthetic and moral imagination that continues to inform Adi identity. They remain eloquent reminders that the body, in its silence, once spoke the language of culture, continuity and the sacred feminine.

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