

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

Dr. Benketaf Hafid (*)

Tahri Mohamed University,
(Algeria),
Benketaf.hafid@univ-bechar.dz

Dr. Melki Fatima Zohra

Tahri Mohamed University,
(Algeria),
melki.fatimazohra@univ-
bechar.dz

Received date: 09/10/2023 **Acceptance date:** 29 /12 /2024 **Publication date:** 03 /06 /2025

Abstract:

This article aims at studying tattooing as a vanished practice in the Algerian culture. The research methodology is based on qualitative and quantitative methods of collecting data that relies on few documents mostly written in French, and on scarce testimonies. The study reveals that tattooing remained a primitive art as regards the symbols, designs, and significance. The purpose of tattooing was either to reveal beauty or to hide it, which means that beautiful and ugly girls would be put on the same footing as regards their chances of getting married since imperfect face traits were dissimulated by the tattoos. Tattooing was performed to protect the girls from being sexually harassed or assaulted since a face-tattooed girl or woman does not sexually appeal to most men especially the French colonisers. Magic or therapeutic tattoos were performed to protect from the devils and the evil eye, and to cure incurable illnesses. The research could not establish any discrepancy in the design and significance of the tattoos between Arab and Berber communities. Post-independence democratisation of education and the fight against illiteracy caused the disappearance of tattooing because of the new social, political, and economic roles acquired by women.

Keywords:

Tattoos ; Algeria ; cultural Identity ; tattoos symbols; tattoos designs; tattoos significance

* Corresponding author

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

1. Introduction

As human beings, we have the innate desire to communicate through different means. The way of dressing or putting on ornaments for the enhancement of beauty has always been a way to cause the admiration of the others in all civilisations. Since beauty is in the eye of the beholder, we voluntarily or involuntarily communicate through our physical appearance, dressing, and gestures or behaviour in general to attract attention, which would take quite strange and unusual ways in certain tribes where a make-up takes the form of body mutilation. In this regard, tattooing is a form of communication to express artistically what speech cannot convey. The singularity of tattooing is that it is idiosyncratic but performed by a second person, the tattooist, on the body of the tattooed. The intention to get a tattoo is not always designed for public appreciation, but is a narcissist construction of the image of the self.

Etymologically, the word Tattoo or Tattow as introduced by Thomas Cook in the 18th century is a Polynesian word *Tatau* meaning 'mark on the skin.' The equivalent word tattoo in Arabic is the noun *washm* /waʃm/ from the verb *washama* /waʃama/. The history of tattooing has evolved from ancient times with different reasons, various significance, and taking different forms. Ethnic tattooing was largely widespread within the ethnic groups that used special markings on the body to display their belonging to a tribe as it was practiced by Polynesian tribes, which helped greatly in differentiating the friends from the foes in the battlefields. Tattooing was also used to mark the slaves, the fugitives, and captured enemies with special pictograms to display to whom they belonged to prevent them from escaping, or just to indicate their social category. It is judicious to underline the fact that the decision to get a tattoo is not always individually taken, but decided by the others in the case of gang initiation entry, or to access the status of manhood in certain tribes.

Volume 10 , Issue 01, (June- 2025).....PP(584/606)

In North Africa, the social, cultural, economic, and political context determined the nature and characteristics of tattooing. It was exclusively given to the females in the Arab and Tamazight tribes, which raises serious questions on its origin, purposes, social function, symbolism and significance, and designs. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to shed light on the tradition of tattooing especially in Algeria during the colonial period up to 1962. The themes debated in this article include male and female tattoos in the Algerian communities as regards their characteristics and purposes, the procedures in the practice of tattooing, and finally tattooing in Islam.

2. Tattooing Tradition in the Algerian Culture: Arab and Berber

The practice of tattooing has always existed in peoples' mores. It is practiced for different purposes with diversified connotations, but using the same technique of creating pinpricks on the skin following a pattern and then rubbed with a black or green substance to leave an indelible mark. Whether in the ancient civilisations or in our modern civilisation, tattooing has been directly linked to intellectual backwardness and a sign of moral standards' degeneration because it is associated with the 'primitive' societies, the criminal organisation, and the incarcerated population. In 19th century civilised cities of Europe, tattooing was associated with a return to an inferior sphere of intellectual development. (Sergeant, 1901)

Although peoples' consideration of the tattoo may change, it is a constant that it is the result of the environment where the communities struggle to survive the throes of life, the wars, and tragedies. Therefore, the tattoo cannot be interpreted outside of the social context where it was designed and performed, and cannot be disassociated from the historical events experiences that the individual or the community went through. It develops into a system of codified symbols established by the community that uses the body as a medium for the others to read

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

and decipher the intended message of communication within the framework of the dominant cultural and social values. However, the tattooed puts himself in an ambiguous situation where his tattoos express what he does not say leaving the interpretation of his emotions, ideas, or values to be guessed by the others depending on a code of patterns and signs decided by the community.

It is undeniable that the tattooing tradition in the Algeria communities did not constitute a form of writing properly designed to transcribe speech, but form a collection of symbols and ideograms that each has its own magic, curative, ethnic, and cultural significance according to the community where it was practiced. The tattooing symbols used by the Arab and Tamazight communities are not easy to decipher for a non-initiated person. It is difficult to comprehend the meaning of the tattoo because the correlation between the signified (idea) and signifier (symbol) is impossible to realise by the tattooist that does not have the intellectual and artistic skills, and efficient tools to realise fine pictographs and concretise abstract ideas. In addition, the tattoo is not something planned in advance because it obeys to people's wants and needs to get a tattoo and depends on the instant inspiration and imagination of the tattooist, the result of which is never guaranteed to produce the expected effect.

The tattoos, therefore, take the form of a representation of the thing intended to inscribe on the skin. In certain cases, the design is invented first and then given a name according to the resemblance it had with the thing named after, which is subject to the accuracy and inventiveness of the tattooist in creating the tattoo and naming it. An example of this is the pictogram of the 'fly' (See pictogram p.11) represented with two crossed lines with four dots in each corner, probably named so because from far the tattoo looks like a fly is on the face of the tattooed. The reason for the preponderance of this tattoo is that a beauty spot on the cheek of a woman enhances her beauty traits

Volume 10 , Issue 01, (June- 2025).....PP(584/606)
and was greatly appreciated by men in the Algerian communities. The choice of the names of the tattoos is significant in determining the intellectual level and the artistic tastes of the individuals. Although the fly is a repugnant insect and a nuisance, it is used to name a pictogram that enhances beauty.

Tattooing was more widespread during the colonial period where the intellectual and educative level of the Algerians was very low because of the French policy to refuse them access to education. As a result of the reduced educational opportunities, only 5.9 % of the Moslem males and 1.6 % of the Moslem females were literate (Andrews, 1962). Illiteracy was an important factor that helped in the spread of pagan beliefs and witchcraft practices though Islam, which forbids such practices, was recognised as the religion of the local population. It is illiteracy that diversified the purposes of tattoos in the Algerian communities since solutions to unsolvable and incurable problems could be found in other rituals than religious belief or medical practices for example. According to Gärtner (1990) the purposes of tattoo symbols and designs can be summarised in the following four points:

1. Ornamental, decorative: for aesthetic purposes
2. Distinctive: for tribal, honorary, or religious distinction
3. Therapeutic or protective to cure illnesses and ward off misfortune
4. Conduct for the memorisation of different enjoyable or stressful events such as love, an exploit, a tragic event, that the memory is not relied on to keep and it is only on the flesh that such events would be kept for the whole lifetime.

The ornamental reason for tattooing emanates from the desire and love to put on sets of jewel to look elegant and beautiful. Women tattoos were usually designed in the form of crosses, flowers, garlands around the neck, the wrists, the chest, and the ankles. This could be

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

explained by the fact that it was common for women from poor communities to be ashamed of not wearing golden jewellery, which pushed them out of coquetry to put on tattoos as a substitution to the desired jewels. This is reflected in the forms of their tattoos that took the form of bracelets, a set of jewels around the neck, and a necklace.

The forms and designs of the tattoos were generally the same in most communities in Algeria with just slight variations, which eliminates the use of tattoos for distinctive tribal reasons (Bertholon , 1904). The communities used other means to distinguish or display the distinctive tribe symbols such as the clothes, the jewellery, and mostly the complexion and face traits. The tattoos were also used on slaves as a mark to know the owner. In this regard, the tattoo tradition in the Algerian society developed into two quite distinct forms of tattoos that embraced themes conceived separately by males, and those by the females. Therefore, the study of the tattoos developed by the males and the females will reveal the social and gender appreciation, motives, and the motifs created for different purposes.

2.1. Male Tattoos in the Algerian Communities

In the Algerian communities, tattooing was appreciated and encouraged act to be performed on the females, but it was considered as a sign of debauchery and perdition for the males. Tattooed males were mostly those who committed crimes or were incarcerated. Implicitly, the community considered tattooed men as unworthy and dangerous, and people of bad manners seeking only troubles whose acquaintance had to be avoided. The tattoos were mostly performed in prison to express personal experience or desires, or simply a mark on the flesh to become a reminder of the events that happened or the future intentions.

It is well established that the locking up dehumanises the incarcerated persons that become the property of the authorities. Undergoing physical and psychological violence in prison engenders a

Volume 10 , Issue 01, (June- 2025).....PP(584/606)
feeling of rejection of the body. The skin becomes a means of communication to express through tattoos what the prisoner cannot say, and in cases, the rejection of the body is expressed through mutilation and obscene tattoos. Tattooing is then a way to transform weakness and servitude into an offensive resistance and a means for survival to express hatred of the enemies (police, justice, ex-friends, traitors...), and defiance to life in general. This required an artistic and linguistic medium to put the ideas into legible signs and writing.

The signs are very limited whether in their design or the body part where they are tattooed. The places that the Algerian males have a predilection for are exclusively the hands, the arms, and the feet because they are most of the time uncovered. Add to that the fact that these places are accessible for a self-tattooing. The meanings of the tattoos that can be a simple or decorated crescent, a star in the form of a cross or an asterisk, or a five-angled star are tattooed for different reasons. They may symbolise the direction or orientation that one should take to reach the wanted destination mainly the loved ones. They may also represent a companion for a lonely person as for a traveller in a desert, which a prison cell resembles in many respects. In addition, the star with five cones is considered as a lucky charm. The association of a star and the symbol of home mean that the person longs for going home, thus he needs a star to follow to reach it. The crescent also represents birth and death of the moon in its monthly cycle referring to life as it begins and ends. It is also a religious symbol in Islam mainly when associated with a star, because the Hegira calendar is counted on the moon revolution around the earth. The ring is a reminder of the beloved woman whether the lost one or the wanted one. The waves tattoo is used to symbolise the rough life that the tattooed went through. When it is associated with the dots this means that the person went through hard times and stood against all odds as a strong man that nothing could defeat. Within the same idea, the lines of good and evil express the ambivalence of all mortals that would do bad things but also

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

good actions. The following pictograms are not an exhaustive collection of male tattoos in Algeria, but a sample of the most common ones.

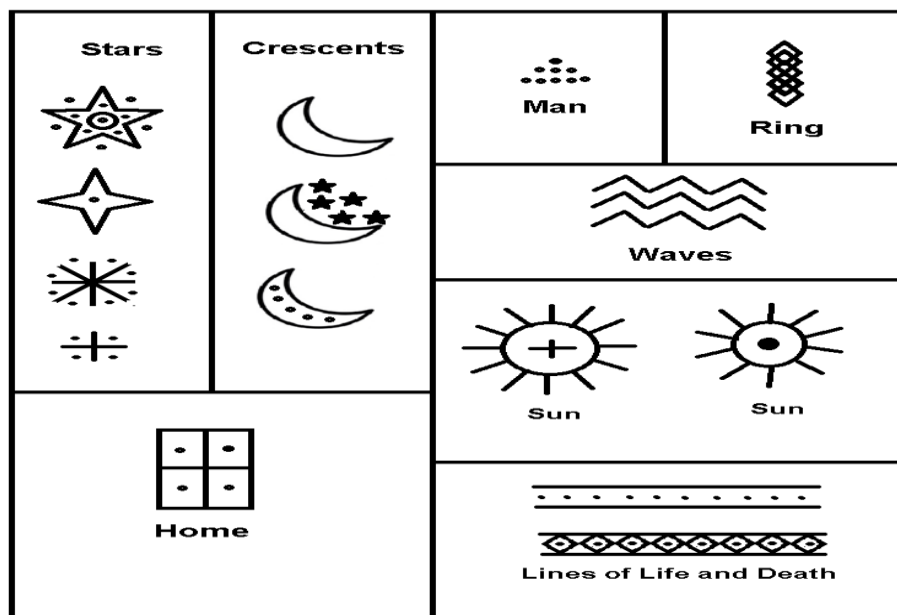


Figure 1 : Common Male Tattoos

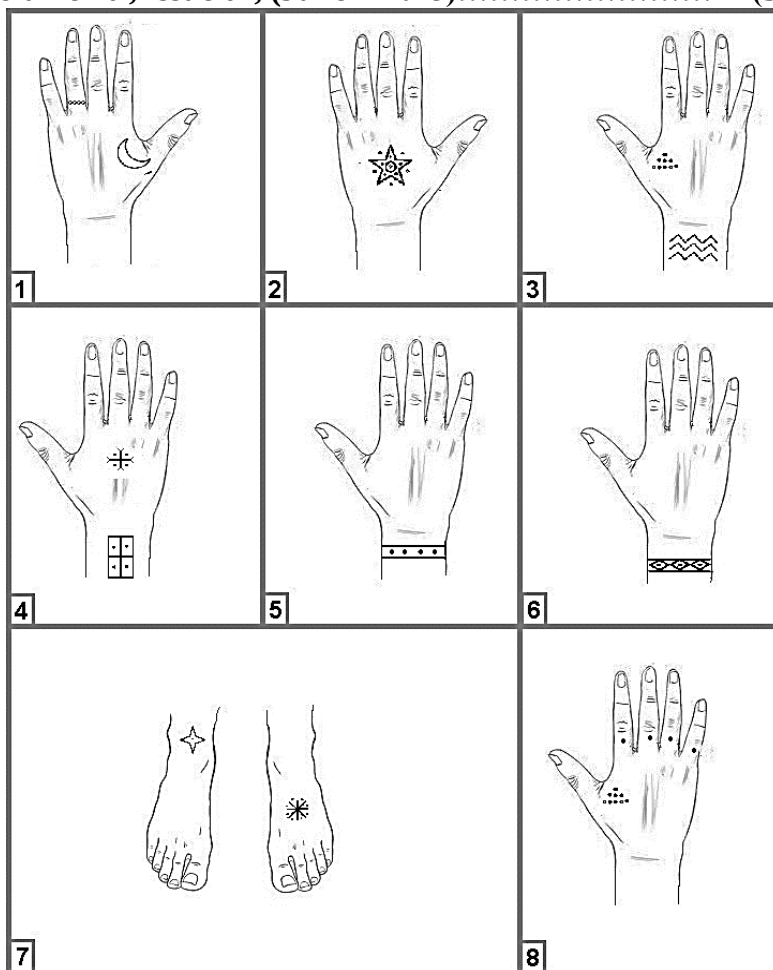


Figure2: Male Hand and feet Common Tattoos: 1. Crescent and ring - 2. Star - 3. Waves - 4. Home and Star - 5. Good and Evil Lines - 6. Good and Evil Lines - 7. Stars on feet - 8. Manliness dots

Male tattoos in the form of words or expressions are exclusively in French. The widespread phrases mainly in prisons are '*pas d'amis*' meaning **no friends**, or '*pas de chance*' meaning 'no chance,' or '*pour la vie M*' meaning **for life** the **M** can be the first letter of the name of

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

the beloved, or '*sans pitié*' meaning **no mercy** as a reminder to have no mercy for the enemies. The word '*solo*' is tattooed to express the solitary life led by the person and his mistrust of the others. Drawings are also tattooed on the chest, the back, or the shoulders representing animals, or things such as a bleeding heart, a knife, a butterfly, etc...

It is important to underline the fact that such tattoos are tattooed in French and not in Arabic. This could be explained by the fact that the tattooist and the tattooed knew that it was inappropriate to use the language of the Quran in the tattoo, or simply because French script was easier for the tattooist to perform than using the Arabic letters. It is more accurate and plausible that French was used because the majority of the Algerian males whether during the colonial period and even after the independence were illiterate and those who could read and write did it exclusively in French.

2.2. Female Tattoos in the Algerian Communities

Tattooing was seen as a means to enhance beauty traits. The decision to get tattoos was a tradition to announce that the girls reached puberty, which was a sign that they were ready for marriage. It was a custom in the Algerian communities to give their girls for marriage at the age of fourteen years old, which of course depended on the girls' physical condition. The Algerian families of the different ethnic groups (Tamazight or Arabs) are sensitive and very serious about family honour issues considering the honour of the family in the honour of the daughters. It is then probable that the purpose of face-tattoo was not only intended to enhance beauty for the appreciation of the autochthons, but also to hide it from the foreigners who would consider it as repellent. Appreciating face-tattooed women developed by education since the boys that opened their eyes on their mothers' tattoos would surely look for a tattooed woman to marry, and encourage the tattooing of their daughters. The Kabyls considered the tattooing of the girls as

Volume 10 , Issue 01, (June- 2025).....PP(584./606)
an honour given to the family. The girls were tattooed on the front between the eye brows, on one side of the nose, or on one cheek with a small bluish cross created by using canon powder or antimony oxide (Lacassagne,1881).

On the other hand, a non-initiated person in this tradition will surely find tattooed women as repulsively ugly. The experience of being in contact with face-tattooed women in the Algerian communities is quite astonishing because such women, who are today in their 70s and 90s of age, have the effect of attracting the eyes on their face-tattoos bewildering their interlocutors, who for a while do not know how to deal with them. This effect is felt with all the encountered face-tattooed women that oblige the interlocutor to show them some respect because their fierce and wild or simply strange look even when smiling. Even today, there is a general shared belief that a face-tattooed woman is quite dangerous, and that one should not mess about with. The spread of face-tattooing little girls during the colonial period was partly aimed to dissuade any person from assaulting girls especially the French colonists or soldiers, or any person that would encounter village girls shepherding in far places or working in the fields, or doing domestic activities such as bringing water or gathering wood.

The little girls were generally tattooed by a woman called the *Addassia* from the Gypsy tribe of *Beni Addass* that some of them still live in North Africa. Lacassagne (1881) observed that in the provinces of Algiers, Constantine, Setif, Aumale, and Media, the Arab and Kabylia communities paid the tattooing services of a Moorish woman that attended the local markets. Men rarely practiced tattooing as the separation of men and women was strictly observed. After the tattooing was finished, a plant named *Maghnina* was applied on the tattooed parts as an antiseptic for nearly one day. The price of tattooing varied depending of the purpose and difficulty of the tattoos. The tattooist was generally paid in money, barely, wheat, or other cereals.

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

Testimonies from old women in the western regions of Algeria confirm that people waited for the period of local or biennial markets to pay the services of itinerant beautician women or a simple barber to give to their little girls their first tattoos. However, the tattoos were not designed to represent faithfully the names they held, but symbolise them as the tattooist (barber or beautician) did not have the drawing skills to tattoo the image of a partridge, a camel, a palm tree, etc...

The tattoos were mainly performed on the visible parts of the body of the girls including the face, the arms, the neck, and the feet. During adulthood, a woman could get tattoos on the intimate parts of her body exclusively for her husband. Each tattoo has its own place of predilection, for example, the Burnouse tattoo was always tattooed on the front to symbolise the tribe's or the family's protective men as the burnoose was both used as a menswear to protect from the cold, and a display of men's sartorial elegance that put the wearer on high social status in the tribe. This symbol was also attributed the faculty to protect the tattooed from misfortune. The eye of the partridge tattoo was tattooed on one of the cheeks or on both of them to symbolise the beauty and grace of the woman as that of the partridge. Other designs such as the fly, the camel, the scorpion or the gazelle could be found tattooed on the face each representing the quality or importance in the daily life of the people. The palm tree symbol was the emblem of fertility tattooed exclusively on the chin or the arms as a means to boost women's fertility. This could be explained by the fact that the Saharan populations depended on dates for their survival, and thus associated the palm tree with fertility. While certain symbols such as the dog or the jackal were used to protect little children, to cure the sick, or to ward off misfortune, the snake or the scorpion were tattooed to repel illness, and the turtle to heal chronic headaches.

Associations were made arbitrarily, which means that it was up to the tattooist or the community to decide on the tattoo's design adding

Volume 10 , Issue 01, (June- 2025).....PP(584./606)
to it a mystic or magic hint. In some cases, the symbol had no significance because it was left to the inspiration of the moment mainly when the tattoo was used for witchcraft purposes since illiteracy fostered the belief that cure and divine protection could be procured through tattoos (Belhassen, 1976). The following pictograms sum up the most common female tattoos in the Algerian communities.

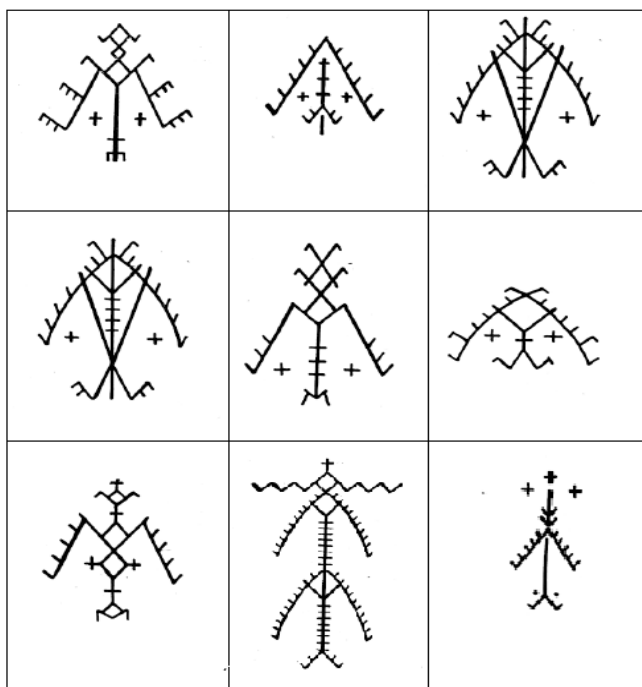
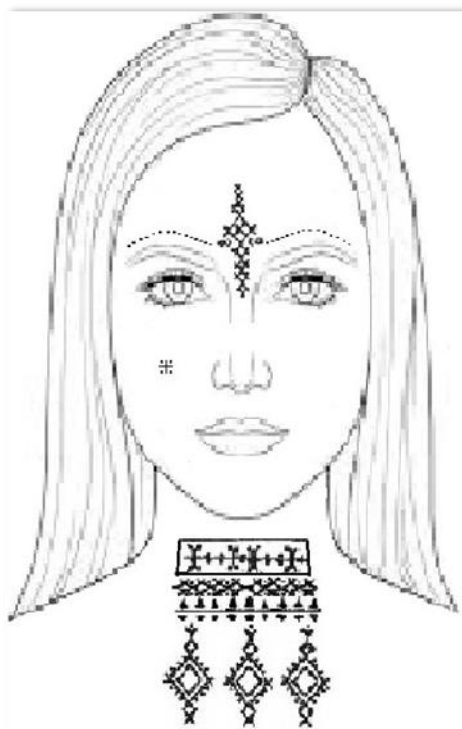
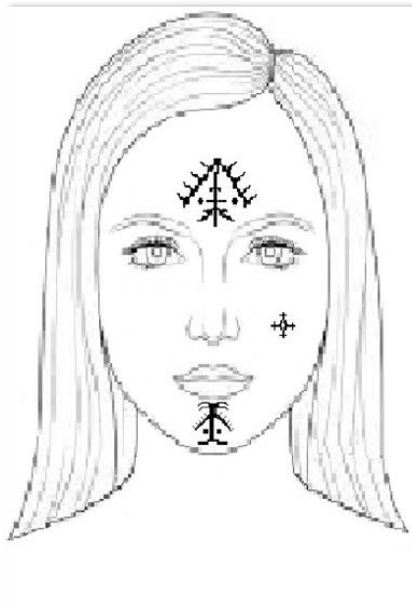


Figure 3: Variations of the Burnouse Tattoo (generally tattooed on the front)

As mentioned earlier, the tattooing custom is not generally used within the Algerian communities to distinguish one community or tribe from another. Other traits are used for such purpose such as the physical appearance, the dressing, and the language. It is easy to distinguish

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

from first look a Kabylia from a Chawia (Chaouia) or an Arab according to their clothes and physical appearance. The use of tattoos as distinctive signs for racial, tribal, and even belonging to a social status purpose is preponderant within the African black tribes that used the scars on the front or on the cheeks as signs for the belonging to a given tribe, a social cast, or a religious sect.



Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

Figure 4: Common Female Tattoos. Left: Burnoose on the Front, Eye of the Partridge on the cheek, and Palm Tree on the chin. Right: Forms of Jewells on the front, the neck, and the chest, with a fly tattoo on the cheek.

The religious purpose of tattoos takes the form of an initiation process in the domain through the tattooing of symbols or animals on the arms, the chest or the face that give to the initiated honourable status and to legitimise his adherence to the domain of the sacred. The tattoos legitimate those who get them to lead a cult or conduct religious ceremonies, and evoking the spirits or the gods to fulfil the demands of the community. However, in North Africa, this purpose is rare because of the existence of Islam as a monotheist religion that forbids shamanism and charlatan procedures such as, sorcery, pagan cults, and black magic. In Algeria, religion is generally associated with therapeutic procedures since the Imam or any person who learned the Holy Quran by heart also called *Taleb* (plu. *Tolba*, literally meaning student of religion) are requested to cure the illnesses using the sacred verses of the Quran. This does not exclude the fact that people still use the name *Taleb* for a person that resorts to witchcraft practices and charlatanism to fulfil their wants and needs. The confusion in the use of the name *Taleb* results from the use of this word as a euphemism to designate the sorcerer. This can be explained by the fact that in some cases the *Taleb* uses Quran verses for witchcraft purposes, which is forbidden in Islam that inflicts the same retributive punishment for both the sorcerer and those who resort to his services.

On the other hand, the cultural belief in the healing properties of tattoos is not the only method used to cure illnesses. Scars and burns are the last resort that people adopt when all other therapeutic procedures give no results. Generally, preventive scars take the form of two short parallel lines using a razor or a sharp blade on the temples or the right side of the nose, or simply on the place where the person feels

Volume 10 , Issue 01, (June- 2025).....PP(584/606)
pain. Then a colouring substance is rubbed on the wounds to reveal a distinctive simple tattoo. It is worth noting that scars from burns by fire or sulphur to cure illnesses related to rheumatism or the sciatic nerve leave indelible marks in the form of simple tattoos. The latter reveal the courage of the person in supporting pain and a proof of his manliness. This operation is strictly conducted exclusively by a man also called *the Taleb*. Today the practice of alternative medicine prospers as charlatans that take advantage of people's distress by offering cures, financially compensated, using the flora and the fauna to cure incurable illnesses or those that are newly discovered.

3. Tattooing Procedures in the Algerian Communities

The procedure of performing tattoos has not changed much from the ancient times. A sharp tool (needle or knife) is used to perforate the skin to drain blood, and then the place is covered with coloured substance usually black or green. In Algeria, the pinprick tattoo procedure was the most spread within the Arab and Berber tribes that usually used tools provided by the surrounding environment such as a thorn, a sharpened splinter of a reed, or utensils such as a sharp knife, or a shaving blade. It was advisable for the success of the *Ahajam* to execute it by the hand of a murderer or at least the knife that was used to commit a murder (Rivière, 1942). It is worth noting that the knife was not principally used for purely decorative tattoos (*Washm*), but for *Hajm* or *Hijama* in Arabic and *Ahajam* in Chaouia dialect. The *Hajm* is a method to drain blood from the body to relieve the person from arterial pressure or the 'bad' blood that contains toxic elements according to the general belief. It is practiced by inflicting incisions in special areas including the back of the head, on the shoulder blade, or the lumbar muscles, to drain blood using a traditional suction device made of leather. Today suction cups are used instead as matters of hygiene and sterilisation, and are closely watched by the patients. The

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

Hajm is still used today for purely therapeutic purposes, which means that anyone can perform a decorative tattoo, but therapeutic or protective tattoos must be performed by special reputed people. This practice leaves also marks that would be seen as tattoos, but they remain very simple in the design taking the form of dots or incisions of two short parallel lines. It is not usual that a pigment is added to the wounds after the operation.

The pigments are generally if not exclusively black, green, or blue to reveal the tattoos. The black colour is obtained when using the kohl mainly on women with a dark complexion just to fade into green colour after many years. The green or blue colours are obtained by mixing charred alum stone with copper sulphate, copper carbonate, and clove. In cases where a person needed a therapeutic intervention, incisions are practiced on the place of pain followed with application of coloured substance such as the henna or crushed charcoal. Such practice is still resorted to when modern medicine fails to bring relief or cure diseases. As mentioned earlier, the quality of the tattoos was subject to the tattooist's skills and experience, and his or her interpretation of the symbols. The latter did not always represent the idea or the item to be tattooed and the result could be disappointing.

Therefore, women had resorted to temporary tattoos using the henna for decorative purposes. The temporary decorative designs are intended to last for a short period of time. Temporary tattoos are performed in special traditional designs that women put on as make up for special occasions such as marriages, feasts, rites, or religious manifestations. The basic ingredients used to draw the motifs on the skin is the henna, which might be mixed with China ink, charcoal, oil, kohl, alum and other combusted vegetal element available in the natural surroundings. In Morocco and the western regions of Algeria, temporary tattooing is simply called *henne* or *reshim*, and called *Harqus* in the eastern part of Algeria and in Tunisia. It is always

Volume 10 , Issue 01, (June- 2025).....PP(584/606)
performed by a specialist woman that might be a hairdresser or a marriage caretaker. If the temporary tattoos are intended for a bride or unmarried young girls, it takes the form of diverse floral designs and geometrical motifs. This kind of tattooing is performed exclusively on body parts including the arms, hands, legs, and feet. The henna is left on the skin for a definite period, usually no more than one night, and then washed away to reveal the imprints on the skin.

4. Islam and the Tattoo Tradition in Algeria

Tattooing is forbidden in Islam although it is not openly and namely mentioned in the Quran. Tattooing is forbidden because it falls in the same category of acts that intended to change the physical traits created by Allah as mentioned in Surate *An-Nissa* (Women), verse 119:

“and I (Satan) will lead them astray and give them [false] hopes, and prompt them to slit the ears of cattle, and I will prompt them to alter Allah’s creation.’ Whoever takes Satan as a guardian instead of Allah has certainly incurred a manifest loss”

The verse stipulates that any action intended to change the form of the body as created by God is forbidden and is a satanic action. The Muslim scholars except to this rule all surgical operations that would save the life of a human being, or the reconstructive plastic surgery, and not the cosmetic one, to treat burns, improve body functions, congenital defects, or developmental abnormalities, or any other operation that would give back the normal appearance to the human body to be socially accepted. Therefore, if we consider the tattoos as a means to change the body and give another form different from the one that Allah had decided, then it is forbidden. It is the Prophet Mohamed (Peace Be upon Him) that forbids tattoos openly, that is why there is a consensus on forbidding it in Islam. In the Hadith told by Abdullah Ibn Messaoud,

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

the Prophet said: *'May God curse the woman that extends her hair and the one that seeks it, and the tattooist and the tattooed.'* It is evident that the population in the Maghreb had already had knowledge of the forbidding of tattooing because the Muslim scholars and Imams had always reminded them of the Sharia's rule on tattoos. Rivière and Faublée (1942) noticed in their study of the Shaouia tribe of Ouled Abderrahman in the Aurès Mountains that they tattooed their girls before their first Ramadan. On the other hand, tattooing was forbidden in the Si Ali Musa Arab tribe as it was reputed for their piety and religious devotion.

However, people are always blinded by their wants and needs, which gives them impetus to transgress the rules and resort to forbidden prophylactic and magic practices. During the colonial period, people gave tattoos powers as the sterile woman to have children, the poor to become fortunate, or to protect the children from illness and death. In Islam, such people are considered as sinners because they associate other deities with Allah, who has the power to decide who will get children and who will not, the same thing with fortune, and life and death. The dilemma in trying to satisfy urgent wants and needs using forbidden means but without committing a sin pushed people to be very inventive. Parents avoided practising the tattoos themselves on their daughters, and they tattooed them at an early age to avoid the curse in the Hadith. This could be proved by the fact that the parents or relatives did not practice the tattoos, but paid the services of another woman, who was a Gypsy with unidentified religion, which implied that the curse was on her and not on the parents or any Muslim member of the community. The girls were given the tattoos before puberty because they were not yet commissioned to practice Islam precepts. The little girls would grow without being liable for the tattoos that were given to them at an age before puberty. Intentionally or unintentionally, this was a means in the Algerian Muslim communities to circumvent the Sharia rule that forbids tattooing. Today, people's awareness prevents the

Volume 10 , Issue 01, (June- 2025).....PP(584/606)
spread of tattooing in Muslim communities, although some youngsters would practice it only in imitation of the frenetic and craze for tattooing that the world witnesses.

5. Research Conclusions

During the colonial period, the Algerian Tamazight and Arab communities gave tattoos high consideration and appreciation. French colonialism helped greatly in the development of shamanism and charlatanism employing witchcraft and magic procedures for therapeutic purposes because literacy and medical care and treatment were denied to the Algerians, which pushed them to resort to all means including tattooing to solve their problems. Identifying the reasons and purposes for tattoos is challenging since they were mostly performed only on girls at a very young age, and that the tradition faded away completely after the independence. The women and men that could testify on this practice are advanced old people, who could not give much information on tattooing. Tattooing in the Algerian communities was used for aesthetic, therapeutic, and as a living memory.

The findings in this study reveal that tattooing did not evolve but remained a primitive art as regards the symbols, significance, and body areas where it was performed. The ambiguity in the tattooing tradition was that it was performed to enhance beauty or hide it at the same time. While face tattoos enhanced beauty by dissimulating the imperfections from being detected, they were intended to hide the girls' beauty to protect them from being sexually harassed or assaulted since a face tattooed girl or woman does not sexually appeal to most men from the first sight. This explains the spread of tattooing during the colonial period because of the existence of the foreign agent in the person of the French colonisers, who would not find a tattooed woman very appealing. Within the Algerian communities whether Arabs or

Tattooing Tradition in the Berber and Arab Communities of Algeria during the Colonial Period

Tamazight, tattooing was performed for magic or therapeutic reasons as a means for protection from the devils and the evil eye, and to cure incurable illnesses. On the other hand, male tattoos were performed in certain circumstances mainly in prisons where the designs and significance developed to serve as a living memory engraved on the flesh.

Tattooing tastes and appreciations, and practices faded away after getting rid of French colonialism in 1962. The Algerian Government's policy of democratising education helped in marginalising this practice because it did not fit the new social, political, and economic roles that women acquired. The fight against illiteracy among the adults was also determinant in excluding tattooing. In addition, the fact that Islam forbids tattooing dealt the coup de grace to the existence of this practice. For today's men in the Algerian communities, tattoos are considered as repelling and a desecration of the natural beauty of the human body, and a degrading mutilation executed on little girls against their will. The revival of tattooing in Algeria within today's world infatuation for tattooing is improbable as the spread of literacy, the evolution of artistic tastes, the preponderance of Sharia in people's lives, and the lack of breeding grounds for its development like gangs and gangs' culture. However, only the future will reveal the veracity of this statement within a constantly changing world and cultural globalisation.

Bibliography List

Andrews, W.G. (1962). *French Politics and Algeria, the Process of Policy Formation 1954-1962*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts

Belhassen, B. (1976). 'Le Tatouage Maghrébin.' In : *Communication et Langages*. N°31. pp. 56-67

Bertholon, L. (1904). 'Origines Néolithique et Mycénienne des Tatouages des Indigènes du Nord de l'Afrique.' In : *Bulletin de la Société d'anthropologie de Lyon*. Tome 23, pp. 220-233

Gärtner, M. (1990). 'Le Tatouage dans l'Antiquité Grecque.' In: *Mélanges Pierre Lévêque*. Tome 5 : Anthropologie et société. Besançon : Université de Franche-Comté, pp. 101-115. (Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon, 429)

Lacassagne A. (1881). *Les Tatouages : Etude Anthropologique et Médico-Légale*. Paris : Librairie J. B. Baillièpe et Fils

Rivière T., et Faublée, J. (1942). 'Les Tatouages des Chaouias de l'Aurès.' In : *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*. Tome 12. pp. 67-80

Sergent, E. (June, 25, 1901). *Les Tatouages dans Les Pays Chauds et leur Ablation*. Montpellier : Faculty of Medicine