From Tattoos to Textiles

Murni's Guide to Asian Textiles

All You Need to Know...and More

Jonathan Copeland

and

Ni Wayan Murni

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Photographs by Jonathan Copeland

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For Roger and Ray for their enduring friendship

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What they said about Tattoos to Textiles, Murni's Guide to Asian Textiles, All you Need to Know…And More

"From Tattoos to Textiles binds together the colourful threads of an extraordinary human story."

Dr Fiona Kerlogue, Deputy Keeper of Anthropology with responsibility for the Asian and European collections at the Horniman Museum, London, Author of *Arts of Southeast Asia,* and *Batik: Design, Style and History*

"What a treat to read such a beautiful, flowing, informative and passionate treatise on Indonesian textiles."

Peter O'Neill OAM
Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia

"*From Tattoos to Textiles* is both easy-to-read and informative."

Professor Michael Hitchcock
Dean, Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Macau University of Science and Technology, Author of *Indonesian Textiles*

"This extraordinary book will not only enthral and enlighten readers but also energize the tradition of hand-woven textiles in Southeast Asia."

Dr Linda McIntosh, Curator for The Jim Thompson House, Bangkok and Curator of The Tilleke & Gibbins Southeast Asian Textile Collection, Bangkok, Author of *Ritual Thai Textiles, Status, Myth and the Supernatural* and *Art of Southeast Asian Textiles: The Tilleke and Gibbins Collection*

"From Tattoos to Textiles tells a tale as old as Adam and Eve, as mysterious as Neith the Egyptian goddess, as intriguing as General George Washington, the first President of the United States, making his own clothes, and certainly a great deal more colourful than Chairman Mao's cotton boiler suits."

Stephanie Brookes, Travel Writer

Prologue

When I first visited the Far East in 1979 I had no idea what a textile really was. I thought it was just a piece of cloth and had no notion that it was a rich world of secret symbols, many of whose meanings have been lost, and which are sometimes even hidden from those who make, wear and use them. It is a fascinating journey into history, geography, anthropology and art. The world of Indonesian textiles is so vast that it is impossible to describe all the treasures in one volume, so what we have attempted to do is explain why they are so important to the people of Asia and in particular Indonesia and refer to a few examples that a visitor is likely to encounter. Murni has been collecting textiles for many decades and I have been fortunate to be able to study and photograph her superb pieces.

We have also tried to describe what to look for in a textile, not only in the cloth but also the context in which it is used, in other words how to appreciate and evaluate it. Fine materials and skilful weaving are a prerequisite. These create the base for the visual and tactile impact. The visual often tells a story rich in historical allusions and symbolic meanings.

In February 2007 Murni was exhibiting textiles from her collection at the Arts of Pacific Asia Show in San Francisco when Jill D'Allesandro, Textile Curator of the de Young Museum, asked if she would give a lecture on textiles to the Textile Arts Council of San Francisco. She did and part of the text is based on that lecture.

Chapter 1 *An Introduction to Body Decoration* shows that body decoration stretches far back into prehistory. Chapter 2 *A Brief History of Textiles* examines the role of textiles in culture, earliest literature and mythologies. There are two main types of textiles: *ikat* and batik. Chapter 3 *The Importance of Textiles* describes their use, mostly for good purposes, sometimes for bad, around the World. Chapter 4 *Indonesia and Women* is a case study of the role of textiles in the World's fourth largest country. Having set the scene, Chapter 5 *The Raw Materials* describes what the weavers actually use and how they do it. Chapter 6 *Indian Patola* examines the beautiful, and arguably most influential, textile in Asia, and certainly Indonesia. Chapter 7 *Magical Geringsing*, Bali's most famous textile, leads on logically from *patola.* Chapter 8 *Protective Cepuk*, also Balinese, is another protective textile. Chapter 9 *Philosophical Poleng* shows that a society's whole philosophy can be incorporated in a textile. Chapter 10 *Serene Songket,* in contrast, is an examination of a textile that has always been high-end and heart-stoppingly beautiful. Chapter 11 *Beautiful Batik* describes in detail an alternative method of production.

Murni and I would particularly like to thank Dr Fiona Kerlogue, the doyenne of the batik world, for reading the manuscript and making extremely helpful suggestions and comments. We are indebted to Dr Linda

McIntosh, the well-known expert on Southeast Asian textiles, who also read the manuscript, was generous with her praise and offered very useful comments. We also thank Ralph Isaacs for unlocking the meaning of the texts embedded in the small Burmese manuscript wrappers called *sazigyo* and Patricia Cheesman for teaching us how to dye indigo. I am also very grateful to Ni Wayan Aryati and her husband Made, who kindly showed me around their batik factory in Denpasar where I was able to take photographs of the process of making batik.

Murni and I would also like to thank and acknowledge the debt that we all have to the anonymous weavers, dyers, textile and batik makers of Indonesia, and their ancestors, without whom we would be culturally much poorer.

Much research has been done into textiles but much remains to be done. It is a work in progress and a huge and fascinating subject. We are all still learning. There are no doubt errors and omissions for which I apologise. Many of the photographs are available at www.jonathaninbali.com.

I would welcome all comments by e-mail and will take them into account in future editions.

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Foreword

What better place to be writing this than sitting on the terrace at *Villa Kunang Kunang*, Murni's beautiful guest house adjacent to her home in the village of Ponggang, a few kilometres from Ubud, Bali's cultural heart. Situated where two rivers meet as they meander from the mountains to the sea, this is a sacred site to local Balinese people. The guest book documents the names and recollections of many international guests who have experienced the grandeur of this special place whilst bathing in Murni and Jonathan's warm hospitality.

After sampling one of Murni's fabled lunches, made from produce sourced in the local village and prepared as it has been for centuries, other appetites can be whetted by a guided tour of her private storehouse of objects and textiles. Her collection is crammed into a space too small to reveal its depth and breadth. What is revealed in full, however, is a working love of her unique culture and an affectionate familiarity with the cultures of her Asian neighbours, from nearby Malaysia to far away Afghanistan.

For more than a decade now, I have been the occasional recipient of

Murni's vast knowledge of the textile traditions of Indonesia and the stories and techniques that accompany each piece she has shared with me. Jonathan possesses a unique perspective that can only come from years dwelling in a chosen culture; years spent observing and absorbing the tracks that cloths leave in their wake in such a spectacularly rich way.

The long strands of the warp of a woven cloth can symbolise ancient yet continuous lines of human history as the narrower weft maps moments in time, the lives of the individuals and communities who craft these ever-evolving cultural documents.

From Tattoos to Textiles promises a rewarding introduction to Indonesian textile traditions as well as a welcome addition to the growing number of scholarly publications on the same subject. The language is direct and free from many of the rigorous museological codes often seen in other texts and is redolent with personal insights into the ceremonial lives of diverse communities across the Indonesian archipelago.

I was witness to a speech given in Jakarta in 2002 by the then Indonesian Minister of Culture and Tourism, Bapak Gede Ardika, himself Balinese. He was launching the exhibition *Tracking Cloth* which featured Australian artists whose textile and fibre-based works were influenced by Asian and other cultures, including Australian indigenous cultures. He remarked that, whilst Indonesia was experiencing various difficulties as it developed into the World's third largest democracy, his dream was that it would eventually be welcomed as a fully fledged member of the global community, but as a member with one singular and remarkable advantage: Indonesia would arrive with its culture intact.

Jonathan and Murni have given us the gift of a book that is both a joy to read as well as a highly informative journey into many aspects of one of the world's richest cultures. In doing so, they have also contributed to the realisation of Bapak Ardika's dream.

Peter O'Neill OAM
Wollongong
New South Wales
Australia

Peter O'Neill is a cultural management consultant and occasional lecturer in museology who worked as a curator and then as director of several Australian art museums for over thirty years. He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 2006 for his contribution to community through the arts and particularly for fostering Indonesian/Australian relations.

Preface

There is good evidence to support the idea that the earliest collected art form was in fact – textiles. In the countless millennia before the 'satanic mills' of the 19th century removed the human hand from the process of textile production, hand-woven materials were highly valued for their technical ingenuity, unique designs and richness of colour.

However, textiles were not only highly desirable objects; they were the 'CD Roms', and 'hard drives' of their day – a fibre-based technology on to which important information was carefully recorded and then handed down to inform and educate future generations.

For these reasons and many more, such 'items of technology' were cherished, collected and preserved. And so it remains today, especially in those societies, like Indonesia, where fabric crafts continue to thrive – literally ancient knowledge and wisdom that has stood the test of time.

Intertwined between the warp and weft of individual threads can be found deliberately archived 'files' just waiting to be discovered, 'downloaded', decoded and appreciated – intriguing stories about great civilizations, fascinating insights into complex cultural traditions as well as enduring strands of historical narrative.

Dr Rob Goodfellow
Baja California
Mexico

Chapter 1

An Introduction to Body Decoration

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?[1]

13th century stained glass Adam and Eve Medallion in the north transept rose window of Lincoln Cathedral, England shows Eve spinning with a distaff in her left hand and Adam digging the soil and an angel in between them.[2]

I think it's unlikely that Eve span as she would have found it very difficult to get the equipment and anyway Genesis does not say that she did. The idea of a spinning Eve is drawn from mediaeval tradition of unknown origin. After they partook of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden,

> *the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.*[3]

They may not have been able to spin, but it seems that they both could sew aprons. Obviously no gender issues in the Garden of Eden.

Nakedness

People generally feel a need to cover themselves, to hide their nakedness. It feels unnatural to be naked. The First Couple were ashamed of their private parts and made themselves clothes. They didn't believe that the pubic should be public. They wanted to be socially acceptable, although society in those days was just the two of them.

Ramie (*Boehmeria nivea*)

Early Man originally wore fig leaves, grass and bark. According to an old Balinese text,[4] they spun fibres from *bayu*[5] and wove them into fabrics whereupon the Balinese textile industry was born. *Bayu* or white ramie has existed for at least 6,000 years and is one of the oldest fibre crops in the World. Not only did the Balinese use it, the Ancient Egyptians (5000–3300 BC) wrapped their mummies in it.

The irony is that having covered up their nakedness, people then wanted clothes to express their sexuality.

Body Decoration

As well as covering their nakedness with clothes, people wanted to decorate their bodies. In many parts of the World clothes aren't actually needed at all, but there's a ready-made body, close at hand, a living canvas on which to experiment.

According to the 6th century AD historian Jordanes the Ancient Picts in Scotland painted themselves with red ochre.

Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (Book 22), published about 77-79 AD, said that young women in Britain stained their whole bodies to make themselves blue with a plant called *glaustum* and '*then processed naked at religious ceremonies*'.

In about 10 BC the Roman poet Ovid wrote down recipes for face cosmetics, which are still in use, but advised that women use them discreetly, so that their beauty appeared to be natural.

Even before Pliny the Elder, Julius Caesar described Britons painting their bodies blue in 55 BC. It has been assumed they used a flowering plant called woad.

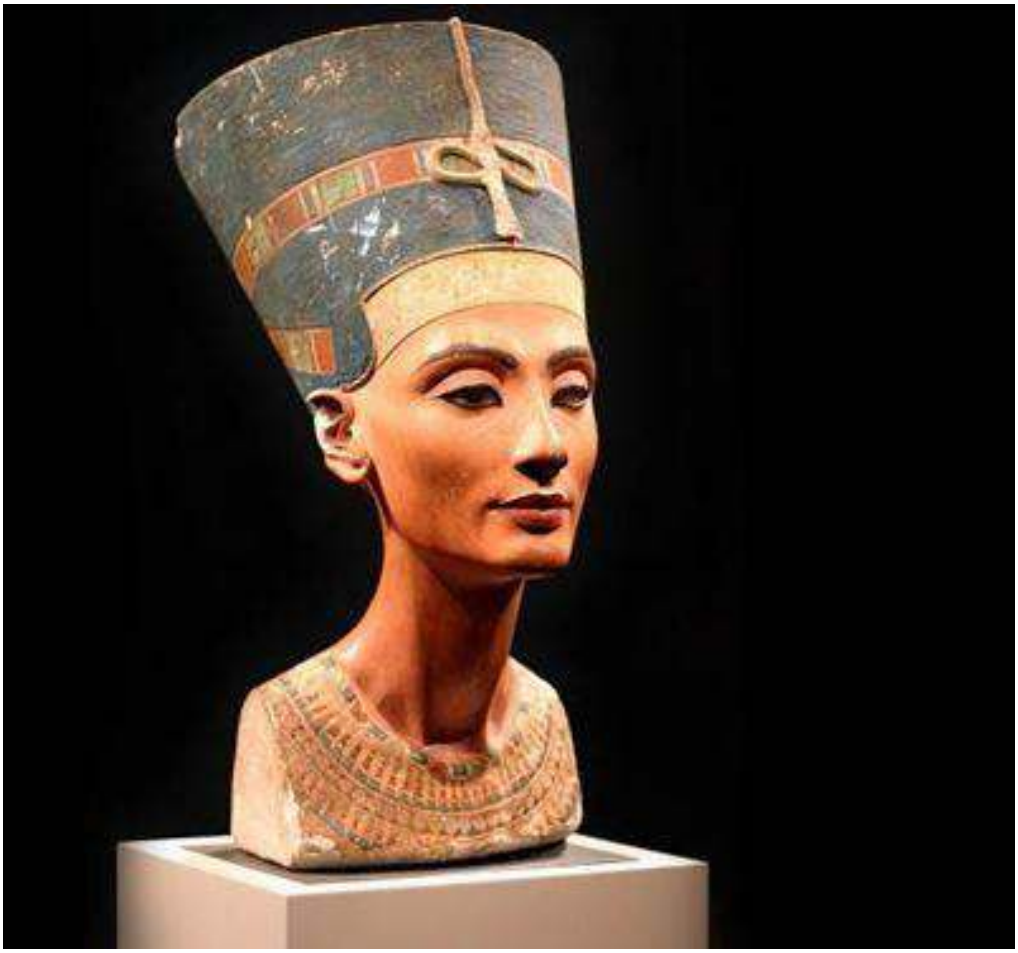
Pompey painted his face red, like that of the most sacred statue of the god Jupiter, during the first of his three triumphs in 80 BC as he proceeded to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus to give thanks for his North African military victory.

The Ancient Egyptians were using cosmetic palettes to grind make-up as far back as 5000 BC. Women painted their faces white and their eyes black. They made their eyes appear larger and almond-shaped. The eye paint also helped reduce the glare of the sun from the desert and provided relief from eye complaints caused by sandstorms and flies. The most popular eye paint was black kohl, made from crushed iron ore and applied with thin bronze applicator sticks. The almond-shaped eye resembled the falcon eye of the God Horus, which was believed by the Ancient Egyptians to have magical protective powers. They used henna dye to stain their hands, feet, finger- and toenails red-orange.

Many everyday belongings, including cosmetic jars, were discovered at Kahun, a Middle Kingdom site first discovered and excavated by William Matthew Flinders Petrie, the 'Father of Egyptology', in 1889. It was a village housing workers associated with the pyramid and temple of Senusret II (also spelled Sesostris II) (1897-1878 BC), the fourth Pharaoh of the Twelfth Dynasty. The cosmetic jars contained green and black eye paint and

Dynasty. The cosmetic jars contained green and black eye paint and powdered red haematite for reddening the lips.

Both men and women wore lots of make-up, perfume and jewelry. Cosmetics had magical powers. Polished bronze mirrors with handles shaped like lotus flowers and the head of Hathor, the goddess of beauty, 'she of the beautiful hair and beautiful breasts', were unearthed. There were also wigs. The Ancient Egyptians often shaved their heads and wore wigs of human hair, usually their own; apart from a dramatic coiffure, it avoided head lice.



Nefertiti (about 1370-1330 BC).

In the Egyptian Museum of Berlin the beautiful bust of Nefertiti (about 1370-1330 BC), wife of the controversial Pharoah Akhenaten, the father of Tutankhamun, and perhaps a Pharoah herself after her husband's death, is a wonderful example of deft use of black eye paint around the rim of the eyes, extended a little at the outer corners to give a strikingly modern look. She plucked her eyebrows and applied eye paint to them as well, which emphasised her expression. She also used lip colour, possibly made from ground-up red ochre, which gave them a siren red shade.[6]

But the practice of painting bodies is much older than even the Ancient Egyptians. Go back 40,000 years.

Dancers and actors throughout the World spend a considerable amount of time making-up, Chinatown, Bangkok. Thailand.

The oldest known underground iron mine in the World is at Bomvu Ridge in the Ngwenya Mountains, northwest Swaziland. It was sunk more than 40,000 years ago and mined for red pigment ochre. It was used for painting bodies for the living and sprinkling on corpses for the dead. The mines were also exploited for black specularite for use as a facial cream. It seems that Swaziland practised body painting, cosmetology and metallurgy, but it's possible that body decoration and cosmetics go back even further – right back to the Neanderthals.

Homo neanderthalensis dates from about 250,000 years ago and they were still living in Gibraltar about 28,000 years ago. The first fully modern humans, the Cro-Magnons, arrived in Europe about 40,000 years ago, so the Neanderthals pre-dated them and they overlapped for around 10,000 years.

The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in January 2010 reported that shells containing pigment residues were found at two archaeological sites in the Murcia province of southern Spain from about 50,000 years ago and were used by the Neanderthals as containers to mix and store pigments for body painting[7]. Lumps of red and yellow pigments suggest that they were used as cosmetics.

Body ornamentation is widely accepted by archaeologists as conclusive evidence for modern behaviour and symbolic thinking. This revelation has changed our view of Neanderthals – they were not, after all, longhaired scruffs, but possibly elegantly painted people – the desire for body decoration predates even modern humans by possibly 10,000 years.

Mime artists paint their faces and sometimes their whole bodies, Silom Festival, Bangkok. Thailand.

Body painting has not died out and survives to this day among the indigenous Australians, the New Zealand Maori, the Pacific islands and parts of Africa.

Mehndi – an Indian design being applied in Mumbai, India.

Mehndi is still popular, especially among women in India and the Middle East – the practice of using dye from henna and applying it to the surface of the hands and feet dates back thousands of years – perhaps to the time that henna was first discovered in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Mehndi – finished design after one day. It will gradually fade over about two weeks, Mumbai, India.

These temporary tattoos wash off after a couple of weeks and are worn on special occasions, typically weddings and parties. Arabic designs are often floral, tend to leave more open spaces than Indian ones and are less elaborate. Customers chose a design from books or leave it up the expert in the beauty parlour.

Thai entertainer, Chatuchak Market, Bangkok, Thailand.

Body painting festivals take place across the World, the largest being the World Bodypainting Festival in Seebooden, Austria.[8] Women – and some men – use make-up on their faces on a daily basis. There is no likelihood that this will change.

Mime artists paint their faces and sometimes their clothes as well, Silom Festival, Bangkok, Thailand.

There are professional reasons for some kinds of body painting. Dancers and actors, clowns and mime artists throughout the World spend a considerable amount of time making-up.

Clown, Silom Festival, Bangkok, Thailand.

Magical Spells

The walls and sarcophagi of the pyramids of the pharaohs of Ancient Egypt at Saqqara are inscribed with magical spells written in Old Egyptian. They are known as the Pyramid Texts and date from the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties of the Old Kingdom and are possibly the oldest religious texts in the World. The oldest of the texts has been dated to between 2400-2300 BC.

They show the belief that words and their visible form possess power, just as cosmetics do. The spells or 'utterances' are concerned with protecting the Pharaoh's remains, reanimating his body, and helping him ascend to the heavens. The spells invoke help from the gods and describe how he could travel, using ramps, stairs, ladders, and even by flying.

King Teti was the first Pharoah of the Sixth Dynasty. Utterance 373 said,

Oho! Oho! Rise up, O Teti!
Take your head, collect your bones,
Gather your limbs, shake the earth from your flesh!

Gather your limbs, shake the earth from your flesh!
Take your bread that rots not, your beer that sours not,
Stand at the gates that bar the common people!
The gatekeeper comes out to you, he grasps your hand,
Takes you into heaven, to your father Geb.
He rejoices at your coming, gives you his hands,
Kisses you, caresses you,
Sets you before the spirits, the imperishable stars…
The hidden ones worship you,
The great ones surround you,
The watchers wait on you,
Barley is threshed for you,
Emmer is reaped for you,
Your monthly feasts are made with it,
Your half-month feasts are made with it,
As ordered done for you by Geb, your father,
Rise up, O Teti, you shall not die!

It is a small step from inscribing words on a wall to inscribing them on a body and having these powerful, protective symbols with you at all times.

Tattoos

Jewelry is a form of body decoration, Bangkok, Thailand.

Body painting, masks, clothes, jewelry and tattoos are all a form of body

covering, but whereas body painting, masks, clothes and jewelry are temporary, tattoos are permanent and indelible, created by injecting ink under the skin, into the dermis, the layer of skin below the epidermis. It is hard to know when the practice first began as skin does not last, but it is ancient.

Tattoos, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Until recently the earliest known tattoos were dated to around 2000 BC, belonging to three female Ancient Egyptian mummies of the Eleventh Dynasty (about 2134-1991 BC). The first mummy, discovered by French Egyptologist Eugène Grébaut in Deir-el-Bahari in 1891, had a number of tattoos on her body. She is identified as Amunet, a priestess of Hathor, the goddess of beauty, now residing in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Another two mummies were discovered nearby in 1923. All of them bore similar body-markings over the abdomen, which may suggest that the tattoos served fertility purposes. They would have been particularly striking when the woman became pregnant – the patterns expanding as she became increasingly bigger.

Small bronze tattoo tools had earlier been discovered by William Matthew Flinders Petrie at Gurob, a town in northern Egypt, in 1880, the year of his first visit to Egypt, and dated to around 1450 BC. They are on display in the Petrie Museum of Egyptology at University College London. The Petrie Museum also has two small blue faience nude female figurines, with black dotted lines, which are thought to represent tattoo markings, similar to the tattoos found on the mummies. There are many such figurines

similar to the tattoos found on the mummies. There are many such figurines in museums around the World.

Then, on 19 September 1991 Helmut and Erika Simon, a couple of German hikers, strayed off track 3,000 metres (9,842 feet) up in the Italian Alps and discovered the oldest frozen human mummy in the World, the Ice Man, dating back 5,300 years, long before the pyramids were built, pre-dating the mummies of Ancient Egypt by at least 1,000 years, and older than Stonehenge.

The Ice Man is called Ötzi after the Ötztal area, 93 metres (305 feet) inside the Italian-Austrian border, where he was found. Ötzi was about forty-five years old when he died – murdered by a flint-headed arrow. He had tattoos, fifty-seven of them, and is the earliest known tattooed human being in the World. They are rather simple consisting of dots and short parallel lines on his lower spine, behind his left knee and on his right ankle.

Considerably later, archaeologists discovered a man's body dating to 4 BC covered with more elaborate tattoos of rams, fish and griffins in the permafrost of the Altai Mountains of Central Asia. The skill with which they were done suggests that the art was well established by then.

Tattoos can signal good and bad messages. Governor Padtbrugge, who was in Minahasa in Sulawesi in 1679, commented that men were tattooed in patterns that indicated the number of men they had killed and if the man's chest was already covered, then his wife was also tattooed as a partner in his greatness.[9]

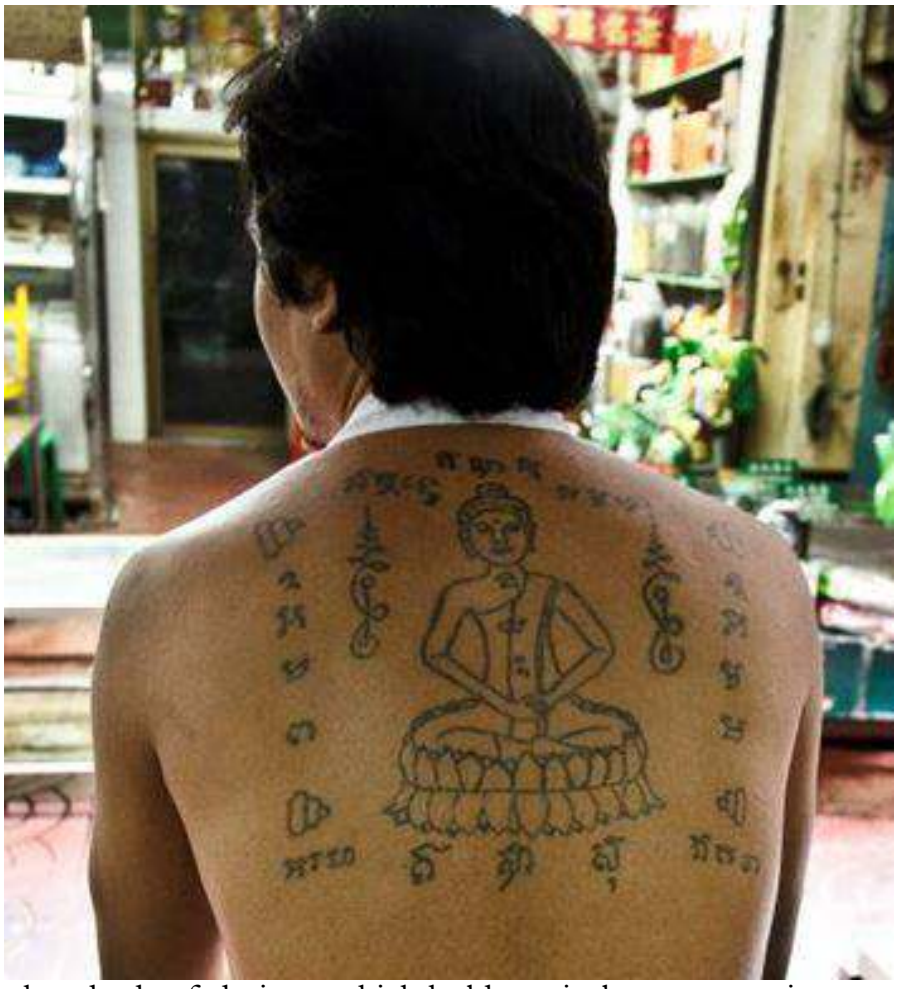
In Ayutthaya, the old capital of Thailand, tattoos were used to punish wrongdoers, including adulterous wives, and in Vietnam tattooing the forehead and face with up to ten characters could be imposed for moral crimes.[10]

According to Charles Darwin, in *The Descent of Man*, 1871,

> *Not one great country can be named, from the polar regions in the north to New Zealand in the south, in which the aboriginals do not tattoo themselves.*

The practice of tattooing for protection still exists in Thailand, and to a lesser extent in Cambodia and Burma. *Sak Yant* tattoos incorporate sacred or magical verses. *Sak* means 'to tap' or 'to tattoo' and *yant* means 'sacred geometric design'.

Murni and I went to a tattooing ceremony in northern Thailand on an auspicious day and saw young men arrive at a shaman's house to have new tattoos pierced on their torsos and old ones renewed. They are popular with soldiers wanting protection against harm, sharp weapons, bullets and even death. Such benefits attract policemen, boxers, martial arts followers and members of the underworld. Some provide invisibility. Certain designs provide luck in love, health and wealth, while others protect against animal bites and fatal accidents. The sacred power of the designs can act not only on the person tattooed but also on those he or she meets.



There are hundreds of designs, which hold magical powers to give protection in battle.

The devotees choose from hundreds of designs of animals, snakes, Chinese dragons, Buddhist, Hindu and Tantric images and lucky numbers, which hold magical powers. The geometric and figurative designs are known as *yantra* or *yant* in Thai and Khmer. The geometric drawings are made up of triangles, rectangles, squares and lines. Hindu gods, such as Brahma, Shiva and Wisnu, and especially Ganesha, the elephant-headed remover of obstacles, are common. One of the most powerful figurative drawings is a tiger stretching down the whole of the lower back and one of the most popular is Hanuman, the monkey commander from the Indian Ramayana epic, who engenders strength, perseverance and devotion. The Buddha is often represented symbolically by letters inside geometric diagrams: a round shape representing his face and a triangle representing the Triple Gem of Buddhism, namely the Buddha, the *Dharma* (the teachings of Buddha) and the *Sangha* (the monkhood). Letters in Khom, the ancient Khmer alphabet, are inserted into small squares, which can be read in various directions, and are sometimes encrypted, so that only the tattoo master knows the power of the tattoo.

Resident monk tattooing at Wat Bang Phra, Bangkok, Thailand.

The monk or shaman will enquire about the wearer's year and hour of birth because the tattoos are linked to astrology and should not conflict with it. He uses a wooden or metal stick that is about 46 cm (18 inches) long with a sharp metal tip, which holds a small quantity of ink.

Very few monks draw freehand; normally they draw the design on to the skin first with a pen.

He may go into trance or be blindfolded or wear a *Ruesi* mask.