

THE RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF BURIK (TRADITIONAL TATTOOS) OF KABAYAN MUMMIES IN BENGUET TO CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

What practices and techniques contribute to the "recontextualization" of an extinct traditional tattoo tradition in contemporary practice? Through what channels do today's practitioners revive the application and use of extinct tattoos? This paper is about the "recontextualization" of *burik*, an extinct traditional tattoo found in some of the mummies in Kabayan, Benguet, north of Luzon, Philippines. While the traditional cultural bearers are already nonextant, I explore the contemporary transformations of the *burik* through "cultural borrowing" and "appropriation," such as (a) graphic designs on clothing, (b) actual tattoo designs on the skin, and (c) an aesthetic tattoo practice. Tattooing, in terms of both practice and design, has become a popular practice worldwide. In the Philippines, tattoo artists turn to traditional tattoo practice by "re-invoking" the features of tattoos (pain, permanence), and the "graphicness" (designs) is appropriated to recent practices in tattooing the skin ("skin-deep") and incorporated in tattoo designs on clothing ("surface").

I argue that the successive phases and changes in the status of burik tattoos—enabled by the advent of modern technology, the Internet, and mass media—encourage an interaction between contemporary and historical influences rather than an extinction of past practice. Such cross-sector sources continue to characterize the reinterpretation of traditional tattoos in contemporary practices. To understand fully the significance of burik today, I draw on Appadurai’s notion of objects as “things-in-motion” and Kopytoff’s “social biography of objects” as the burik relate to relevant socioeconomic and political contexts across time.

Keywords: tattoos, reinvention, Benguet, tradition, mummies

Introduction

Tattooing was a prevalent practice during the pre-Hispanic period and a widespread practice in early sixteenth-century Philippines (Van Dinter 85). *Batek* or *batuk* is the general term for traditional tattoos, which are variously referred to in different provinces in the Cordillera region as *batók* (Kalinga), *fatek* (Bontoc), *bátok* (Ifugao), *bátek* (Ilocano, Ibaloy, Lepanto and Sagada Igorots), and *bátak* (Kankanaey). Tattoos function as painful rites of passage, bodily adornments (clothing), talismans from malevolent forces, marks of bravery, visible markers of religious and political affiliations in the community, and symbols of status or affluence.

Scott, in his early description of the Visayan *pintados*, explained the combination of different tattoo patterns that covered the full body. These were found on the legs, ankles, waist, chest, abdomen, pectorals, buttocks, and the whole back. The facial tattoos, which included the ears, chin, and eyes, were restricted to the boldest and the toughest warriors (*Barangay* 20-21).

A similar form of full-body tattoos can be found among the mummies in Kabayan, Benguet, north of Luzon, Philippines. Remnants of the burik, on different body parts of the thirteenth-century old mummies¹ are found in Kabayan and in some areas in Benguet.² However, the custom of covering the body with traditional tattoos had already declined in the region in the early twentieth century, and the practice of tattooing along with mummification in Benguet had become extinct (Merino 15).

In the last five years, there have been reconfigurations of the burik. Under the conditions of modernity, tattoo artists and practitioners who are engaged in what it means to be “modern” have re-invoked the experiential aspect of tattoos – pain, perforation of the skin and permanence (embodied),

and graphic design, elements without pain (disembodied) – to construct individual and social identities through cultural borrowing and appropriation resulting in the recontextualization of the tattoo designs. With globalization and new media technologies, relations with people have become more complex (Eriksen 1-18). As Appadurai (“Disjuncture and Differences”) argues, increasing global interconnectivity is critical in offering individuals new meanings, values, and ways of imagining the world. To this end, urban and diasporic Filipinos and other tattoo enthusiasts in Manila are taking the “traditional” designs of the burik as “authentic” tattoo designs with a new kind of signification, i.e., the revival of burik in contemporary practices such as tattooing (“skin-deep”) and in clothing (“surface”). In this particular case, the traditional motifs, the visual form, and the location of the tattoos are retained. However, the symbolic association, the rendition of burik, and the context of their use have changed. Such shifting circumstances of tattoo production and use raise questions such as: What practices and techniques contribute to the “re-contextualization” of an extinct traditional tattoo tradition in contemporary practice? Through what channels do today’s practitioners revive the application, appropriation, and use of extinct tattoos?

In this paper, I examine the “recontextualization” of burik and explore its contemporary transformations: (1) burik as graphic design – when traditional motifs can become designs that are appropriated in different mediums such as paper, clothing, and digital media. As such, it has enjoyed a resurgence outside of Benguet and the Philippines that can be admired by foreigners and diasporic Filipinos; (2) burik as an aesthetic practice—this refers to the particular method of tattooing (hand-tapping and modern methods) in the application of permanent body decoration; and (3) burik as actual tattoo design—when contemporary tattoo practitioners select and appropriate traditional tattoo motifs and patterns from the burik (tattoo) found on some mummies. I argue that the successive phases and changes in the status and meanings of burik from a collective kin-based tattoo among the Ibaloy, to an expression of individual identity in contemporary practices, and to the current recognition of the tattooed Kabayan mummies as cultural patrimony or “national heritage” of the Philippine nation-state, have given a wider recognition to the practice of tattooing as a tradition. The recontextualization of burik in different meanings and forms has encouraged an interaction between historical and contemporary influences. Such cross-sector sources continue to characterize the reinterpretation of traditional tattoos in contemporary practices. To understand fully the significance of burik today, we need to examine burik as “things-in-motion” (Appadurai “Introduction” 5), in this case as “tattoo-designs in motion” with a “social

biography" (Kopytoff 67) as they relate to relevant socio-economic and political contexts across time.

In this light, an examination of how practitioners transform the meaning, purpose and use of tattoos highlights the "inventiveness of tradition" (Sahlins 408), and veering away from decadence or extinction. Rather, tattoo traditions are "invented" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1), "reinvented" (Terrio 9), and "continuous" (Wagner 9). The contemporary practice of tattooing reproduces traditional designs. The contexts within which they function are in flux. In commoditization, the burik, once extinct, now moves into different mediums to ensure its vibrancy, significantly as an "emerging art," and not as a "lost practice."

I argue, then, that while other scholars have posited the "demise of tattoos" (Picpican "A Cultural and Historical Treatise," *The Igorot Mummies*; Krutak "The Last Tattoo Artist," *Kalinga Tattoo*; Kips) along with the phenomenon of the "social death of objects" (Strathern; Kuchler 40, Daniels), the extinct tattoos of the mummies of Benguet still have the "constancy of circulation" (Finkelstein 5-6) and "aesthetic mutations" (Lipovetsky 4). By shifting the focus from things to social relations and interactions of people and objects, the tattoos have changed. According to Daniels, the loss of objects may play an important role in social processes of regeneration and the demise of objects does not necessarily lead to the depletion of value, but rather to the "sociality of value" (McGuigan 146). My emphasis on the sociality of value is the central feature underlying the transformation and recontextualization of tattoos or "the ways in which people understand who they are, the nature of the world they live, how they relate to others and what counts as important to them" (Reicher and Hopkins 3). With this shift, the point of departure is the recontextualization of tattoos with its varying strategies of expression.

In this paper, I outline my theoretical framework on the meaning of objects, and briefly examine burik tradition and history. My purpose is to highlight the evidence of a traditional practice as recorded in the visual and material representation of tattoos. Furthermore, I examine the techniques and processes used in contemporary practices to situate the social biography of burik. I also analyze the various channels by which quotidian expressions of the burik are used for individual ethnic and social identities.

The Meaning of Objects

In this paper, I frame the recontextualization of tattoos by drawing on Appadurai's ("Introduction") perspective on the "social life of things," which argues that the constructed nature, meaning, and value of things

change as they move through time and space. According to Appadurai, objects—in this case, tattoos—move from one system of value (“regime”) to another, depending upon the time-space context of their use.

Similarly, Kopytoff (67) maintains that each object (e.g., tattoo) has a life history of its own: “the object is created, imbued with an aesthetic mark ... and continues to live out a life as a meaningful expressive object in social and economic spheres.” To contextualize, this includes an understanding of the inherent status of the object in terms of the period and culture, moving on to the object’s current career, specifically how it is redefined and put into use. As objects move through time and space, their social biography is transformed, leading to varying trajectories. By analyzing the social and cultural contexts and processes within which tattoos are “copied,” borrowed, and appropriated, we can explore these tenacious negotiations of individual identity, specifically, and of a collective Filipino identity in general.

On the other hand, objects “are reified notions of culture and identity that, while still relevant to some degree, comprise only a small part of the mix of things that people use to situate themselves within regions” (Milgram 233). As such, there is a new literature that suggests “that people increasingly craft personalized forms of identity by drawing on the ‘banal’ material culture of everyday life – the mundane experiences of everyday life” (cf. Milgram 233; see also Edensor; Billig). Billig has recently popularized ideas regarding the banality of nationalism by drawing attention to the subtle and informal ways in which nationalism is reproduced. The emphasis placed by Billig on the role of the day-to-day, the mundane, and the informal in the reproduction of nationalism, of necessity, obliges us to explore the local contexts that are central to the whole process.

In the past, people assign specific meanings of the burik in their social life, circulating these through different visual mediums (illustrations, designs, clothing, skin). As such there is a “social biography” (Kopytoff) of these tattoos that assume specific values and identities as they are circulated from one place to the other in different mediums.

Contemporary tattoo practices utilize and appropriate tradition as a resource for identity and individual self-expression. Tattooing, in terms of both practice and design, has become a popular practice worldwide. In the Philippines, tattoo artists turn to traditional tattoo practice, now referred to as “ethnic” or “Filipino tribal tattoos,” to serve as an inspiration for contemporary designs, a site of authenticity of “Filipino-ness,” and as a distinct form of self-expression.

The “extinct tradition” such as the burik and its interplay with contemporary practice is “understood as a sign of vitality rather than decadence or extinction” (Sahlins 409). The recontextualization of tattoos refers to the appropriation and cultural borrowing of burik motifs, patterns, and designs, to be used in contemporary practices — either “tattooed” on the skin or “appropriated” as designs in clothing. The resulting tattoo draws from various sources such as the Internet, old drawings, archival photographs, and personal experiences with burik-inspired designs. All these sources enable tattoo recipients to articulate individual, ethnic, or national identities by re-interpreting traditional burik designs in response to specific aspects or events in the contemporary period. Kopytoff and Appadurai (“Introduction”) describe the biography of things as: “the qualities bundled together in any object will shift in their relative salience, value, utility, and relevance across contexts” (Keanne 188). As this suggests, burik is reconfigured as it engages with social relations and processes across time.

Burik: A Brief History

In this section, I present a brief history of the burik. There are limitations to this, however, since the original cultural bearers of the burik are no longer existing. Instead, I have reviewed archival sources (both written and visual), oral narratives, and reports that pertain to the tattooed mummies of Benguet. Further investigations should be carried out to come to an in-depth understanding of these mummies.

Burik refers to the tattoos of Banao in Mountain Province and is closely translated as “spotted” (Meyer 512-513; Scott 110).³ The word “burik” with the root/rik/ (Blust; Blust and Stressel) has an Austronesian origin, which means “speckled,” “dappled,” and “spotted.” Yabes (296-297, 299-303) notes that the Igorots are consistently referred to as “Iggorot a burikan” (checkered Igorots) in the Ilocano epic *Biag ni Lam-ang* (Life of Lam-ang). In Ilocano, the word is used as an adjective to refer to a person that is “tattooed all over the body” (Rubino 135). In addition, enough evidence exists that the word *burí* is also found among the Isneg to mean “speckled” like iguanas;⁴ to ornament (Vanoverbergh 183-184), referring to the tattoos found among the Isneg people. *Burí* is similarly referred to as a form of body ornamentation in Kankanaey, Pangasinan, Tagalog, and Bikol (Blust and Stressel).

The term burik could have also been derived from the peculiarity of the Banao people, on account of the elaborate tattoos found on their skins. Banao is situated on the slopes of the sierra of Sabangan, three kilometers

from Guinzadan and Bauco (Perez, F.A. 133-134, 174), located in the Western part of Central Cordillera in Benguet and Lepanto. This is the present Banao located in Bauko, Mountain Province (Pekas). There are two sub-groups — the Burik and the Busao — who have generally practised tattooing.⁵ Burik is confused with the name of the people in Banao in Mountain Province, but is in fact the local term for the elaborate full body tattoos of the people.⁶

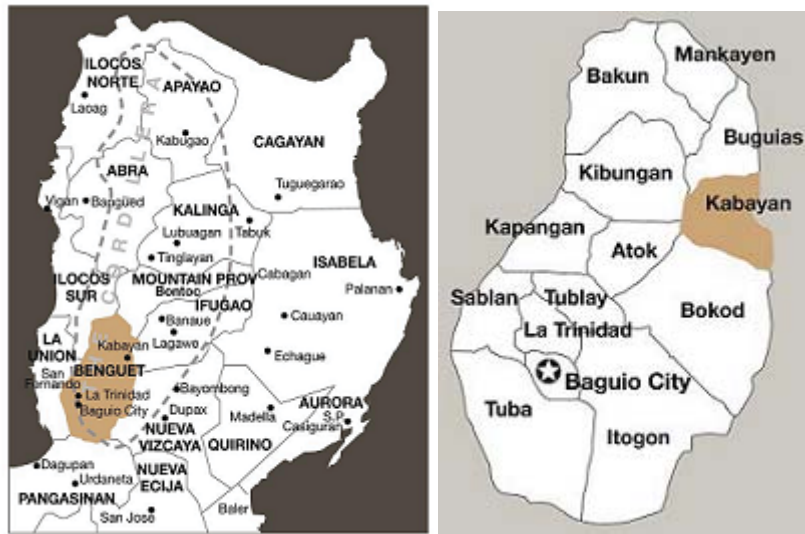
In 1885, the German scientist Hans Meyer, who embarked on a three-month journey to the Agno and Abra Valleys, to Guinaang and Balatoc, observed that the inhabitants in these places, both men and women, were tattooed profusely with elaborate designs on the wrists, arms, chests, and legs. Frederic Sawyer, an English engineer who lived in Luzon for 14 years, also observed that “you can hardly find a man or woman who has not a figure of the sun tattooed in blue on the back of the hand, for in Central Benguet they worship the sun. Some of them tattoo the breast and arms in patterns of straight and curved lines pricked in with a needle in indigo blue. The Burik Igorrotes tattoo the body in a curious manner, giving them the appearance of wearing a coat of mail” (252).

Scott (12) explains that the Spanish conquistadores were captivated by the gold jewelry that bedecked the Igorot bodies as well as their “scantily clothed” and “curiously strange body decorations.” In fact, “four battle-scarred Igorots with tattoos” along with thirty six other Filipinos were sent to participate in the 1887 *Exposicion General de las Islas Filipinas*, in the industriously built *Rancherias de los Igorrotes* in Madrid. The intricate tattoos were an attraction in the exposition (El Globo 3; Taviel de Andrade; Scott 275; Anales del Museo Nacional Anthropologia; Rovillos). The tattooed participants were chiefs (they were called gobernadorcillo in Spanish) of their respective communities: Oit-tavit and Sumad-en from Bontoc, and Lao-lao and Gumad-ang from Lepanto, Benguet (Catalogo de la Exposicion 5 cited in Rovillos 231). According to the notes and descriptions in the *Catalogo*, Oit-tavit and Sumad-en showed tattoos of their chests and arms, which featured elaborate designs such as lines, animal figures, and other geometric patterns — sign of bravery in warfare. Gumad-ang was described as having curved lines on the back of his arm to signify membership to his group in Lepanto, while Lao-lao was said to look like the fiercest of all his companions because of his tattoos: “on the back of his right hand a toothed wheel that must represent the sun; another wheel with a cross in the center on his left; a kind of dog figure on the hollow of his chest; the figure of a frog with another of a dog on his left arm, and another two dogs on his right arm; on his chest, abdomen, arms and legs a multitude of scars” (Perez, F.A. 174-

175; Anton; *El Globo* 102-103). The tattoo markings served as both curiosity and attraction for fairgoers who recorded them in photographs (Gomez 191). Despite the controversies that surrounded the display of the tattooed Igorots,⁷ the documentation had become valuable in understanding earlier perceptions of traditional tattoos. The social context of the burik is important in understanding the status of the wearer and the kind of values attributed to the tattoos in the past.

Sawyer notes that in the 1900s, burik was “probably now becoming obsolete, for at least those of the Igorotes who live near the Christian natives are gradually adopting their dress and customs” (252). The introduction of cotton as a form of clothing had also contributed to the loss of the significance and visibility of full body tattoos. Vanoverbergh (194) writes: “nowadays this custom of tattooing is tending to disappear.” He attributed this decline to the fact “that the Ibaloy and the Kankanaey abandoned headhunting long ago, so that no Ibaloy and very few Kankanaey braves are still alive” (189). Another factor was the loss of artisans and the loss of significance of this practice. However, remnants of the burik tradition were found among the thirteenth century tattooed mummies in Kabayan, one of the old settlements of Benguet (Merino; Garong et al) Northwest of Luzon (Figures 1-2). Although the practice of tattooing is extinct, the tattoos found on the mummies have served as visual and material record of the tattooing practice.

The tattoos are particularly visible among adult mummies (Garong et al. 30). In a recent report assessing the conditions of mummies found in the two rockshelters in Timbac in Kabayan (where some of the well-preserved mummies are found), National Museum archaeologist Ame Garong observed that majority of the mummies found in burial caves are tattooed with distinct patterns and designs that covered the forearms, upper arms (female adults) and the whole body (old and middle age adult males) including the fingertips (Garong 9-12). This means that the tattoos were highly individualized, with special tattoo markings accorded to relevant people of high status.⁸ This information is important to my argument in the shifting status of the burik. While in the past, burik was kin-based and had social and collective meanings among the Ibaloy, in contemporary tattoo practice, different sorts of people seek out these tattoos and social linkages are no longer important. Thus, the purpose and motivation for using these tattoos have changed (i.e., as an individual form of self-expression).



Figures 1-2: Map of the Cordillera region, Northern Luzon, Philippines. Kabayan is located in Benguet province, and was once the seat of Ibaloy culture. The Ibaloy reside in the mountain valleys and settlements of the general Southeastern area such as Kabayan, Atok and Kapangan; the predominantly Kankanaey group are found in the Northern municipalities of Benguet such as Mankayan, Bakun, and Kibungan (Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid 1985). However, significant migrations of Kankanaey and Ibaloy are found in different areas in Benguet, including Sablan, Tublay, Tuba, Itogon, La Trinidad, and Baguio City (Map modified by AV Salvador-Amores and Denes V. Dasco).

In this paper, I focus my discussion on the burik of men,⁹ and employ the term burik (also furik) to refer to the tattoos found on the meking (mummies) of Benguet.

Thinking Biographically: Burik Tattoos in Early Records

Kopytoff posits that part of the cultural shaping of biographies of objects, in this case the burik, is to understand the “inherent” status in terms of the period and culture and what is its current “career,” specifically the way it is culturally redefined and put into use (66-67). In an expanded investigation on the study of tattoos, I earlier argued that examination of a specific cultural tradition, in this case tattooing, is the combined use of archaeological sources with additional materials (Salvador-Amores “Breaking Barriers”) such as illustrations, narratives, travelogues, documents, photographs, and

artifacts that were collected in the past and that are now found in different repositories in the Philippines and elsewhere. These sources have served as “explanatory bridges” or vehicles for deeper understanding of tattoos (53). More specifically, these have opened up spaces in the renewal of interest by reviving, reinterpreting, and reconstructing new representations of burik tattoos in the contemporary period.

An early description of the tattoos of the Igorots from the beginning of the nineteenth century reveals that these markings sparked the interest of many who traveled to the area. A few hardy European travelers came to the Cordilleras, motivated more by genuine scientific inquiry and the prospect of adventure in “exotica” than by colonial pursuits. Von Wartinberg (37), an Austrian baron and geologist, thought that the word *ygolotes* (“people of the golot” or “people of the mountains”) meant “free or independent” and associated this with the arresting chest tattoos arching over Bontoc warriors’ pectorals, indicative of head-taking valor. Although the practice had died out by the 1930s, headhunting rituals are by no means forgotten by local people in the Cordillera region (De Raedt).

In addition, Semper (28–99), a German scientist, took interest in Benguet tattoos, which he described as having “designs [with] straight and curved lines, with an exception of a drawing on the back of the hand which could be an outline of the sun.” As a casual observer, he interpreted the sun pattern as an icon believed to be sacred, but noted that no special rituals were associated with it. Marche, a French scientist, likened the tattoos to works of art depicted in the illustration of D’Altamonte (Figure 3), who accompanied him on his trip to the Cayan and Mancayan in the 1880s: “done with great precision and depicting serpents and flowers sometimes, but most frequently executed with great care and method. As one becomes richer and more powerful, the designs “increase” (115).

Perhaps the first to draw a detailed depiction of Igorot tattoos was another German scientist, Hans Meyer (Figure 4), who traveled to the mountains of the Cordillera in the late 1890s. His tattoo drawings were accompanied by his description of the tattoos, which he called burik.

Meyer’s drawings showed designs that are identical to tattoo patterns that date back to an earlier period (fourteenth century or earlier). They appear on the mummy of Appo Anno (Figure 5), which is estimated to be 700-900 years old (Merino 99). Beyer (219) observed that “the body was completely tattooed, from the top of the forehead to soles of the feet, with intricate pattern of the type illustrated by Hans Meyer in his monograph on the Igorots in 1885.” The mummy was stolen in 1918 and was rediscovered in 1984.¹⁰



Types d' Igorrotes

Figure 3: *Types D' Igorrotes* (Types of Igorots) from Alfred Marche 1887, *Lucon et Palaowan (Six Annes aux Philippines)*, p. 153. (With permission from the Heritage Collection, Miguel de Benavidez Library, University of Santo Tomas, Manila).

There are also mummies in other Benguet areas that bear very similar tattoos to those portrayed in Meyer's drawings.¹¹ The custom of tattooing the whole body with decorations exactly like a coat of mail with breastplate and backplates (Figures 5-6) was widespread and was extensively practiced during the pre-historic period. The early origins of tattooing were also supported by archaeological finds: comb-like tattoo instruments and two-horn tattooing chisels unearthed in a neolithic burial assembly in Arku cave of Cagayan (Thiel; Bacus 264), which indicates that tattooing was practiced in pre-historic times.

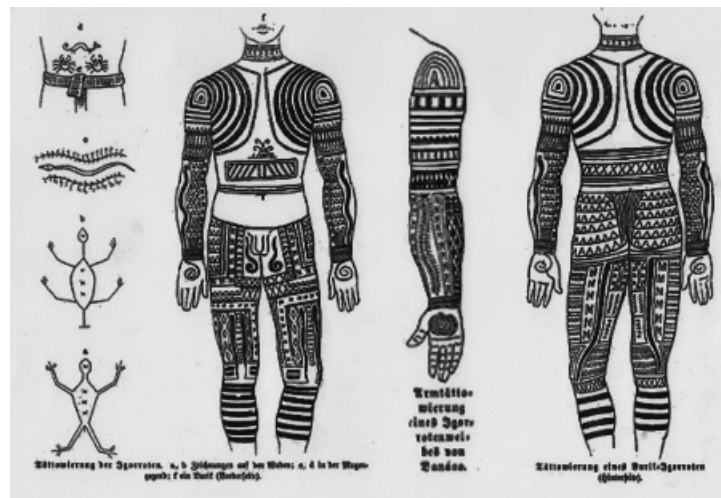


Figure 4: The *burik* (tattoos) of Mountain Province. *Burik* is also the name of a tattoo design found on the body and translated as “spotted.” The tattoos have figurative designs (man, lizard, snake and scorpion) and geometric designs (lines, circles, stripes, and zigzags). The designs have similar figurative patterns found on the thighs and buttocks, while the chest, back, and legs have parallel stripes, making the body look like a sailor’s striped jacket and the legs like Tyrol stockings (Hans Meyer 512-514; Scott 67).

Early documentation of the tattoos in Northern Luzon showed that the Igorot body was fully tattooed with distinct and abstract patterns. For instance, most of the tattoos documented in the pre- and early contact periods were abstract, geometric tattoos that followed a similar pattern and form covering the men’s chest and back and that occupied a large portion of the body. The tattoos of the women were found on both arms and shoulders (Vanoverbergh). Noticeably, there is also an association and distribution of the tattoo patterns of the mummies to the patterns and designs found on the funerary blankets such as the *pinagpagpagan*, *dill-i*, and *kuabaw* that wrapped the corpses of the affluent in Benguet. Similar patterns can also be found carved on some of the wooden coffins found in Kabayan (Figure 7). For instance in the Timbac rockshelter, a coffin cover of a single broad board is decoratively carved with geometric designs that are similar to the tattoo designs found on the skins of the mummies (Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid 125).¹²



Figures 5-6: Appo Anno, the seated mummy of Benguet, is clad with elaborate tattoos. Right: Detail of the tattoos found on Appo Anno's back with a *to-o* (man) on the central figure of his backplate tattoos. A similar design is found on the wooden rectangular coffin (see Figure 7) at the Kabayan Museum. (Photographs by Art Tibaldo, reproduced with permission).

Tattoos for the Ibaloy have the power to cure. The tattoo was supposed "to prevent the acquisition of certain disease locally known as *cultong* (smallpox). Some believed that tattoos assured the individual of prolonged life and were for body ornamentation" ("Aesthetics and Symbolism as Reflected in the Material Culture of the Ibaloi" 8). Prestige and economic wealth were also seen in Ibaloy tattoos. According to an interview with Merino, the practice of tattooing (and mummification) was done in accordance with the *peshit* or prestige rites (feasts) to show the status of the person.¹³

The tattoos in general are characterized by the application of geometric and figurative designs on the chest, back, sides of the stomach, buttocks, arms, shoulders, hands, finger, neck, throat, face, and legs. The figurative designs include centipedes, snakes, lizards, the sun, and certain plant forms. This description is confirmed in Fray Angel Lopez's (138) earlier observation of the process of tattooing among the Banao: "The dwellers are most addicted to painting or tattooing their legs, arms, chest and back. The styles they usually adopt are a series of squares formed with alternating dots and lines; one side of the square parallels the vertebrae and the other is perpendicular, leaving the sternum and vertebral column clean. This same combination of

lines and dots, but forming circles, serves as the base for the decoration of the legs and arms." The ever-present *to-o*, or man motif (see Figures 6-7), shows how the Ibaloi views himself as a prime element within the context of his existence and reality. The *oleg*, or snake, signifies the essence of animism in Ibaloi culture and the belief in spirits, the soul, and life after death.¹⁴ Traditional tattooing designs have survived. Many of these have also been appropriated in contemporary tattoo practice, in different mediums as part of the modern way of (re-)expressing social and individual identity.



Figures 7-8: A rectangular wooden coffin possibly used for kinship internment. This coffin is found at the Kabayan Museum in Benguet (Photograph by AV Salvador-Amores, 2012). Right: The coffin has intricate tattoo patterns similar to the tattoo patterns found on the Kabayan mummies (Photograph by Alexis Duclos, reproduced with permission).

The Tattooing Process

Several scholars have documented the process of tattooing among the people in the Cordilleras. An early account, by Fray Perez, narrates that the process of tattooing was done "with three needles joined, the points of which are millimeter apart like steps, and dipped in a liquid somewhat like ink, made of pig's bile and soot, which mixture, called *guisit*, they introduce into the skin in the same way as vaccination among us, and it causes inflammation so great that it prevents them from being able to work for some days, which inflammation is always accompanied by a high fever. Among the drawings of animals, the figure of the lizard predominates all of them" (138).



Figures 9-10: The cactus plant (locally referred to as *maguey*) is abundant in Benguet. It grows on rocky portions of the mountains and is grown in some gardens in Adaoay and Kabayan Benguet. Left: A thorn from the maguey plant used for tattooing in Benguet (Photograph by AV Salvador-Amores, 2012).

Mummies, according to Merino, were tattooed using the thorns of the cactus plant *maguey* (*Furcraea foetida L.*), which is abundant in the Kabayan, Bokod and other areas in Benguet (Figures 9-10). This tattooing “needle” was dipped into the ink and was used to puncture the skin with the desired designs. Ursula Perez writes that the “sharp instrument may also be a thorn of lemon or orange trees” (11). Merino (27) adds that the art of tattooing among the mummies of Kabayan was done with the use of “pounded leaves of a native tomato mixed with soot and water until a consistent and oily ink-like liquid is produced.” According to some tattooed elders in Kabayan, the colour of the tattoo is bluish and greenish black. “The solution, which serves as a coloring and healing lotion, is applied after the arms are pricked with sharp instruments following a desired design” (Perez, U. 11).

In Bontoc, tattooing was done using ten needles attached to a piece of a water buffalo horn (Figure 11). A similar instrument was collected by Alexander Schadenberg, a German pharmacist who made several expeditions to the Cordilleras between 1886 and 1889. This instrument consisted of a thin piece of carabao horn bent at right angles and furnished on the shorted end with sharp pieces of wire. According to Schadenberg, these needles were

placed against the skin and driven in by a stroke with a wooden hammer. When about twenty strokes have thus been made, the wounds were rubbed vigorously with soot. The soot was obtained by burning resinous wood, and a pot was held over the flames to collect the soot (134).



Figure 11: A Bontoc tattoo instrument with ten steel needles attached to a stick. Photograph source from the Schadenberg collection, 1883. (Photograph courtesy of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, Netherlands).

Turning to more contemporary practices, in Southern Kalinga, Whang-ud, a 90-year old tattoo practitioner among the Butbut, uses a lemon thorn inserted in the hole of a stick called the *gisi* (“stick with a thorn”) instead of a cactus thorn. She uses a stick for hand-tapping the designs onto the skin (Salvador-Amores “Batok in Diaspora” 298-300).¹⁶ Needles are also part of her repertoire. Whang-ud opines that the cactus thorn and the lemon thorn work the same way as needles, more specifically when the tattoo designs are “blackened” (or tattooed repeatedly to achieve the black or shaded part of the tattoo motif).

Likewise, needles are used by the younger generation of Ibaloy and Kankanaeys, including the generation of Merino’s mother who was in her 70s or 80s when she passed away in the 1980s. It is uncertain how sewing

needles were introduced to the Cordillera region and how they came to be used for tattooing. My assumption is that these came in during the American colonial period in the 1920s, when Catholic missionaries taught sewing and embroidery to young girls (and carpentry to the boys). Stitchery was educational at that time and was part of the curriculum.

The traditional hand-tapping technique in the region has found its way into contemporary tattoo practice. In many of the tattooing sessions I observed in Southern Kalinga, the tapping frequency was about 90–120 taps per minute, with a continuous tapping of the skin. Whang-ud would stop for a few seconds to replenish the ink at the tip of the thorn. It would take an hour or more to tattoo a design. It took a day to finish full sleeve tattoos on one arm and another day for the other arm – a similar and lengthy process in the burik tradition, according to some of the tattooed elderly women in Benguet. The process of tattooing would take months to finish.

Merino notes that the tattoo practitioner would eventually become almost a member of the tattooee's family. Like any other tattoo practitioners in the Cordillera, the family had to provide the tattoo practitioner with food and shelter to render the tattoo service well (Salvador-Amores "Tattooing", "Batok in Diaspora").

Shifting Biography: Interactions and Mutability of Tattoos

The movement of objects across time "shifts contextually and biographically as the originators' perspectives, affiliations and interests shift" (Kopytoff 79). The interaction between people, technology, and change shows the dynamism in the transformation of tattoos from a once collective identity among the Ibaloy and Kankanaey groups in Benguet to an individual expression of social identity. To reiterate, Appadurai and Kopytoff's call to study the "paths" and "social life histories" of objects also influenced the ongoing trajectories of objects through the "mutability of things in recontextualization" (Thomas 49). Mutability refers to the act of constructing the present by reifying the past through the process of re-contextualization (Toren 698). As such, the burik that we see in the contemporary period illuminates the past social context and how these tattoos are used today. This practice then highlights the continuous representation of the burik. In other words, the case of burik is not fixed; it can also be in different mediums and in different times with varied meanings.

For instance, aspects of traditional tattoos are re-invoked in two ways: (1) the graphic designs of the tattoos without the experience of pain (disembodied) and (2) the painful experience, perforation of the skin, and permanence of

tattoos (embodied). I argue that by re-invoking these aspects of traditional tattoos, they have implications for the interplay between permanence and impermanence, “skin deep” (tattooed) and “surface” (graphic designs on clothing) as a re-expression of the traditional burik. The transference and disaggregation as eventual consequences of the transformation of burik as a graphic design and actual tattoo designs render the movement of the motifs and designs to different mediums. Simultaneously, this also resonates how tattoos move in and out of various “regimes of value” and “spheres of exchange” thereby focusing our attention on both the cultural biography and the social history of things (i.e., tattoo) and, concomitantly, on looking at the life of burik as “mutating” through innovative and creative strategies of appropriation.

Burik as Graphic Design: Materializing Burik on T-shirts and the Barong Tagalog

O’Hanlon (1-6) argues that traditional body decorations and aesthetic practices (such as tattooing, piercing, and body painting) assume fresh significance under the context of modernity. My research in 2010-2012 indicates that nowadays, tattoos or identity marks have become visible on everyday clothing such as T-shirts and the Philippines’ national men’s wear, the *barong Tagalog*. Such transformation, in which body arts are transferred to clothing, should be analyzed as a new phenomenon on the anthropology of the body, to explore the individual and social identities that the dressed body creates.

For instance, a modern rendition of a tattooed man (see Figure 12) was recently featured on a T-shirt designed by a group of Fine Arts students from the University of the Philippines in Baguio. The T-shirt was designed for a tattoo shop in Manila and was intended for sale at tattoo events. The T-shirt appropriated traditional designs of the *burik*, rendered on the chest and upper shoulders, in combination with contemporary graphic designs. According to the designer, Harinam Tibon of Circus Science X,¹⁹ he found the 1885 illustrations of Hans Meyer online and downloaded these so that he could use them as sources for his tattoo designs. Here, the “graphicness” of traditional tattoos became central to the T-shirt’s design. Tibon chose the breastplates (like a coat of mail), geometric designs, and curved patterns from the *burik* and fused these with contemporary patterns.

Tattoos have also been recently incorporated in the *barong Tagalog* (“baro” means dress, “barong” means “dress of” the Tagalog) the delicately embroidered formal men’s wear of the Filipinos.²⁰



Figure 12: A modern rendition of the burik of Benguet on a T-shirt for a tattoo festival in Manila. The T-shirt is labeled “Lakandula,” an archaic Tagalog word referring to “a leader, a ruler from a monarch” in pre-colonial Philippines. (Designed by Harinam Tibon of Circus Science X, 2011. Reproduced with permission).

Many innovations on the barong Tagalog have emerged since its proclamation as national attire in the 1970s. Top fashion designers have brought the barong Tagalog to greater heights (see Milgram *Islands of Embellishment*, “Piña Cloth”). Barge Ramos, one of the top designers in the Philippines has fused folk art and ethnic print designs in the *barong Tagalog*. Such designs include traditional motifs, the *ambahan* (ancient Filipino writing), and patterns from indigenous textiles. The *barong Tagalog*, therefore, has become a means for weaving Filipino culture into fashion (Ramos). More recently, En Barong Filipino, a family-owned enterprise based in Manila, incorporated tattoo designs in the *barong Tagalog*. Susie Silverio, co-owner of En Barong, says that this is the first time that tattoo patterns have found their way onto the *barong Tagalog*, heralding a departure from the more conventional floral, lined, geometric, and spiral designs of other barongs.