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**Tattooed Bodies in the public sphere between tradition
and modernity. The case of Equatorial Guinea**

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Tattoo belongs to what we today denominate *cultural heritage*, that which according to UNESCO can be understood as “the essential source of an identity deeply rooted in the past.”¹ The practice of body modification –through its diverse manifestations such as tattoo, scarification, piercings, deformation or amputation- are visible all over the world, with more or less intensity, in the past and also in the current times. But body modification practices constitute one of these cases of cultural manifestations not sufficiently taken into account as examples of cultural heritage, despite the fact that they may be worthy. The reasons behind why they are disregarded may be diverse in nature; for instance: ignorance, because they do not constitute spectacular manifestations such as big festivals which can attract tourists or because they collide with certain mainstream values. Tattoo traditionally has had a bad reputation in the West, and concepts such as *deformation* or *amputation*, with which we understand specific kinds of body modifications have a clearly negative connotations as well. We should not forget that in the concept *cultural heritage* the social subjective component always has its importance. After all, as we are today well aware, this which we understand as *tradition* means, in fact, a vision of the past according to our present perspective and values.

When the person dies, that is the bearer of tattoo, this cultural manifestation disappears as well. We already know the importance tattoo has within the tradition of some societies. Tattoo not only has aesthetic connotations but its functions can be manifold -always directly related to the sphere of beliefs and social structure of the collectivity and very often related to the idea of individuality as well. It is extremely curious that Western society is experiencing an increasing interest in tattoo with more and more young people having their

¹ *Guidelines for the Establishment of a 'Living Human Treasures' System*, UNESCO, 1989

skin tattooed and that tattoo studios are offering completely decontextualized designs and motifs imported from non-Western cultures², while in non-Western societies the traditional practice and techniques of tattoo are gradually disappearing without receiving due recognition in most cases. Above, we said that the idea of *cultural heritage* is directly tied to values viewed positively by society, and we also know very well that in Western society people have historically seen tattoo in a very negative manner. People have associated tattoo with criminals or marginal people. Christian missionaries, with the good will of the colonial powers, forbade people from cultures that practiced this kind of body modification from doing so. Perhaps this is an important reason for the fact that people normally do not think of tattoo when we speak of *cultural heritage*. However, in the tradition of several cultures, things are or were much different. The *moko* or tattooing of the face that Maoris of New Zealand traditionally have and which gives unique and unmistakable marks to a person, the elaborated designs of Polynesia, the tattoos of the population of Borneo, Maghreb, or of so many parts in black Africa among many others, are or were also very important for the tradition of these cultures.

Body modification such as tattoo or scarification disappear gradually throughout the twentieth century in several world cultures, among them in Africa. The main reasons of this extinction are:

1. The loss of functionality. A lot of these body marks had to do with concrete aspects of tradition (rites of passage, identification with determined groups, beliefs) which due to modernisation or acculturation processes in the contact of their bearers with the West have lost their validity.
2. The dynamic of fashion trends themselves within a given society. This is especially true for those cases in which body modification is done for aesthetic reasons.

² Within the current aesthetic of Body Art people speak of *modern primitives*.

3. Aversion by civil authorities. Often colonial authorities as well as the local administration itself because of Western influence banned this kind of practice (for instance in Japan or Nigeria among other countries).
4. Aversion toward body modification by collectives with some moral authority, such the Christian missionaries. As the missionaries in their evangelizing activities gave much importance to the decorum regarding the body covering, they also damned tattoo and scarification practices.
5. The present globalization processes, especially through the powerful mass media have spread throughout the planet ideal images of the body, which correspond to Western criteria, regarding the beauty ideals as much as the social presentation of the body which generally advocates a body without marks of any kind. And if today the same mass media channels show tattooed bodies according to the new tattoo trends, these new tattoo practices –regarding not only designs but also the functionality and values which are behind them- also penetrate in geographic areas of the planet where traditional body ornamentation practices are disappearing and substitute them.

The case of Equatorial Guinea:

Like many other African countries, Equatorial Guinea through the different ethnic groups which today form the country had a rich tradition in tattoo and scarification practices. Equatorial Guinea is a very symptomatic case of the changes which in the last century body modification practices such as tattooing and scarification have experienced in the whole world. Bubi and Fang, two of the most important ethnic groups of this small country have very characteristic traditions regarding tattoo and scarification practices. In the island of Bioko, which is mainly populated by Bubi it was usual to practice two main types of scarification. The first and most widespread consisted of making cuts in the face which could be quite deep, in the form of parallel lines. This was done between the ages of three and five years to girls and boys. After cutting the face, wounds were treated so that big scars resulted. In this way Bubi people appeared to the

European “horribly ugly, disfigured and repugnant”³. According to Antonio Aymemí, a Spanish priest who at the beginning of the twentieth century wrote some articles about the Bubi, the aim of these scarifications on the face was the possibility of recognition among the members of the same tribe in case of banishment or slavery⁴. Whatever the case, the fact is that these characteristic scarifications, first due to reasons of beliefs, later with aesthetic aims⁵ over time have become clear identity signs, a reality which is recognized by old people who today still conserve these marks on their faces⁶. The cruelty which according to the view of the colonial administrators accompanied these practices led to their banishment by authorities.

Beside these scarifications, Bubi people practiced also other types of scarification with ornamental aims, specifically designs in which vegetal motives predominated. Different from the former, “These tattoos beautifully adorn the body. [...] Generally, only the young women had them, though on rare occasion a man would tattoo himself. In the present day, as all Bubi dress decently, this custom has disappeared.”⁷ All these types of scarification⁸ were abandoned at the end of the first third of the twentieth century.

The traditional tattoos made by the Fang in the continental part of Equatorial Guinea are also very interesting. The traditional ways of body ornamentation practiced in the past by the Fang were tattoos, scarifications - scars made mainly by cutting but also by fire (branding)- and body painting in this last case for ceremonial reasons⁹. According to Günter Tessmann who in 1913 published an important study on the Fang, the custom of tattooing among

³ “[...] horriblemente feos, desfigurados y repugnantes.” Antonio Aymemí, *Los bubis en Fernando Poo*, Madrid: Galo Sáez, 1942, p. 25

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cfr. A. Martín del Molino, *Los bubis. Ritos y creencias*. Madrid: Labrys 54, 1993, p. 438

⁶ See: Buenaventura Mobajale et al. *Los últimos escarificados de la isla de Bioko*, Madrid: Centros culturales españoles en Guinea Ecuatorial, 2002, p. 13

⁷ “Este tatuaje resulta hermoso y adorna el cuerpo. [...] Solían únicamente usarlo las mujeres jóvenes; los hombres muy rara vez. En la actualidad, como todos visten decentemente, esta costumbre ha desaparecido por completo”. Aymemí, Op. Cit., p. 28.

⁸ Aymemí speaks of “tattoos” but actually these marks were scarifications.

⁹ Günter Tessmann, *Los Pamues (los Fang): monografía etnológica de una rama de las tribus negras de África Occidental*, Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá de Henares. Servicio de Publicaciones 2003, p. 218

this African ethnic group is not so old, dating from the late nineteenth century¹⁰. Tattoos were made in different parts of the body: face (forehead and cheek), neck, arms, chest, back and legs. Nevertheless due to the fact that colonial administration dressing habits were changing and the body was more and more covered, the tattooed surface of the body was progressively reduced to the visible parts of the body. We have some descriptions of these tattoos and scarifications and we know there was an extremely rich variety of figurative as well as symbolic designs. Tattoos and scarifications were made above all for aesthetic purposes but they were also related to group identity marks and occasionally with determined rites of passage¹¹ as well. The best study on Fang tattoos was published by J. Sabater and J. O. Sabater in 1992 according to documentation gathered during the 1950s when it was still easy to find tattooed bodies among the Fang¹².

As I was interested in these traditional Fang tattoos, I carried out three short trips during the years 2006, 2007 and 2008 to Equatorial Guinea in order to state what had remained of them, regarding their popular memory and regarding also possible aged individuals who still conserved them. I basically carried out my research in the city of Bata, the second town in importance of Equatorial Guinea with approximately 70.000 inhabitants, but also in adjacent villages and some places situated in the interior of the country, especially in the area of Acurenam, near to the Gabon border.

In the town of Bata nowadays it is extremely difficult to find people with old tattoos, and in the very exceptional case that I could find them, they were always very elderly people who had been born in the interior part of the country. Adults nevertheless knew the existence of these tattoos and in my interviews they generally remembered to have seen tattoos on some occasions. On the other hand, young people had little knowledge about old tattoos and scarifications. They knew there were bodily marks which could signify very

¹⁰ G. Tessmann, Op. Cit., p. 221

¹¹ Concretely the initiation ritual denominated *sô*. Cfr. Pierre Alexandre and Jacques Binet, *Le groupe dit pahouin (fang - boulou - beti)*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958, p. 99

¹² See: J. Sabater and J. O. Sabater, *Els tatuatges dels Fang de l'Àfrica Occidental*, Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1992

concrete things such as belonging to a determined village or in the case of women to point out that they were married. The thing they most wondered was how people could have their face marked in such a way. Nowadays no young people would do that.

In the course of my fieldworks I was able to interview some people with traditional tattoos most of whom were women given their greater longevity compared to men. The obvious difficulty of gathering information about this already lost tradition lies in the fact that their bearers are very elderly people. To my questions about the reasons of their tattoos, the first answer was always the aesthetics of appearance. Men and women got these marks before wedding and according to my informants, because in this way the person was more elegant:

“En tiempos de nuestros abuelos una persona que no lleva esto [tatuaje] le burlan. Era una cosa como nosotros ponemos pendientes, pulseras, relojes y cadenas ...y en tiempo de esas [mujeres mayores] si tú no llevas eso te lo insultan porque tu cara está limpia porque tú no llevas tatuajes. Era su ser de joven, como yo pongo mi cadena, pintalabios, nuestra tradición de hoy”¹³.

Nevertheless, going a bit farther in the group discussions, it was also clear that tattoos also had the function of indicating some kind of group ascription, such as family, clan, tribe or place of residence. The son of a woman of Ebinayón told me: “Como no había pasaporte en aquellos momentos empleaban el tatuaje”¹⁴. And quite often I could hear statements like: “Si yo veo de esto [tatuaje] yo ya sé que es de la familia mía.”¹⁵

These kinds of ascription tattoos may not have disappeared completely in some remote villages of the country. In any case, according to the information I got from a 22 year old girl from Ebebiyin, a town located in the Northwest of

¹³ “In the time of our grandfathers a person who did not have this [tattoo] was mocked. It was the same as we now wear earrings, bracelets, watches and necklaces... and in the old women’s time, if you did not have this, people insulted you because your face was clean, without tattoos. It was their own way of being young as I wear my necklace, use lipstick, according to our present tradition”.

¹⁴ “As there weren’t passports at that time they used tattoos.”

¹⁵ “If I see a tattoo I already know that this person belongs to my family.”

the country very close to Cameroun and Gabon, her grandmother makes simple and discrete tattoos on the face of her grandchildren when they are very young. She marks the skin with a single line a few centimetres long in the cheekbone, sideburn or with a dot on the forehead and on other parts of the body (in the concrete case of my young informant she had one of these dots on her forehead and a set of twelve on her left lower forearm). According to the words of this woman:

“hay tatuajes que sirven para calificar a la familia que perteneces. Ahora ya no se hacen pero me los explicaba mi abuela. Ella tiene eso, tiene como una flor en la frente y dice que solo se hacía a su tribu essató. Su papá lo hacía siempre con todos sus hijos. Pero mi abuela ya no lo hizo a sus hijos porque la generación esa ya se acabó”.¹⁶

But the grandmother of my informant conscious of the tradition and with the desire to perpetuate it in some manner was content doing very simple designs on her grandchildren. My informant understood these designs as a “señal de la familia” (family mark) and at the same time in these cuttings the grandmother introduced some substances with the aim to protect against witchcraft.

In the tradition of the Fang, when tattoos were done only for aesthetic reasons, every person could choose the design: “Cada uno cogía la señal que quería, según gusto”¹⁷. The people I interviewed did not remember that there was some kind of prohibition related to tattooing by colonial administration, as on the contrary, was the case among the Bubi in Bioko. They explained to me the progressive extinction of tattoos as a simple change in fashion trends. All people agreed that they did not have any kind of celebration associated to the tattooing. “After the specialist had done his work and with the pain we felt, all we wanted –some informants told me- was to sleep. “

¹⁶ “They are tattoos which are suitable for indicate the family which you belong. This is not more done today but my grandmother explained it to me. She has this, a kind of flower in the forehead and she said that it was for the essató tribe. Her father did this to all his children, but my grandmother didn't it any more because this generation was already finished”.

¹⁷ “Everyone chose the design according to his/her taste.”

Generally they were specialized men who did this kind of work. They used self made blades, knives or other cutting objects such as the glass of a broken bottle. Pigmentation was obtained through the prevalent lampblack and water or also through the combustion of seeds or sap of determined trees such as okume (*Aucoumea klaineana*) or atanga (*Pachylobus edulis*).

Today there are many young people who show some type of tattoo engraved on their skin but they have little to do with the traditional ones and more with the present globalization processes. It was very interesting to observe the change of values regarding tattoos among recent generations. This change was paradigmatically well represented by a young woman I interviewed who had some modern tattoos on her skin. Her grandmother had had the traditional Fang tattoos on her body. The mother on the other hand had no tattoo at all and she had internalized the negative valuation regarding tattoos which were introduced in the country through the colonial administration. She criticized her daughter strongly for having tattoos. But nevertheless the daughter was very proud of the lovely tattoos she had on her skin.

The tattoos we can see nowadays among the population in continental Equatorial Guinea are made in an amateur manner or there are tattoos which have been done by experts abroad. In the city of Bata there is currently no tattoo studio for professional tattooing. Everyone can make these amateur tattoos. At first the desired pattern is made by a normal ball-point pen and then tattooists puncture it into the skin by means of three sewing needles tied together. As a pigment they use an ink made of lampblack and water. The first hours after the tattooing the wound cannot get wet but no additional antiseptic procedure is taken for treating it.

Today people wear tattoos above all for fashion and aesthetic reasons. But in spite of this it is also clear that tattooing also is narrowly related with identity matters –not group identity as was the case in former times- but individual identity. The most simple tattoo which is very easy to see in Bata reproduces the name of the person who wears it. They are worn indistinctly by women and men, especially on the arm but also on other parts of the body.

Very often tattoos show some characteristics of their bearer and especially in these cases we can observe gender differences. Typically men's tattoos are for instance designs representing scorpions, snakes –a big one with an open mouth- crabs, tigers... People spoke to me of these tattoos as “cosas fuertes” – strong matters- which correspond to men. On the other hand the characteristic women's designs were butterflies, flowers or pigeons. If a man wears such tattoos he could be the object of ridicule. Other tattoos which are relatively popular among the present Equatorial Guinea population are the star, moon or the horoscope sign. Very often people wear more than one of these simple tattoos.

Besides those designs which are related with some individual characteristics there are also other usual tattoos which externalize signs of affection such as the heart with an arrow or inscriptions like “tu y yo” (you and I), “mi amor” (my love, my darling) “mi vida” (my life, my darling), or the well known tattoo which reproduces the name of the loved person. These tattoos are worn mainly on the arm, chest, leg, the back of the neck or on the back.

Not everyone looks kindly on the present tattooing in Equatorial Guinea. This is not a very widespread attitude but nevertheless, according to my informants people may think of a very tattooed man as a “bandido” (bandit), or “delincuente” (delinquent) and in the case of women they can be perceived as a “mujeres de calle” (prostitutes). In these cases they reproduce the same mental schemes which we also find in Europe and which would also belong to the colonial administrators in Equatorial Guinea who came from the Spanish state. But these attitudes have to do with modern tattooing. Regarding traditional tattoos, people had no negative opinion about these kinds of body modifications. This was different from what I was originally expecting. In the Maghreb for instance traditional tattoos are seen as backward and this is one reason for their present-day extinction. But in Equatorial Guinea, perhaps because the tradition is already extinct, old people have no problem at all in being proud of having a tattoo. These marks, as well as their bearers are seen as mere witness of the past.

If the old Fang tattooing has practically disappeared, the case of the traditional cutting of the Annobon population is very different. In this little island which belongs to Equatorial Guinea and is located in the south west of São Tomé most inhabitants –men and women of all ages- conserve the tradition of making cuts in the body which are denominated *cutâ*. Although *cutâ* is body modification, it is not tattoo, but only simple cuts not very deep which are made by a sharp object and which do not get any posterior treatment with the only exception being rubbing lemon juice, *ndong* (*afromomum meleguet*, used as a condiment in cooking) and charcoal to the scars. The cuts are made in a long shape and they can be up to 10 cm. long. They are made on arms, hands, legs, back and chest. In the case of the chest it is common to mark two small crosses of approximately 3 cm. in length.

The cuts are done on children when they are about seven years old by specialized men or women. All cuts are made in the same session and in a very quick manner. Usually people give as a payment or present to the specialist a hen or a chicken accordingly if it is a man or a woman. The cutting sessions are done in the early morning and without informing the child in advance so he or she does not resist. The cuts do not have any aesthetic function, in fact much of them are not easy to see at first sight. According to what I could deduce after some interviews made by Annobonese people living in Bata, these cuts have a protection aim.

In Annobon the *cutâ* tradition is until now very well preserved but, in fact, in Africa and in the non Western world in general, traditional tattoo or scarification practices are in the process of disappearing quickly. Sometimes the designs which belong to the typical tattoo or scarification patterns although they are no more engraved on the skin can survive as decorative designs in the handicraft production such as for example is the case among the Ga'anda an ethnic group of northeastern Nigeria in which scarification was officially outlawed in 1978¹⁸. In Benin, for instance, tattoo had been very important as a social practice and in the present days, as is the case in Equatorial Guinea, only

¹⁸ See for instance Marla C. Berns, "Ga'anda Scarification: A Model for Art and Identity", in Arnold Rubin (ed), *Marks of Civilization*, Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1988, pp. 57-76

very elderly people conserve it. Nevertheless today the traditional tattoo named *iwu* is being used in dressing ornamentation as a symbol of ethnic identity. In this way the value and identity function of these ancient designs is not lost and their social validity is conserved, with the only difference that instead of showing them engraved on the skin they are reproduced in woven fabric¹⁹. In other parts of the world like for instance Tahiti or Polynesia in general, a very rich region in tattoo traditions, within the folklorism practices or revival movements so typical for our times, people recuperate the designs of old tattoos, sometimes as real tattooing or sometimes as a body painting.

In the case of Equatorial Guinea, where the memory of the old tattoos is quite vague there is not at the moment any sign or clear manifestation of some kind of revival regarding the formerly rich tattoo tradition of the country. Such tradition has nothing to do with present daily life. As a general rule, what I perceived from the tattooed people I interviewed was a certain pride in the old tattoos. They were very conscious that these tattoos were something of the past, "señal de los tiempos remotos" ("signal of distant times"). But they also do not care about the disappearance of these engraved marks because they are a matter of generations. "They –the young people- do other things" I was told very often. Sometimes young people make fun of these tattoos but in fact they do similar things: "tienen que adaptarse a las nuevas tecnologías" ("they have to adapt to new technologies"). In all my interviews to traditionally tattooed people I always got the answer that they would not like that their grandchildren to bear the same tattoos. Their time was already gone.

Tattoos and the public sphere

Tattooing, like body modification in general, is related to the concept of *social presentation* of the body, and all that which we want to communicate with our body through the simple fact of presenting it in a space of social interaction. Therefore, this also has to do with the idea of *personal facade* of Goffman²⁰. And if the term *facade* gives us the idea of something external we do not have

¹⁹ Cfr. Joseph Nevadomsky and Ekhuagosa Aisien, "The Clothing of Political Identity: Costume and Scarification in the Benin Kingdom", *African Arts*, 28/1, 1995, p. 72

²⁰ Erving Goffman, *La presentación de la persona en la vida cotidiana*, Madrid: Amorrortu, 1987, p. 35

to fall into the trap of considering the social presentation of the body as a mere mask which we can put on and take off easily. In fact, as social interactionism teaches us, the self and its public presentation are not only associated but they merge²¹. We are then not only talking about the public sphere in which the individual acts but also about the private and even the intimate sphere. And tattoos precisely allow us to play in these different spheres. The area of the body where we engrave the tattoo is very indicative of the kind of sphere which we ascribe it. The traditional Fang tattoos which are done on the forehead are very explicit regarding this: they belong without any doubt to the public sphere. But while these tattoos are part of a determined code which is very well understood by the community, other tattoos, although they can be on very visible parts of the body such as arms or chest can belong to the strict private sphere. This is the case for instance of some of the aforementioned modern tattoos which reflect affective relations or others which are understood as a magic protection which can only be decodified by the individual or by a very limited number of people. And even those tattoos which in former times belonged to the public sphere, through the passing of time and as they are losing social validity they are progressively entering into the private and intimate sphere of the individual. I perceived this clearly in some of my interviews with tattooed people. In asking for the meanings of those designs already completely merged in the wrinkled skin, there were people who were reluctant to give me very concrete answers. Perhaps because the memory had fallen into oblivion, the days where they engraved those body marks were already far away. But also perhaps because all that these tattoos implied belonged to the personal memory and those memories cannot be made known so easily to a stranger who had no relationship to that reality. What before belonged to the public sphere has now gone into the private one. Even the young Guinean people complained to me on some occasions that old people did not want to tell them anything regarding those old traditions. For them tattooing belonged to the past which had nothing to do with the present life.

²¹ G. Stone, quoted by Bryan Turner, *Body and Society*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 123

A tattoo may have been conceived in order to intervene in the public sphere but throughout time and especially because of social changes, in the end can be perceived as something belonging to the private sphere. And this may happen even in spite of its visibility such as is the case in the Fang facial tattoos. On other occasions these tattoos may keep their concrete meaning although nobody wears them on the skin anymore. This, for instance, is the case of the aforementioned Benin example, where traditional tattoos survive in the designs of clothes.

When tattoos are conceived in order to interact in the public sphere, they are to be understood within the dynamic of the social presentation of the body, a dynamic which can be explained through the existence of three parameters which are consubstantial to human nature as the social beings that we are: identity, social order (including hierarchy) and exchange. The social logic requires us to know who we are within the community, which place we occupy within the different situations of social and hierarchical order and what and with whom we exchange things or services. And all this is signalled through the manner in which we present our body to others.

It is within these three parameters of social logic that the symbolic value of the body attains relevance. This symbolic value is expressed through the actions we perform with the body, as for instance, gestuality, all body techniques which Marcel Mauss began to speak about²² and also through the image we intend to give of our body, that which we denominate *body presentation*. And regarding this last aspect, a very important element in all societies is that of body modification, all these techniques which are used with the aim of producing permanent or semipermanent modifications on the body without therapeutical reasons. And among them is, of course, tattooing.

Identity –social as well as individual- is that which defines us within a given community or collective and delimits us from others, who we are not. A

²² Marcel Mauss, "Técnicas y movimientos corporales", in: *Sociología y antropología*, Madrid: Tecnos, 1971, pp. 337-356

large part of traditional Fang tattoos has to do with this parameter. Body modifications such as Bubi scarification or the cuts in the body which Annobonese population show, although they were not originally conceived as identity marks can become ethnic symbols. As I was carrying out my fieldwork in Bata and was asking for body modification manifestations, many people gave me as a typical ethnical identification marks for the Annobonese the cuts they make on their bodies.

The fact that individuals are social beings implies organization, and one of the aspects of this is the social order which we understand as the structuration forms of social relations, as a set of rules and regulations which govern the relations among people and different strata in a given society. This social order is expressed in a very perceptible manner by individuals through the social presentation of the body. Body presentation tells us how we have to be understood within the social system.

Given the importance that the social presentation of the body has, it is no wonder at all that every society has concrete regulations regarding the external appearance of individuals. Here, for instance, we have to speak of the "politics of presence" which we can directly link to the concept of *public sphere* and with which among others we regulate the bodily appearance²³. This is the explanation for the animadversion which colonial rulers in Africa –including the religious apparatus which accompanied them- generally had against such social presentations of the body within the public sphere, which contravened Western criteria, basically related to nudity, tattooing, scarification and body modification in general. Regarding this last aspect, it is worth noting the deep animadversion against female genital mutilation practices in Western society which contrasts with the indulgence devoted to male circumcision. It is clear that the bodily consequences in female genital mutilation are much more dramatic than in the case of the male circumcision. But in fact, male circumcision is also a mutilation carried out in children without any possibility of choice. We can be sure that an additional reason for such indulgence is the fact that the West has known male

²³ See: Annelies Moors, "Representing Family Law Debates in Palestine: Gender and the Politics of Presence", in Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, Eds., *Media Religion and the Public Sphere*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, pp. 115-131

circumcision for centuries and that these practices –beside the concrete case of the Jewish population- are still alive today among broad population areas of Great Britain and the United States of America²⁴.

Whatsoever form of body modification –tattooing, scarification, piercings, deformation or amputation- which goes beyond that which is considered *normal* represents an attempt against the social established order: the body symbolizes the fight between order and disorder in all societies²⁵, and this is put especially into manifest through its social presentation in the public sphere. Even bodies which already from the birth of the person are seen as anomalous are very often suspect. So, for instance, among the traditional beliefs of the Equatoguinean Ndowé a child which is born with a body malformation is thought to have witchcraft powers²⁶.

If social order and hierarchy constitute logical consequences of the social nature of human being, the need to exchange is another social logic. Individuals can only survive if they articulate in a convenient manner the exchange relations with other members of society. These relations are channelled through that which we denominate *sociability*, whose basic reason is the absolute indispensability of the interaction among the different members who constitute society. The social presentation of the body has to do with this human reality as well. Throughout our body presentation we say to others –in whatsoever situation- which kind of interaction, of contact, in short which kind of exchange we want to maintain with the individuals who we are confronted with face to face in every concrete situation. For this reason, for instance, it made sense to indicate through tattoos if a person is or is not married such as was the case in the old Fang tattoos, or to indicate in the same manner the group affiliation given that the kind of exchange which is expected between two individuals depends on these circumstances.

²⁴ See: David Gollaher, *Das verlezte Geschlecht. Die Geschichte der Beschneidung*, Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2002

²⁵ Jayme Sokolow, *Eros and Modernization*, London and Toronto: Associated Universities Press, 1983, p. 25

²⁶ This child is named *enongui wato* which means that he or she can bewitch. Cfr. Virginia Fons, *Entre dos aguas. Etnomedicina, procreación y salud entre los ndowé de Guinea Ecuatorial*, Vic: Ceiba 2004, p. 128

Regarding the social presentation of the body, within the logic of Western society and which throughout globalization processes has been in part also adopted among other societies of the world, the only body parts which generally people do not cover are the face²⁷, the neck and the hands. This is the reason that only very seldomly can tattoos be seen on these parts of the body. A tattoo always gives some kind of information about the self²⁸ and in determined occasions will be socially, strategically better not to show it. It is true that today in the West, when climate conditions permit it, many people show tattoos on the back, arms, legs or even on the belly. But -if advisable- these parts of the body can be easily covered with clothes. In the case of the traditional Fang tattoos which people showed on the face or on the neck, these could always be seen. But today, if necessary, a manner if not of covering, but at least of silencing them, is not to make known the social meanings which they had when they were socially valid. This is what I sometimes found when I was doing my fieldwork with elderly people. They wore tattoos, which although they were of clear ascriptive nature, by asking for their meaning people said to me that they were only for aesthetic reasons typical of their past times. On some occasions, given that I generally did my interviews in the presence of different members of the family, when hearing this answer some of the family members corrected the tattooed person saying that tattoos not only were related to the beauty concept but above all, they indicated to the family or tribe to which the person belonged. There are tattoos then, which although originally conceived for the public sphere, step by step have become understood as for the private sphere. That is why people may hide their primitive meaning on some occasions.

Tattoos are the reflection of concrete worldviews and if these change, also tattoos have to change in some way. They cannot disappear given that they are well engraved on the skin, but what can change, when they lose importance within the public sphere, is the social perception about them. In the

²⁷ We only have to think about the aversion many Westerners feel seeing Muslim women with their face covered.

²⁸ Not only because of the concrete engraved design but also because of the simple fact of being tattooed, a fact which in the traditional Western worldview is not always considered positive.

traditional Fang tattoos, the *signifier* –the tattoo design- is maintained but what changes is the *signified*. In saying they were made for aesthetic purposes only and “forgetting” other social meanings and functions that tattoo could also have had, people are showing very clearly what place old traditional tattoos have to occupy in the present public sphere, the same as modern tattoos may have and which above all are understood as fashion. The validity of all other meanings they could also have is only going to be conserved in the private sphere.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Traditional Fang tattoo: Two simple lines on the forehead. Village Akok Ndong, Equatorial Guinea, near to Gabon border, 2008



Traditional Fang tattoo: An inverted triangle between the eyebrows. Bata, Equatorial Guinea, 2008



Traditional Fang tattoo: A tattoo on the neck and forehead, Village Alum, near Mongomo, Equatorial Guinea, 2008



Traditional Fang tattoo: Twelve simple dots on the lower forearm of a young woman. Ebebiyin, Equatorial Guinea, 2008



New tattoos: People engrave their own name on the skin. Bata, Equatorial Guinea, 2006



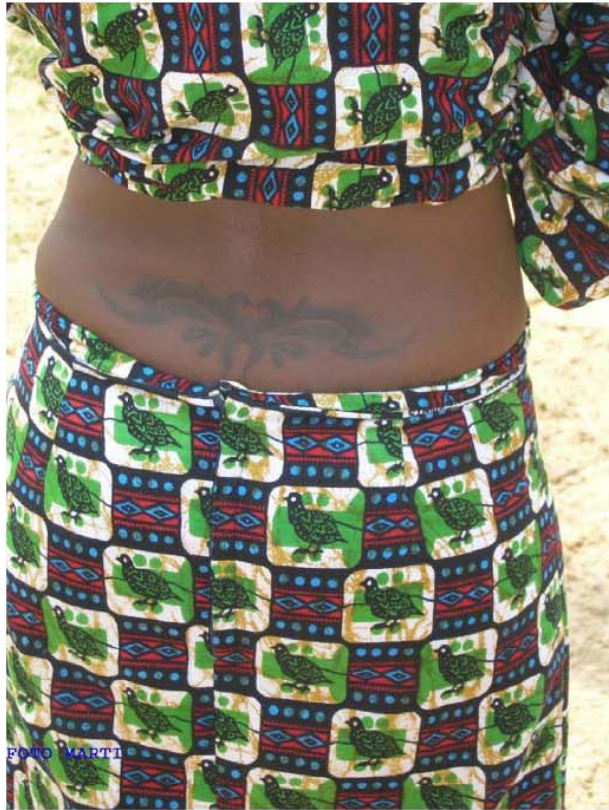
New tattoos: Personal name and other tattoos related to the private sphere made on a non professional manner. Bata, Equatorial Guinea, 2006



New Tattoos: Tattoo as protection against spiders on a Ndowé young man, Bata, Equatorial Guinea, 2006



New Tattoos: The horoscope sign on a young man, Bata, Equatorial Guinea, 2006



New Tattoos: Tattoo showing the present global aesthetic trends. The tattoo was done during the woman's short visit to Spain. Bata, Equatorial Guinea, 2006