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Production processes and ethics of contemporary tattooing among tattoo artists in Kumasi and Accra metropolises

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary tattooing in Ghana is gaining prominence as a mode of self-expression; however, scholarly discourse has predominantly focused on its health implications, overlooking the ethical and procedural dimensions of tattoo practice. This study explores the production processes and ethics associated with contemporary tattooing in the metropolitan areas of Kumasi and Accra. Employing a qualitative ethnographic methodology, data were collected from six tattoo artists through purposive and snowball sampling, capturing four key stages of tattooing: consultation, artistic design, the tattooing procedure, and aftercare. The findings reveal that, despite the absence of codified ethical guidelines, artists adhere to unwritten norms that can be interpreted through the lens of deontological ethics, emphasizing duty, informed consent, and hygiene. The study concludes by advocating for the formal regulation and licensure of the tattoo industry in Ghana to ensure professional standards, enhance safety, and support the inclusive growth of tattoo culture as a legitimate artistic and cultural practice.

Keywords: Contemporary tattooing, Ethics, Tattoo artist, Tattoo Culture.

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1. Introduction

The practice of markings on the human body for varied reasons has been in existence since time immemorial (Ebeheakey and Kquofi, 2018). Among the numerous forms of body marking is tattooing, which is a form of body alteration. Tattoo art has been practiced for at least 10,000 years, with evidence of tattoos found in ancient Egypt and tomb scenes (Oppong et al., 2024). They further stated that the oldest known tattoo was found on an Egyptian mummy dating back to around 2000 BCE. These tattoos may have symbolized rejuvenation and fertility in women. The word tattoo originated from the Tahitian word “tau-tau,” which means to “mark” (Fedorenko et al., 1999). According to Tapon (2024), tattoos in Africa served multiple purposes, including healing, warding off spirits, and signifying allegiance to an ethnic group. These tattoos exhibited simplicity in design, characterized by pairs of straight lines adorning the arms and legs, as well as an elliptical pattern positioned below the navel. On his part, Hambly (2009) opined that tattooing is perceived as an art form that transmits a wide range of cultural expressions and social dichotomies within spaces where they exist. It cuts across a range of purposes,

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which are for religious beliefs and magic, and social and anti-social purposes. In Sub-Saharan Africa, tattoos were not predominant as compared to other body modifications such as piercings, ear and lip stretching, cranial stretching, etc., because of the beliefs and practices attached to them (Onyeagubor, 2022).

Currently in sub-Saharan Africa, the art of tattooing is also well-practiced, both by using contemporary techniques, tools, and materials as against the traditional technique carried out by the Holi, Somba, Fulani, and the Fon people across the Sahel (Andrews, 2019). According to Kenney (2014), tattoos, which were once seen as symbols of social deviance or marginalization, have become a popular form of body art, symbolizing community, affinity, and inclusion. Tattoos have gone mainstream and have been reconsidered as a vibrant art form (McGrath, 2017). This recent widespread acknowledgement of tattooing has led to the popularity of modern tattoos and demystifies the negative or detrimental health concerns associated with it (Summers et al., 2018; Timming and Perrett, 2017; Ellis, 2015; Timming, 2015). Tattooing today integrates contemporary methods and trends to produce unique artworks on the skin that express the personality, interests, and individuality of the person, as opposed to traditional tattooing, which depended on simple designs and limited colour palettes (Hobbs, 2022). Contemporary tattoo artists use high-powered and quality equipment, such as specialized machines and high-quality ink, to create seamless, intricate designs that are tailored to the client's exact wants and tastes (Rosenkilde, 2015; Park, 2023). In addition, minimalist designs, brilliant colours, art nouveau-inspired works, geometric shapes, and realistic portraiture are some examples of contemporary tattooing (Hardin, 1999).

In Ghana, tattooing appears to be a growing trend among the younger generation (Arthur, 2016; McGrath, 2017; Agbezuge et al., 2022), leading to the phenomenon of contemporary tattoo culture. However, tattoos are increasingly becoming more than just a fashion statement, as they move away from the stigma, discriminatory comments, and perceptions that once surrounded them as 'unprofessional'. This shift has resulted in people with tattoos being labeled as rebellious, less intelligent, with lower levels of competence, inhibition, and sociability, and often stereotyped as drug addicts or criminals (Agbezuge et al., 2022). Furthermore, contemporary tattooing has become more accessible than ever before. Technological advancements in equipment and techniques have allowed for a faster and less painful process, making tattoos more accessible for those who may have previously been hesitant. The dynamic blends of materials, approaches, ideas, and topics associated with tattooing push the boundaries of conventional art forms and reflect current social and cultural challenges (Belting, 2012). As contemporary tattooing becomes increasingly popular in Ghana, particularly as a medium of self-expression (Tetteh et al., 2022), traditional stigmatized perceptions of the practice are progressively being challenged and replaced by more accepting attitudes (Sarajlić, 2020). Moreover, research in Ghana has primarily concentrated on the health effects and other body markings (Adjei et al., 2006; Agbezuge et al., 2022; Ebeheakey and Kquofi, 2018; Irwin, 2000), leaving discussions about production methods and ethical practices within contemporary tattoo culture largely unaddressed. The study seeks to answer the research question: What ethics and production processes do tattoo artists engage in within Kumasi and Accra metropolises?

2. Methodology

This study was part of a doctoral thesis, conducted from 2022 to 2024, which utilized a qualitative research approach. According to Mogalakwe (2006), the qualitative research approach is considered a process of social science research that involves systematically collecting data to discover answers or provide explanations for social issues. Bhandari (2020) further explains that the qualitative research approach is most often used in the fields of social sciences and humanities, in subjects like anthropology, ethnography, sociology, education, health, philosophy, history, et cetera. This method allows data to be collected in a natural setting. With the methods of ethnography and two non-probabilistic random sampling strategies, namely, purposive and snowball sampling, data were collected from participants through face-to-face interviews alongside field observations. For this study, a sample size of six (6) tattoo artists and their shops was recruited. This sample size was deemed sufficient as data saturation was reached with further engagements not yielding any new data (Polit and Beck, 2017). The study examined the production processes and ethical practices of contemporary

tattoo art in Kumasi and Accra, the two major Ghanaian metropolises with rapid urban population growth. Due to the rapid population growth in Kumasi and Accra, the researchers anticipated that there would be a higher number of tattoo artists due to the increased number of wearers. The data was analyzed using the narrative analysis method (Dudovskiy, 2011). This is because the method is best suited for analyzing naturally occurring talk and all types of written texts. Also, stories were presented by respondents, considering the context of each case and different experiences. All ethical considerations were observed in the field of study since the study involved human beings. Approval of this study was given by the supervisory Committee from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. With this approval, ethical principles such as voluntary participation, harmlessness, anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality, as well as respect for individuals, were observed. Pseudonyms like Khalifa, NN, KB, Aku, Bella, et cetera were created for participants.

3. Results and discussions

3.1 Production processes within Kumasi and Accra Metropolises

In no particular order, six (6) tattoo shops were visited within the Kumasi and Accra metropolises. They include: Jahman, Black Ink, Gray, Rabi, *Skracha*, and Shittu tattoo studios. In the production of tattoos, four (4) major stages were identified they are Tattoo consultation, artistic idea, tattooing procedure, and after-care.

Tattoo Consultation:

Before an individual decides to have their body inked or tattooed, the person is engaged in a comprehensive discussion in a therapeutic manner. In the words of a tattoo artist, “tattoo consultation is extremely relevant and without that, a tattoo process can never start” (tattoo artist, personal communication, 1st October, 2023). He further stated that: “clients receive counselling sessions to become knowledgeable about the tattooing process”. This assertion is like that of David et al., (2023) that, in the city of Hoi in Vietnam, it is not merely a discussion; rather, it is focused on capturing the essence of the client's ideas. Another tattoo artist stated, “How huge an icebreaker it is, simply because it makes clients feel comfortable by taking away any form of fear and anxiety. Without it, I will not work on a client” (tattoo artist, personal communication, 9th December, 2022). This consultative process by the tattooist, therefore, aims at making the ultimate design reflect the clients’ story at a profound level by grasping their preferences, previous tattoo encounters, and aspirations. It also helps the tattooist to customize a tattoo that is exclusive to the client. Central to this discussion are equal issues of the potential pain, healing time, aftercare requirements, and any associated risks. The artist provides a step-by-step explanation of the process, including the use of needles, ink types, and the duration of the session. This information enables clients to make informed decisions about their tattoos.

The researchers also discovered that, during the counseling sessions, inquiries are made regarding clients’ health and safety concerns. Clients are specifically questioned about any medical conditions, allergies, or medications that may impact the tattooing process. This information enables tattoo artists to assess whether the clients are physically capable of undergoing the procedure and to take appropriate measures, such as utilizing hypoallergenic ink if necessary. During tattoo consultations, clients receive estimates of the cost for their tattoos. Factors such as the design’s size, complexity, and colour are duly considered by tattoo artists when providing cost quotations. However, other tattoo artists from certain regions of the United Kingdom prefer to see clients’ ideas and are therefore always pleased to welcome clients visiting the parlour with their references. (Salvin, 2022).

Artistic Idea:

During the artistic idea session, clients were allowed to discuss their tattoo ideas and concepts with the tattoo artist. With this, it was realized that it helps them to define their concept for the tattoo and receive feedback from the artist on how to effectively translate their thoughts into a tattoo design. It is a collaborative process in which the artist contributes to the refinement and improvement of the design based on their knowledge. Furthermore, at the idea sharing stage, prompting them to share the significance behind their chosen design and its cultural context with their tattoo artist. The tattoo artists then provide valuable insights into the symbolism of different designs and offer guidance on accurately representing the intended meaning. In affirmation of this, a tattoo wearer disclosed that.

This is my third tattoo, and I can never go get a tattoo without discussing my tattoo design with my tattoo artist before the sketch is done. This is because I am very critical about the cultural and symbolic significance of my tattoos and any other tattoo design I intend to get (Bella, personal communication, 29th December, 2022).

Based on the observations by the researchers, it was realized that the artistic idea sessions also provided an opportunity for clients to create a connection and trust with their tattoo artists and the final design to be produced. Additionally, creating a wonderful tattooing experience begins with strong communication and a comfortable working relationship. Tattoo procedure is preceded by sketching or drawing of the image via transfer paper, shaving and disinfecting the body area where a tattoo will be stamped, transferring the stencil drawing onto the skin, and then setting up the rotary tattoo machine and tattooing.



Figure 1. Stencil drawing on a transfer paper. Source: Fieldwork, 2023

Tattooing Procedure:

For a client to get a tattoo, the area to be tattooed was first sanitized with rubbing alcohol and clean cotton. Additionally, it was explained that as a tattoo artist, sanitizing the skin is primarily done to avoid infection (KB, personal communication, 29th December, 2022). As the skin acts as a natural barrier against pathogens, piercing it with needles allows bacteria, viruses, and other microorganisms to enter the body. By sanitizing the skin, the possibility of introducing harmful microorganisms into the body is lowered. Similarly, another artist also stated that many microorganisms are present on the skin's surface, including harmless bacteria, making it non-sterile. To prevent these microorganisms from entering deeper layers of the skin during tattooing, it is important to sanitize the area and remove dirt and oil. The researchers observed in all six shops that the area to be tattooed is mostly shaved to clear off all unwanted hairs. This is because there is the possibility of the needle from the tattoo machine pulling the hairs of the client, which is a very painful experience. Finally, to commence the procedure, the artist applies a numbing cream known as 'SPSSCIA 85%', which is to reduce painful sensation from the needle on the first layer of the skin. However, in some of the shops visited, this practice was not witnessed. This was because the numbing cream was seen as quite expensive. So, after the application of the numbing cream, the equipment and workspace are prepared by the tattoo artist, who sterilizes all tools and wears disposable gloves. The client is then positioned comfortably on a chair or table. A stencil of the approved design is applied to the skin by the artist, serving as a guideline. However, just before it is applied, a greasy disinfecting solution (Dettol) is applied to the area to be tattooed, and the stencil tattoo drawing is placed on it to transfer whatever image the client intends to get on the preferred area of the body. Other experts in Europe and some parts of America also strongly recommend "Green soap". This is a vegetable-based soap that is eco-friendly and oil-based. It is commonly used by professionals in medical settings, tattoo shops, and piercing studios to sanitize and cleanse the skin. This plant-derived soap has been a staple in the tattoo industry for a long time and is

suitable for most skin types, including sensitive skin (Higuera, 2021). Now, a sterilized needle on a tattoo machine is used, and the artist carefully and precisely tattoos the design onto the client's skin. The level of discomfort or pain experienced by the client varies depending on their pain tolerance and the location of the tattoo. Typically, experiencing pain during a tattoo session is highly subjective and can be influenced by factors such as biological sex, pain tolerance, and the specific area of the body being tattooed. Generally, the most painful areas for tattooing are those with minimal fat and located over bony areas. These areas include the feet, ribs, spine, fingers, chest, knee, elbow, shin, neck, groin, head, and face, and the bony part of the ankle. On the other hand, areas of the body with thicker skin and more fat are generally less painful for tattooing. These areas include the forearm, hands, shoulder, parts of the back, back of the arm, stomach, outer arm, and outer thigh (Tabackman, 2021). With this, the study observed that a lot of the artists deliberately engage the clients in conversations to take their minds off experiencing discomfort. Periodically, it was observed that all the tattoo artists clean away any excess ink and blood and apply ointment to keep the tattoo moisturized.



Figure 2. Disinfecting a shaved area where the tattoo is to be made. Source: Fieldwork, 2023



Figure 3. A stencil of an approved design being transferred to the skin by the tattoo artist. Source: Fieldwork, 2023



Figure 4. Detailing of the stencil already transferred onto the skin by the tattoo artist. Source: Fieldwork, 2023



Figure 5. Artist using the rotary tattoo machine with a sterile needle to outline the design with black ink. Source: Fieldwork, 2023

After-Care:

Once the tattooing process is finished, the artist gives the client thorough guidance on how to take care of the tattoo. This involves instructions on how to clean and safeguard the tattoo, which products to utilize, and how frequently to apply them. The researchers observed that some of the tattoo artists applied “Vaseline” body cream, or a shea butter locally known as “nkuto”. However, there were instances where organic wax, like beeswax, was recommended. This is to guarantee appropriate healing and to stay clear of exposing the tattoo to direct sunlight, and later covered with a plastic wrap to keep it from further damage and other infections. The healing process of a tattoo usually lasts for a few weeks and sometimes involves scabbing, peeling, and itching. Usually, it is advised that to prevent any issues, it is important to refrain from scratching or picking at it. Adhering to appropriate after-care instructions is crucial to promote proper healing and maintain the tattoo’s brightness. On the other hand, Cherney (2019) opines that petroleum jelly products, like the well-known brand “Vaseline”, function by sealing in moisture to the skin. These are the most effective for severe dry skin issues, particularly during certain times of the year. However, Vaseline is not a suitable choice for tattoos. This is because the moisture-sealing properties also obstruct the airflow to the new tattoo wound. Air circulation over a wound is essential for the healing process. Using Vaseline on fresh tattoo

wounds may even increase the risk of infections. Symptoms of an infected tattoo include redness, swelling, and discharge.

Another tattoo artist said, “The best after-care is the dry healing method. Tattoo dry healing involves letting the tattoo heal in the open air instead of using ointments or creams. It’s important to keep the tattoo clean with soap and water and protect it from tight clothing and sunlight exposure”. This approach is in tandem with that of Jewell (2020), that dry healing eliminates the risk of using products with harmful ingredients. Jewell, however, moisturizers can help lubricate the skin and reduce itching. These various approaches to after-care suggest that both dry healing and using moisturizers have their pros and cons. Some lotions and creams contain ingredients that can irritate the skin or cause allergic reactions, while natural oils like coconut oil or shea butter oil can be a safer option.

3.2 Tools and materials

Samples of tools and materials used for body tattooing include coil and rotary tattoo machines, inks for tattooing, needles for making tattoos, gel ink pen tattoo transfer, and different kinds of numbing creams. Surprisingly, the research found all these tools and materials imported from Europe and the United States of America (U.S.A). With this alert, the researcher realized a significant loss of income to the Ghanaian economy.



Figure 6. Coil Tattoo Machine and Rotary Tattoo Machine. Source: Fieldwork, 2023



Figure 7. Collection of Inks for Tattooing. Source: Fieldwork, 2023

3.3 Ethical practices among tattoo artists in Kumasi and Accra Metropolis

The tattoo artists and studios visited by the researchers generally lacked a formalized list of ethical guidelines. However, there were evident unwritten ethical considerations that were consistently observed in practice. One tattoo artist shared his standard: he avoids tattooing young adults under the age of 20, stating, “Firstly, I think they are still too young to get tattoos which will become permanent designs and decisions on their body” (Bonti, personal communication, 28 October 2022). While the legal age for tattooing varies by jurisdiction, this practice aligns with the broader legal and ethical principle that minors or young individuals cannot independently consent to procedures or enter legal contracts (Farley, Van Hoover, and Rademeyer, 2019). In Ghana, the legal age of adulthood is 18. Tattoo artists typically require clients around this age to present valid identification before offering their services. One artist noted that, despite financial pressures, he upholds this standard to maintain ethical integrity (Ow, personal communication, 28 October 2022). Interestingly, ethical standards vary among practitioners. At Shittu Tattoo Studio, for example, the two artists displayed differing personal approaches, yet both emphasized the importance of ensuring that clients are legally recognized adults. Furthermore, another artist stressed studio etiquette and spatial awareness, urging clients to clean up after themselves and minimize movement during procedures due to the limited studio space and the concentration required (YW, personal communication, 5 July 2023).

This study does not attempt to generalize about the ethical practices of tattoo artists globally. Rather, it focuses on the practices observed in six studios: Black Ink, Shittu, Rabi, Gray, Scratcha, and Jahman across the Kumasi and Accra metropolises. The findings reflect the interplay between ethical decision-making and the artistic nature of tattooing within a close-knit community of artists and clients. All interviewed artists confirmed the use of single-use needles, disposable gloves, and sterilized instruments, reflecting a shared commitment to hygiene. From a theoretical perspective, these practices align with deontological ethics, which emphasize duty, informed consent, and respect for human dignity. Rooted in Kantian philosophy, deontology holds that actions must follow moral principles regardless of their outcomes (Gregor and Wood, 1998). In the context of tattooing, this includes adherence to standards such as obtaining informed consent, maintaining hygiene, and respecting age restrictions. For example, the Tattooing of Minors Act 1969 in the UK legally prohibits tattooing individuals under 18, upholding a moral duty to protect minors from irreversible decisions (UK Legislation, 1969). Similarly, Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 mandates workplace hygiene and safety, which are deontologically necessary to prevent harm and protect bodily integrity (UK Legislation, 1974). From this ethical standpoint, it is insufficient for a tattoo to be merely complaint-free; it must conform to universal moral duties and professional standards. Thus, deontological ethics affirm that ethically responsible tattooing is grounded in duty-based conduct, not just pragmatic or economic reasoning.

4. Conclusion

This paper critically examined the production processes and ethical dimensions of contemporary tattoo culture in the metropolitan areas of Kumasi and Accra. The findings revealed that, like other forms of artistic and cultural production, tattooing in Ghana follows a structured and methodical process designed to align with clients’ aesthetic expectations and personal expressions. These stages, namely consultation, artistic conception, the tattooing procedure itself, and post-tattoo aftercare, form a coherent workflow that reflects both technical skill and client-centered philosophy.

Importantly, while many tattoo artists and studios do not operate under codified ethical frameworks, the research uncovered a range of tacit ethical norms embedded within everyday practice. These include respect for client autonomy, age-based restrictions, hygienic protocols, and efforts to create a safe and inclusive studio environment. Such practices, though informal, resonate with deontological ethical principles that emphasize duty, respect for people, and moral responsibility independent of outcomes. The implications of these findings are twofold. First, they highlight the urgent need for the institutionalization of regulatory policies in Ghana’s tattoo industry, including mandatory licensure, health and safety standards, and ethical training for practitioners. Such measures would not only professionalize the field but also safeguard clients’ health and rights. Second, the study underscores the studio’s role as a culturally significant space that fosters individual self-expression,

psychological safety, and social identity formation. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to track the evolution of ethical practices within industry, as well as comparative analyses across different regions or cultural contexts. Additionally, ethnographic engagement with clients themselves could offer deeper insights into how ethical considerations and artistic expectations intersect in their lived experiences of body modification.

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