

Inked: Tattooing and Identity in Gozo

by *Samantha Hoeper*

ABSTRACT

While visiting Gozo, it was not difficult to notice the large number of tattooed individuals. It seemed that there must be a reason for this widespread practice and what significance it held. I wanted to figure out why tattooing occurred at such a high frequency and what it meant to the individual as well as the community. Luckily, the majority of the people of Gozo are very friendly and love discussing their tattoos, which made my research easy and enjoyable. Just by sitting on the beach, waiting for a bus or shopping, I was easily able to strike up conversations with local residents. Because tattooing is so personal, but also so widespread, I thought it was important to get many different sources and opinions. My reasoning being that what is true for one person may not be true for another, thus I am not putting all of my eggs in one basket, so to speak. Therefore, I relied on numerous, brief conversations. However, I was also able to contact the only certified tattoo shop owner on the island, I frequented this shop many times, and we had many deeper conversations concerning tattoos and island culture. After piecing together the information I had acquired from my brief encounters and the tattoo shop owner, I was surprised to find that tattooing is a way for individuals to express themselves outwardly, but is also a mechanism for providing solidarity and identifying with their own culture. It is a practice that has become internalized, and over time it is incorporated into Gozo's cultural habitus, solidifying its place in the lives of Gozitan people.

ARTICLE INFO

Introduction

In the heart of the Mediterranean lies the small island country of Malta. When you look at Malta on a map, it's hard to imagine that Malta's much smaller sister island of Gozo can hold so much beauty and cultural richness. As stated by one resident; "Gozo is small; people will do what everyone else is doing". Yielding a small population, island identity and what it means to be and look like someone from Gozo is of great importance. The art of tattooing is a reflection of the individual, but also of the local island culture and association with this culture. What is an individual and personal experience is initially influenced by the social circle or American films and culture, and yet represents the individual on a personal level. Tattooing aids in the cultural pursuit of looking one's best, and varies depending on one's age and gender. It can be argued that being tattooed is a trait that can be linked and identified with being from Gozo. Tattooing is a tendency of the past that is being altered and incorporated into the habitus of the people of Gozo. By evaluating what tattoos may mean and why people get them, a deeper cultural understanding of what it means to be a member of Gozo society and what is valued can be determined.

Keywords

Tattoo, Gozo, habitus, Maori, "showing off"

Tattooing as a reflection of the Individual

The act of getting a tattoo on one's body is a deeply personal experience. The individuals who choose to get them know that it becomes a part of them forever, and appreciate this fact. However, it is also this perception of permanency that is often used as a reason for others to not get a tattoo. After having a short conversation with a young couple who have chosen to not get tattoos, they expressed the fear that their tastes will change, and they will no longer like the tattoo. They also mentioned that they thought the process of getting a tattoo would be painful, and they didn't want to subject themselves to that. In the way that getting a tattoo is a personal matter, the reasoning for not getting a tattoo is personal as well.

While the act of decorating and tattooing the body is personal, this does not mean that the design holds any significant meaning to the owner. Some days, I would sit at a café or in town somewhere, and just approach people and inquire about their tattoos. After a few days of this and having asked dozens of people about what their tattoos mean, if they hold special meaning, or why they chose to get one, it became apparent that tattooing was all about personal style and taste. There were some (mostly elderly) individuals who had tattoos of crucifixes, crosses, family names and family crests. It was evident that these designs were heavily influenced by family and faith. In this case, the tattoo is a direct reflection of personal values. However, when I asked the question of why they got them, the vast majority of the responses were "because I liked it". In some cases, the tattoo gives insight into the values or beliefs of the individual, but there are many times that this does not occur. In many cases the personal nature of the tattoo gives insight into their personality and personal taste. For example; while I was walking down the beach, I struck up a conversation with a young woman sitting nearby. After a while, I asked her why she chose to get a tattoo of a butterfly. Her response of "I just really like butterflies" gives us superficial insight into her likes and dislikes, thus expressing a part of herself through her tattoo. Alfred Gell expresses this concept clearly in the theoretical introduction to his book "Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia". Gell suggests that an individual's skin is used as a way to express oneself and their relationship with others and the outside world. He also goes on to explain that skin is the most external component of the body. It is this part that is viewed and used during interaction with others, and if what it means to be human is the epitome of our interactions and relationships with others, then an individual is ultimately what is viewed by the outside world

and others; their own skin. (Gell 1993: 24) This suggests that the tattoo of the woman on the beach is a reflection of what she wishes to portray to the world.

As stated, tattooing is a personal experience. However, once an individual has a tattoo, it is not something to be hidden. Many of the people I spoke to view their body as something to be decorated and seen by others. At this point, the tattoo becomes a type of accessory to one's persona and is a form of art and decoration. Not everyone chooses to get a tattoo, but the tattoo does aid in the pursuit of looking good. The concept of looking one's best is not exclusive to tattooing. Tattoos are only a small portion of the effort put forth in one's appearance. These attempts at looking good can be observed outside of the realm of tattooing. The most easily observed example of this are the local fiestas held every weekend during the summer. Attending the festa was unlike anything I had experienced. It was a celebration of Saints and faith. There was plenty of food, drink, bright lights, music and large crowds. It was an exciting overwhelming of the senses, and it always made for an interesting night. What particularly interested me was the way people dressed up for these celebrations. Young women often wore revealing clothing, skirts or dresses, high heels, and well-done makeup. This type of dress can be observed in very young girls as well as adult women. The tattoo is an addition to the makeup and manner of dress that emphasizes the way a person may look. Among the young adults on Gozo, it is apparent that tattooing is a social tool that is not only used among friends to "show off", but also as another form of decoration that displays individuality and taste.

The influence of friends

While getting a tattoo is very personal, it is largely influenced by friends and the social circle. The process of considering and deciding to get a tattoo relies heavily on the friends and associates of the individual. In many cases, the consideration for getting a tattoo is suggested by the act of simply seeing a friend with a tattoo. This inspires the individual, and they immediately want to get their own. After unintentionally frequenting the tattoo shop on the slowest days of the week, I was a little disappointed that I hadn't been able to talk to many clients. I thought for sure people would be there to get their tattoos on the weekends and end of the week. However, the owner of the local tattoo shop mentioned that the busiest day of the week is Monday. I found this unusual, but it was explained to me that when friends go out on the weekends, they observe the new tattoos of others. Then they decide that they want to get a tattoo as well, so they enter the tattoo shop with the intent of getting a tattoo on the next day the shop is

open. Sometimes the individual may get an exact duplicate or a similar style to their friends tattoo. This all depends on their personal taste and what they find appealing. Once the individual gets his or her new tattoo, they then will go out another weekend and “show off” their new tattoo, continuing the cycle. While this may encourage tattooing among friends, this type of interaction does not create competition in the number of tattoos an individual gets. The process of showing off, and then duplicating the tattoo is unplanned and an irregular occurrence. The individual is also inspired to get their own tattoo in order to fit in, not to stand out from the crowd. Thus the desire to attain an abnormal amount of tattoos according to the social norm is contradictory to why an individual gets a tattoo in the first place. How this type of interaction influences what kind of tattoo an individual gets largely varies depending on gender.

Gender variance

This male to female dichotomy can be seen in the initial act of purchasing and choosing a tattoo. The owner of the tattoo shop mentioned that he has clearly seen a difference between men and women and their views towards getting the tattoo. It was mentioned that while men are more likely to directly duplicate the tattoo of another, they are also more likely to compromise on the size or amount of detail put into a tattoo if it will significantly influence the price. Men generally seem to be more focused on the immediacy of acquiring the tattoo and getting a good deal. Women tend to be very steadfast in their decision of what kind of tattoo they want. When a woman sees a tattoo she wants, she will in most cases not compromise on details or size. If the tattoo is too expensive, she will either save her money and wait, or get the tattoo at smaller installments at a time. Depending on the current popular design styles, men are more likely to copy a specific tattoo found in movies or directly from the tattoo of friends. While there is great variety in styles and designs of tattoos, this is why there is a very distinct trend and similarity in styles among male friends. The most popular location for a tattoo is the forearm, chest, leg (shin area) and shoulders. These are all areas that accentuate male masculinity, and by drawing attention to these areas with a tattoo, men are attracting the attention of others to themselves.

The types of tattoos that an individual gets have changed drastically over time depending on the current trends and outside influences. Many of the tattoo designs that are popular now originate from American films that have become popular in Gozo. One example of this is the 2002 American film *xXx* (pronounced “Triple X”). The iconic tattoo of 3 interconnected “x’s” that was displayed in the

movie has become widely popular among some men in Gozo. Another popular tattoo design for men is that of Maori art. This type of tattoo is characterized by black ink and interconnected tribal designs, originating from New Zealand tribes. Maori tattoos have only recently become popular in Gozo, and from my observations, is believed to have become popular because of the prevalence of this style in American and western culture. This is a representation of how designs and tattooing are a part of the larger influence of Americanization or Westernization, which will be discussed later.

While men may directly copy the tattoo of a friend, women rarely copy the design or even location of a tattoo that a friend may possess. Women seem to be more influenced and attracted to the idea of simply getting a tattoo. For example, on a particularly hot day while hitchhiking my way to Victoria, I was picked up by a woman just out of town. We quickly began to discuss tattooing, and the woman mentioned to me how she had noticed her friend had a new tattoo of a bird on her foot. She was then inspired and compelled to get her own tattoo, but of a heart on her back. According to the tattoo shop owner, of the women that purchased tattoos from the shop, the most popular locations for women to get tattoos were on the lower back, shoulder, ankle, foot, wrist and hip. However, we also discussed how there are always exceptions, and some women have expanded these horizons and acquired tattoos on other areas. These more popular locations are desirable for women because they are discreet and emphasize the femininity of the owner by drawing attention to these culturally deemed feminine areas of the body. Similarly, the most popular tattoo designs for women tend to accentuate and highlight the cultural idea of femininity. Designs such as flowers, fairies, hearts, birds and stars are very popular, but it is not unheard of for a woman to desire more abstract or masculine tattoos, such as Maori style, as previously described.

As briefly mentioned, there are always exceptions to the general preferences for style, location, or even expected tattoo for an individual’s gender. It is claimed that individuals who choose to get a tattoo that varies from that of what is expected for their gender are not viewed any differently than other tattooed individuals. However, it was the statement of one individual regarding the interactions among Gozitans compared to the interactions between Gozitans and tourists that make me question this theory. It was explained that “Gozitans are very nice to tourists, but we gossip about each other. Everybody knows everybody. There’s nothing else to do.” I had come across this information rather by accident on a particularly hot and slow day at the tattoo shop. I had run out of questions

and was more or less just hanging out and enjoying that the shop was so much cooler than the temperature outside. The owner was explaining to me that he was experiencing conflict between himself and others who were questioning the quality of his work. This perspective of the people of Gozo made me rethink how I perceived interactions between Gozo residents. My only experience had been my personal interactions with locals, which ignores the fact that I am essentially a tourist. I cannot assume that the interactions between locals are the same as a local to foreigner. If I apply this thought to tattooing, this suggests that outwardly, there may be no visible social stigma to getting an unorthodox tattoo, but there may be underlying tensions and gossip directed at the individual. Because I am not a resident of Gozo, I am unaware of these interactions. However, because tattooing is a large part of fitting in with the local culture, this type of situation should rarely occur. When it does occur, there seems to be a bias towards one gender. It is more acceptable for a female to acquire a more masculine tattoo, such as a Maori style, rather than a male acquire a feminine tattoo.

Considering that men and women follow different tendencies in choosing and acquiring a tattoo, there are few tattoos that are perceived as bad or negative. One man I met at a festa mentioned that tattoos related to the devil or evil are often perceived as immoral. Despite the stated attitude that individuals are not judged based on their tattoos, these types of tattoos make people think “you are a bad person”. This is a reflection of the very religious community in Gozo, and the perception that what is tattooed into an individual’s body is a reflection of the self and their personality, as previously mentioned.

Age

It is not exclusively young men and women that are getting tattoos. A small number of older adults will choose to get a tattoo, in many cases, for the first time. Tattooing is predominantly practiced by the younger generations, but it is not unheard of for older individuals to participate as well. There is a group of older men that gather outside a local bar every day in one of the towns. Among them I observed that many of them had tattoos, mostly of family crests, crosses or a crucifix, flags, or family names. If I had more courage, I would have approached them and initiated a discussion, but this never happened. It was an opportunity I greatly regret passing up.

Referring back to Gell’s idea of the skin as a reflection of the individual, the observation of tattoos on the older men suggests that the values of the older generation vary greatly from the decoratively tattooed younger generation. The older

generation generally chooses to display their loyalty to their country and/or family as opposed to themselves or their personal taste. This shows that the self-image that the older generation wishes to portray is one of loyalty and dedication to family, religion or country. What is also interesting to note is that this is generally found among older men. There are very few older women with tattoos. I had asked two young men I met at a bar why they thought this was so. Their perspective on why this is so involves the participation of men in the military. Men would travel away from home in the military and attain tattoos while abroad. This is why the tattoos usually reflect the individuals or country that the young men abroad yearned to return to. I wish I was able to find older women to help answer this question for me, but it was surprisingly difficult to find any. It seemed that older women were either not around, or too busy to be bothered. Another regret I have is not fully seeking these women out and pursuing this question further.

Outside Influences

The difference in style of tattoos between the older generation and younger generation suggests that there has been a shift concerning why people get tattoos and what a tattoo should represent to its owner. The tattoo used to show obvious meaning or closeness and importance of a group or individual to the owner, but over time, tattooing has changed to express the personality of the owner. Since this shift in views and values varies with age, one idea is that this occurred because of the recent rising popularity of foreign and American films which young Gozitans use as inspiration for new tattoos. By introducing a new culture through film, the native cultural atmosphere and values are altered, creating new ideas and sources for inspiration. While visiting Gozo, it was hard not to notice the American influence on the small community. While it was easy to spot the uniquely Gozo cuisine and customs, it was not difficult to find a movie theater playing American movies, a car radio playing American music, or the classic American cheeseburger and fries in some restaurants. Gozo has come to adopt these aspects of American culture and incorporated them with their own. This is reflected in the popular xXx tattoo previously mentioned. Gozo men (and sometimes women) are duplicating the tattoos they see in American films. In this scenario, the character in the movie was portrayed as the idealized masculine hero. By duplicating this tattoo, Gozo men are expressing their personality and themselves by showing a resemblance to the character. Even by claiming that they just “like the way it looks”, there is an unbreakable connection between the film and the tattoo that the owner is aware of, and wants

others to be aware of. This generally only applies to the initial inspiration from the film, not inspiration from the social circle. Once these tattoos are introduced into the social circle by “showing off” and duplicated as previously mentioned, they become a part of Gozo culture and often lose their connection to the film. The design then becomes simply a design that is aesthetically pleasing, and not necessarily recognized or associated with the film.

Who gets tattoos?

Tourists are a group that is known around Gozo for getting tattoos. However, the intentions can be completely different from those of Gozitans. Most often, the reason for a tourist to attain a tattoo is in remembrance of the trip to Gozo. While they may appreciate the design, it is not the predominant reason for getting the tattoo. The most popular designs for tourists are those related to Malta or Gozo such as the Maltese flag, the Maltese cross, the eye of Horus or words expressed in the native language. It is also not unheard of for inhabitants of Malta to travel to Gozo to get a tattoo. This generally is done because of the cheaper price in Gozo as opposed to Malta. The citizens of Malta can afford to get a more elaborate or larger tattoo on Gozo, so they make the trip. Gozitans cannot always afford to do this, so they either settle for a smaller, less elaborate tattoo, or break up sessions and payments in order to make it more affordable. One popular perception of tattoos is that only sailors, military men and criminals get them. However, in the past 10 years, tattooing has become popular among all professions. When asking the tattoo shop owner if there is a trend in occupations of his clients, I was surprised when he stated that there was none. It was explained that individuals from various positions and social classes have acquired tattoos. This includes individuals who work in hospitals, road work, construction, education and students. Tattooing is not generally restricted by social class or occupation, as it is becoming a part of what it means to be from Gozo.

Tattooing as a part of Gozo culture and identity

Tattooing is not unanimously supported or practiced among the people of Gozo; however, it is slowly becoming more and more popular. As previously stated, Gozo is small, and everybody knows everyone. If tattooing is largely influenced by social interactions and the friends and acquaintances people make, then the practice of tattooing is quickly spreading throughout the population of Gozo through these connections. Given that there are specific styles, gender rules and interactions that are uniquely linked with the island

culture of Gozo, tattooing is quickly becoming a part of what it means to be from Gozo, and its identity.

After analyzing the most popular tattoos of men and women and their motives for getting them, it becomes apparent that Gozo's young adults are concerned with (possibly unconsciously) expressing themselves. It is about who they are, what they like, and looking good. By looking at these tattoos, we can determine the deeper cultural values of young-adult Gozitans. Anne E. Becker explains it best in the book “Body, self, and society: The view from Fiji”, when she notes that “core cultural or sub cultural values are encoded in body habitus and participation in bodily conformity.” (Becker 1995: 28) The term habitus itself refers to personal biases, learned norms and social interactions that are acquired through living one's life. It is tendencies of the past that are passed down to create these common norms and interactions. These ideals and practices are then unconsciously internalized, forming the individual's personality. (Bourdieu 1977: 82)

Physically conforming to what is learned and popular, i.e. tattooing, allows for the individual to identify as a member of society. This can be seen in the “showing off” of a tattoo, and the resulted copying or inspiration to get a tattoo. Tattooing is becoming a part of the “body habitus” of young men and women living in Gozo because the social transference and suggestion of tattooing is intimately tied with social life. Because tattooing is so widely practiced and spreads so quickly among social groups, tattooing is starting to become associated with the Gozo lifestyle and identity. When the connection between being from Gozo and having a tattoo was made, the standard of what it means to be from Gozo and look like a Gozitan was redefined. By the power of suggestion and the close-knit sense of community on Gozo, tattooing is becoming a learned practice and norm of the Gozo lifestyle.

In Clinton R. Sanders book, “Customizing the body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing”, Sanders suggests that while some reasons for tattooing are liable to change, it is still viewed as beautiful or becoming to the owner. Even if tattooing serves a specific function, such as expressing ones personality or personal taste, it is also done because the owner “likes it” and it is appreciated by their social group. (Sanders 1989: 6) This is reminiscent of the previously mentioned woman on the beach who got her tattoo of a butterfly because she “liked it”. While there may be underlying cultural and possibly unconscious reasons for getting a tattoo, the appeal of the design, and overall enjoyment of the tattoo still plays a large role.

Conclusion

Tattooing holds different meaning to different people depending on gender, age, whether you are a citizen of Malta or Gozo, or a tourist. However, among the young

adults on Gozo, it is apparent that tattooing is a social tool that is not only used among friends to “show off” and spread the practice, but also as another form of decoration that displays individuality and taste. Tattooing is a reflection of what young Gozitans value, such as looking good and individuality, and how the individual wants to be viewed. Being predominantly, but not exclusively practiced by young adults, tattooing occurs across social class and occupation. Due to the increased exposure to American culture in Gozo, the popular styles and designs of tattoos have changed, altering Gozo culture. With tattooing becoming a part of the “body habitus”, tattooing is becoming deeply encoded in Gozo culture, and what it means to belong in Gozo society.

I admit that in my last days on the island, I gave in and got a tattoo. While it partially fits the tourists reasoning as a way to remember my time in Gozo, I was also experiencing excitement and peer pressure from my friends, who were also planning on getting a tattoo. Thinking back to my reasoning as to why I got the tattoo, I realize that I am no different than any of the people I interviewed or talked to. I felt that same influence from my friends, and really liked the design I chose.

Piecing together the information I had acquired after my time in Gozo was a fulfilling challenge. Separately, the information didn't seem to make sense to me, and was very messy and unorganized. When I compared the information I was given with what I remembered from my down time, everyday events, or just things that I did not necessarily view as important anthropological information, it started to make sense. It even stimulated my curiosity for other areas of study. For instance, the concept of the body and how Gozitan's view themselves is not exclusive to tattooing. This is a question that can be pursued within the context of fitness, body image, and concepts of beauty. Why women dress up for festas, what is considered beautiful, and how beauty is acquired are all very interesting questions that could be potentially pursued. It would also be interesting to pursue my briefly discussed issue of interactions between locals in relation to gossip, as well as the interactions between residents of Gozo and tourists. Looking at the interactions between locals versus the interactions between locals and tourists could provide great insight into the minds of the people of Gozo. In order to fully appreciate the Gozitan culture, we must further research how Gozitans view themselves as well as others. The interactions between citizens of Gozo are key to understanding Gozo, as well as its complex cultural system.

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