

**Timea Barabas**

*University of Bucharest, Romania*

## **In(k)scribed Identities: A Sociological Analysis of Catholic Croat Tattoos**

**Abstract:** For centuries, a number of Catholic Croat women from the territory of modern day Bosnia and Herzegovina have participated in a traditional form of tattooing. Rooted in the socio-political context marked by the rule of the Ottoman Empire (16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century), it was believed that the symbols would offer protection against kidnapping by the Turks. While the practice carried on, outliving the context of its creation, it entered into a slow decline; today not more than a handful of people still bear these markings. Using interviews collected by Ilinčić (2016) as secondary data, I apply Foucauldian discourse analysis to follow the construction of meaning associated to tattoos along the interpersonal-intergroup continuum. Drawing upon structuralism and feminist theories about the body and social identity theory, I focus on how tattooing is used as a communicative signifier of social and or self-identity.

**Keywords:** tattooing; identity; social identity theory; structuralism; discourse analysis

### **Introduction**

Shilling introduced the concept of “body projects”, referring to the intentional action of changing any of the physical characteristics of a person, and highlighted the important role it plays in representing identity.<sup>1</sup> Individuals find themselves under constant social pressure to be involved in such projects, which vary from light interventions (e.g. daily grooming activities) to more intrusive ones (e.g. tattooing). Therefore, bodies can be conceptualized as “floating symbols of cultural identification”<sup>2</sup>. Or in the present case, fleeting symbols of cultural identification, as I venture into the narratives of the last living representatives of a dying practice. The body modification practice of tattooing in the Balkan region remains a subject with relatively little exposure outside the field of anthropology, thus falling behind the academic evolution. Besides the extensive research by Petrić, there are a few more noteworthy

---

<sup>1</sup> Chris Shilling, *The Body and the Social Theory* (London: SAGE Publications 1993/2003).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Atkinson, “Pretty in Ink: Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation in Women’s Tattooing,” *Sex Roles* 47, 5–6 (2002): 219.

works to be mentioned.<sup>3</sup> The German doctor Leopold Glück became one of the first to report on Catholic Croat tattooing on his travels to research the use of medical plants.<sup>4</sup> Another important milestone was reached by Truhelka, whom, inspired by the former, continued to document the tradition and accompanied his writings with ample illustrations.<sup>5</sup> To date, he remains the most cited author on this topic. In recent times, Durham briefly touches on the subject, while Lars Krutak writes more extensively about it.<sup>6</sup> Finally, as part of her thesis Ilinčić conducts a case study on female tattooing in Jajce.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, tattoos are considered as embodied signifiers of identity. I argue that the meaning associated with traditional body modification practice has a dynamic position on the interpersonal-intergroup continuum. For this, I rely on the theoretical framework of structuralist perspectives on the body and the social identity model. By applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to the narratives of 19 Catholic Croat women, I critically investigate how tattoos are encoded with signifiers of identity. The spatio-temporal context of interest is delimited as follows: the territory of modern day Bosnia and Herzegovina, from approximately the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup> to present day. However, my focus will fall on the lived times of the subjects. By analyzing their personal narratives, we can peer through a window quickly closing, to see through their eyes the construction of this body modification practice.

### A sketch of Catholic Croat tattoos

As Thomas rightfully observes “the history of tattooing in Europe has many strands, marked by continuities and discontinuities.”<sup>9</sup> The practice I am analyzing is a perfect example to illustrate this. Historians have long reported the practice among

<sup>3</sup> Mario Petrić, *Običaj tatauiranja kod balkanskih naroda: karakteristike, uloga i porijeklo* (Sarajevo, [s. n.], 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Leopold Glück, “Tetoviranje kod katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini,” *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja I* (Sarajevo: Zemaljska Štamparija, 1889).

<sup>5</sup> Ćiro Truhelka, “Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini,” *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja VI* (Sarajevo: Zemaljska Štamparija, 1894).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Edith Durham, *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans* (London: Unwin Brothers Ltd., 1928); Lars Krutak, *The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women* (London: Bennett & Bloom, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Nataša Ilinčić, “Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce, un caso studio in Bosnia ed Erzegovina,” [Tesi di Laurea. Corso di Laurea magistrale (ordinamento ex D.M. 270/2004)] in *Antropologia culturale, etnologia, etnolinguistica, percorso storico – geografico* (Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> In 1451 Sarajevo fell to the Ottoman Empire, with much of Bosnia and Herzegovina following by the end of the century. However, Jajce remained under Habsburg rule until 1527 (Cathie Carmichael, *Concise History of Bosnia* /Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Body Art* (London: Thames & Hudson world of art, 2014), 149.

a number of people from the Balkan territory<sup>10</sup>, and while some<sup>11</sup> believe that it continued on and adapted to a new context, as a result of Slavic migrations and Christianization, others<sup>12</sup> remain unconvinced by a theory of continuity, linking it to the protective tattooing of Catholic Croats under the Ottoman Rule.

The local term for tattooing was *bocanje*, or *sicanje* (depending on the region) and it was practiced throughout the Catholic regions of Bosnia.<sup>13</sup> The motifs were mostly specific to local folklore, heavily relying on the symbolism of nature, a reinterpretation of the cross might be the only Christian symbol present (although some researchers, including Truhelka, attract attention to the pre-Christian origin of the symbol).<sup>14</sup> The designs were inked on the most public and visible parts of the body (arms, hands, the forehead) with their specific placement depending on the motif itself.<sup>15</sup> The practice was reserved for mostly women, whom also were more adorned with designs than men.<sup>16</sup> Starting from the age 10 to 15 years,<sup>17</sup> or 13 to 16,<sup>18</sup> they would periodically develop<sup>19</sup> the design until marriage.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the initiatic aspect of the practice is rightfully brought into discussion. Another argument used as support for a rite of passage is the period of the year when the tattoos were usually made. There are several dates in question, all marked by Catholic holidays close to the spring equinox, which represents the passage from winter to spring, a symbolic rebirth of nature.<sup>21</sup> The religious character of these dates ushers in times of celebration and rest, bringing people together.

It is difficult to outline the extinction of the practice, since it was a gradual process to which numerous factors have contributed. Petrić observes a decline even before WWII, especially among male population.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, during the war, the tradition was still kept alive by mostly women, although fewer in numbers. Postwar, however, the extinction process seems to have been precipitated by such social factors as: prohibition of the practice in schools, or by certain local perishes; socialist politics of egalitarianism in Yugoslavia;<sup>23</sup> also the social dynamic shifted, the leisure context

<sup>10</sup> To mention just a few: Illyrians, Thracians, Dacians, and Greeks (Margo DeMello, *Inked. Tattoos and Body Art around the World*, Vol. 1. /Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2014/).

<sup>11</sup> Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile*.

<sup>12</sup> DeMello, *Inked. Tattoos and Body Art around the World*.

<sup>13</sup> Dalmatia is an exception, although not being part of Bosnia, the practice appears to be essentially the same according to Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile*.

<sup>14</sup> Truhelka, "Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini."

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix for the representation and description of the main categories of motifs.

<sup>16</sup> Truhelka, "Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini."

<sup>17</sup> Petrić, *Običaj tatauiranja kod balkanskih naroda*.

<sup>18</sup> Truhelka, "Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini."

<sup>19</sup> It was not infrequent to add a motif on a yearly basis on the same day (*ibid.*).

<sup>20</sup> Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile*.

<sup>21</sup> Also, the risk of infection was lower than in the heat of summer (*ibid.*).

<sup>22</sup> Petrić, *Običaj tatauiranja kod balkanskih naroda*.

<sup>23</sup> Durham, *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans*.

of religious holidays had lost its power. However, it should be noted that there is no evidence of an official ban issued by the state or church.<sup>24</sup>

## Socio-political landscapes

Tattooing was present in the Balkan region prior to the Ottoman Empire's expansion, but under its rule a new protective practice took root among Catholic Croats. As DeMello highlights, "this resulted in a change in the ethnic makeup of the population, as many of the people living there converted to Islam."<sup>25</sup> The process of conversion to Islam was facilitated by certain benefits for the new adherents, like being spared from paying certain taxes. The social divide was further increased by the *millet* system, which categorized Ottoman subjects on the basis of their conversion (Muslim landowners, army, civil servants, peasants) and basing the division of labor on religious affiliation.<sup>26</sup> During the Ottoman occupation, peaking in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Bosnia was subjected to the practice of *devşirme*, which involved the enlistment and conversion of local Christians. Young men were taken to Istanbul with the prospect of becoming personal servants of the sultan, janissaries, or officers in state departments. On the other hand, the women were taken as servants or entered into the harem.<sup>27</sup>

In 1878 Bosnia was taken over by an Austro-Hungarian administration, thus ending the centuries-long rule of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>28</sup> Not long after, following WWI, a new Yugoslav state was formed, which brought on 40 years of relative peace and prosperity until its dissolution in the 1990's. This period also incorporates a "Second Yugoslavia", united under Tito's leadership post-WWII.<sup>29</sup> This brief incursion into history has the goal of highlighting that the people of Bosnia went through many turbulent periods, being frequently exposed to structural shifts that accompanied regime changes.

## Theoretical framework

The body within the structuralist perspective, falls into a closely knit theoretical web of meaning and language. More precisely, all things are seen as possessing meaning as a result of the language system in which social agents function. Furthermore, one of

---

<sup>24</sup> Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile*.

<sup>25</sup> DeMello, *Inked. Tattoos and Body Art around the World*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Carmichael, *A Concise History of Bosnia*.

<sup>27</sup> See: V. L. Ménage, "Some Notes on the 'Devshirme,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29, 1 (1966): 64–78; Mia Brandel-Syrier, "The Harem as a Socio-Cultural and Political Institution in the Ottoman Empire," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (1982): 40–0\_2; Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A short history* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Malcolm, *Bosnia: A short history*.

<sup>29</sup> Marija Kuzmanić, "Collective Memory and Social Identity: A social psychological exploration of the memories of the disintegration of former Yugoslavia," *Horizons of Psychology* 17, 2 (2008): 5–26.

the main occupations of structuralism is to analyze how significance is constructed and understood in relation to other elements of the system.<sup>30</sup> Foucault evolved into one of the central figures of this current and under his critical eye, the body became the site of preference for the function of power.<sup>31</sup> A power that was once elusive and statal, was now incorporated into the ordinary. Additionally, the body also entered into a process of normalization facilitated by his research into such mediums as prison, sexuality, asylums and clinics.<sup>32</sup> As Davis eloquently concludes “the body came to be seen more generally as a metaphor for critical discussion.”<sup>33</sup> However, Shilling meets structuralism (at least as it manifested in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) with some criticism, mainly that it “tended to conceptualize structure as equivalent to the cognitive internalization of dominant value systems, and dissolved the casual significance of other features of the body by making individuals the products of forces over which they have no control.”<sup>34</sup>

Building on Foucault, the focus of feminist perspective falls on the relation between body modification practices and institutions of power. Referencing his “docile body”<sup>35</sup> defined as being easily subjected and trained by a figure of power or authority in accordance with its own agenda, “women’s bodies become socially constructed, monitored, and regulated in accordance with a dominant image.”<sup>36</sup> However, the body is not only conceptualized as being inscribed with symbols of significance by culture, but also counter-inscribed by individuals. Typical for feminist literature is the focus on the agency of the body (thus bringing a resolution to Shilling’s critique), which not only manifests opposition but also an influence over social constructs. For example, DeMello reads tattoos as a form of resistance against the inscription of hegemonic values onto the female image.<sup>37</sup> A vision closely mirrored by Pitts, who sees a method to oppose dominant norms of female beauty.<sup>38</sup> At this point, most feminist researchers seem to go beyond Foucault, who did not see bodies as feasible sites of resistance.<sup>39</sup> In his view a dynamic and open cycle was formed, as when power is met with resistance it responds by implementing new forms of control.

<sup>30</sup> C. Ulises Moulines, “Introduction: Structuralism as a Program for Modelling Theoretical Science,” *Synthese* 130 (2002): 1–11.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1927–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980); *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, Hall, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> See also Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961).

<sup>33</sup> Kathy Davis, “Embodiment Theory: Beyond modernist and postmodernist readings of the body,” in *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, ed. Kathy Davis (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Shilling, *The Body and the Social Theory*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> Atkinson, “Pretty in Ink: Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation in Women’s Tattooing.”

<sup>37</sup> Margo DeMello, *Bodies of inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Victoria Pitts-Taylor, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> Michael Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1927–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

A long-neglected issue by the sociology of body modification practices is that of gender. Studies revealed a gender bias in the social perception of tattooed individuals, women being more prone to criticism and stigmatization.<sup>40</sup> An attitude which also transpired in some of the early literature dedicated to the topic. Even Truhelka argues that the reason for the gendered nature of Catholic Croat tattoos is that women are weaker and more superstitious.<sup>41</sup> In response to this gender bias, comes a feminist current, where the focus falls on the liberation effect of body modification practice.<sup>42</sup> While both views associate tattoos with social deviance, as far as overstepping social norms, they differ regarding the value attributed to this action. Atkinson, however, comes with a new proposition, uniting the two perspectives.<sup>43</sup> He claims that both are right, in the sense that some women indeed use their inked bodies as a form of political manifesto, others use them as a means to reiterate the dominant social constructs. So, he shifts the focus to the private negotiation of the meaning associated to the practice.

Finally, in order to better integrate the structuralist perspective into the analysis of the tattoo practice, I draw upon Tajfel and Turner's classical model on social identity theory, according to which people tend to classify both themselves and others into groups, based on a variety of categorization schemas (like religion, gender, age).<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that the definition of the self and others is constructed in comparison with and in relation to each other. This social classification serves two main functions: firstly it provides the individual with a method to define others and order the social environment; secondly, it enables the individual to define himself. Social identity is defined as a "perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate, and having the sensation of a shared fate."<sup>45</sup> While self-identity, another fundamental element of the model, is seen as a conglomerate of identities, resulting from the internalization of roles occupied by the social agent within the social structure.<sup>46</sup> A noteworthy study on this topic was conducted by Dann and Callaghan, who followed how young women expressed the social role of motherhood through their tattoos and also the class based focus on their body related choices.<sup>47</sup> Actually, this represents one of the most

---

<sup>40</sup> Viren Swami, and Adrian Furnham, "Unattractive, promiscuous and heavy drinkers: Perceptions of women with tattoos," *Body Image* 4, 4 (2007): 343–52.

<sup>41</sup> Truhelka, "Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini."

<sup>42</sup> See Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (New York: Power House Books, 1997); Pitts-Taylor *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*, and DeMello, *Bodies of inscription*.

<sup>43</sup> Atkinson, "Pretty in Ink: Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation in Women's Tattooing."

<sup>44</sup> Henri Tajfel, Johan C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1985), 7–24; "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47.

<sup>45</sup> Blake E. Ashforth, and Fred A. Mael, "Social Identity Theory and the Organization," *Academy of Management Review* 14, 1 (1989): 21.

<sup>46</sup> Sheldon Stryker, *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version* (Palo Alto, CA: Benjamin Cummings, 1980).

<sup>47</sup> Charlotte Dann, and Jane Callaghan, "Embodiment and excess: Construction of tattooed mothers in the UK," *Psychology of Women Section Review* 19, 1 (2016): 43–51.

fertile leads in the sociology of tattoos, there is an ever-growing amount of research dedicated to its association to identity.<sup>48</sup> However, the present study aims to contribute a fresh take by following how these inscriptions of identity change over time. Craighead found in his research that women use their tattoos to visually represent who they are.<sup>49</sup> Finally, as DeMello concludes in one of her studies: “tattoos are fundamentally a means of expressing identity, both personal and collective. Tattoos inscribe a person’s relationship to society, to others, and to him or herself, and they do so in a manner that is visible not only to the wearer but to others as well.”<sup>50</sup> Following on a Foucauldian line, identity or human action, for that matter, are not considered as being definable in fixed terms, but rather as fluid inscriptions of identity.<sup>51</sup>

## Methodology

Through this exploratory study I will be taking previously-collected data (from the field of anthropology) and placing it into a new sociological framework. Although I address a historical event, the focus falls on the construction of said phenomenon in the personal narratives of the last representatives of the custom. The research objective is to follow how the inscription of identity changes over the lifespan of a gendered body modification practice. Interviews will be the main source for data collection, but this will be placed in the context of a detailed documentary analysis to secure a solid academic backup.

Selected interviews from the work of Ilinčić will be subjected to Foucauldian discourse analysis. She addressed a total of 19 people in Jajce, taking advantage of the mobility of the locals issued by the celebration of St. John the Baptist on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>52</sup> There are two main characteristics of this method that made me consider it most appropriate for this paper. The first accentuates the construction of the subject position is dependent on his discourse, while the second expands the field of study to include the process of power and its legitimization.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> See also Victoria Ebin, *The Body Decorated* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979); Robert Brain, *The Decorated Body* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> Clare Craighead, “(Monstrous) Beauty (Myths): The commodification of women’s bodies and the potential for tattooed subversions,” *Agenda* 25, 4 (2011): 42–49.

<sup>50</sup> Margo DeMello, “Anchors, Hearts and Eagles: From the Literal to the Symbolic in American Tattooing,” in *Literacies: Writing Systems and Literate Practices*, ed. David Schmidt and Janet Smith (Berkeley: University of California, 1991), 107.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).

<sup>52</sup> Out of the above mentioned total, sixteen were older Croat women with traditional tattoos, one was a local recounting the words of another tattooed elderly woman, and two men wearing a small inked symbol each (in Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce*).

<sup>53</sup> Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2008).

## Discourse analysis

### *Discursive constructions and discourses*

The first stage follows the construction of the discursive object and identifies dominant constructs in the discourse, which are analyzed in a wider context only in the second stage. However, I shall consider these two stages together, for the sake of coherence and continuity. In this case I name the Catholic Croat Tattoos as the discursive object of interest and several associated constructs. Out of these the dominant one would be identity, followed by stigma and gender reflected mostly in the gendered nature of the practice.

### *Identity*

First it was done at the time of the Turks, so that women would show to be šokice, Croat Catholics. I knew a woman, an old woman, who had a cross on her forehead, a large one, I do not know how she could endure it (the pain)! Some women also had three on their foreheads!<sup>54</sup>

While reflecting on the origins of the practice, the discourse highlights the confessional and ethnic affiliation marked by the traditional symbols under Ottoman rule. It can easily be integrated in Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory of the construction of self.<sup>55</sup> In the present case the groups in question are mainly contoured based on ethnical and religious considerations. The in-group (that to which the subject belongs to) is represented by the Catholic Croats and the out-group (formed out of the 'others') by Muslim Turks. Under these circumstances tattoos become markers with a dual effect, on one hand strengthening the in-group, on the other hand, further separating it from the out-group.

When I was in Dubrovnik for a leg operation, they said "This is a Croat!"; I showed the wheels on the hands and they laughed, they also brought me a statue of the Virgin so I could pray.<sup>56</sup>

However, moving closer to our present and the lived experiences of the respondents, I found somewhat different representations of Catholic Croat Tattoos as markers of identity. To begin with, these still exercise their initial role of identification as a member of a specific ethno-confessional group. In some cases it visibly distanced itself from the group identity and closing in more on self-identity. Here, a personal meaning was superimposed on the traditional symbol itself.

<sup>54</sup> Kata Perković's words quoted in Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce*, 75.

<sup>55</sup> Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict;" "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour."

<sup>56</sup> Mara's words quoted in Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce*, 105.



My *grančica* was seen when we were dancing the *kolo*; when we were in the *kolo* (we held each other by the arms) we had our arms exposed, so the boy (that I liked) could recognize me!<sup>57</sup>

She points to her single *narukvica*, and says, My mother told me: So you have a memory of me. When you look at the hand, you can remember me.<sup>58</sup>

### Gender

There are multiple accounts which attest the gendered nature of the practice. While there are some accounts of men also taking part, they are few in number and present a far less elaborate tattoo design.

This (the tattoo) was always done in the company of the other girls. We did it to each other!<sup>59</sup>

Even the males were tattooed, but not as much. [...] Sometimes once they returned from the military service they did write something, “To me only a little, I do not know what, only a little!” Said the boys.<sup>60</sup>

Noting that the scientific literature comes in support of oral accounts, it is safe to conclude that we are faced with a gendered practice. A particularly important observation, considering that the practice of European tattooing has been historically associated with masculinity.<sup>61</sup> There are two aspects, which I believe merit more focus: the gendered division of labor and access to education. To begin with, women of the analyzed communities were traditionally invested with the responsibility of caring for the sheep, next to other house-hold related responsibilities. On the other hand, men enjoyed more social mobility, but also had to respond to the not so infrequent call to enroll in the army. Furthermore, women entered the school system at a later point, at first this was exclusively reserved for men, or women were unofficially exempted from attendance, so they could adhere to their duties. Once enrolled, they were faced with criticism from the institution regarding tattoos, for which some found a way around the system.

They did not let us because of school. I have it up here, under the sleeves. Then there was also communism, the teacher would not allow it. [...] The teacher did not want these to be seen, but you know the traditional clothes were up to here, (she says pointing at her wrists, alluding to the

<sup>57</sup> Marija Ladan's words quoted in Ilinčić, *ibid.*, 82.

<sup>58</sup> Anica Marušić's words quoted in Ilinčić, *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>59</sup> Ana Ladan's words quoted in Ilinčić, *ibid.*, 95.

<sup>60</sup> Kata Perković's words quoted in Ilinčić, *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>61</sup> Carey Sargent, and Sarah M. Corse, “Picture My Gender(s): Using Interactive Media to Engage Students in Theories of Gender Construction,” *Teaching Sociology* 41, 3 (2013): 242–56.

fact that choosing to tattoo only the arms and not the hands avoided the tattoos being made on a visible area).<sup>62</sup>

### Action orientation

At this stage I will analyze the functions and implications of the constructs associated with the discursive object. The discursive object will now be considered at the macro level, within the power relations of a social agent and the state.

By constructing the discursive objects as a mark of affiliation, the Cartesian split of mind and body was overcome, the two were unified with a singular, well-defined scope: preserving one's confessional and ethnic identity under Ottoman rule (which actually outlived the regime). By creating permanent markings on the skin, they not only signal the ethnic and confessional affiliation, but what is more, conveyed incorporation: the inked designs became a sigil that marked the unity of the spiritual and carnal. However, the motifs did more than just affirm affiliation, these also conveyed resistance to change through differentiation. In the context of the religious and cultural clash that extended over centuries under the Ottoman rule, the body served as the most reliable instrument to defy the gaze of the power; while in the later volatile socio-political context, it provided stability, serving as a constant reminder of the host's identity. According to Foucault the individual is caught under the all-encompassing gaze of an institutional power, yet as the body is invested with agency, it can turn the gaze to its own advantage by visibly displaying symbols of resistance.<sup>63</sup> The skin, thus, became a surface of text to be read by the institution of the Ottoman power. While in the socialist state of former Yugoslavia, where egalitarianism was promoted, the tattoo was seen as a sign of distinction, once again opposing the dominant norms, albeit for different reasons.

Members of the same group can not only identify each other by these visual markers, but perhaps most importantly, their community is also strengthened. The ceremony of tattooing became an ancestral call for gathering during days of religious festivities in spring time. Shielded in a safe space of similar others, the imprinting of one's ethno-confessional identity became all the more symbolically invested. The implications of this aspect are far-reaching. United under the pretext of a ceremony, a sense of structural stability was bestowed upon the individual, in the midst of social turmoil. Risking to stretch into Durkheim's structural functionalism, the surface of the skin can be interpreted as a means to an end, creating a context through which the social identity – which is under the threat of structural change by the 'others' – may be strengthened. Thus the custom itself may serve the purpose of an internal mechanism to re-establish balance to a society faced with structural instability. This can also provide a plausible explanation for the longevity of the tradition, beyond its socio-political context of origin.

---

<sup>62</sup> Anđa Klarić's words quoted in Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Iajce*, 89.

<sup>63</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

## Positioning and practice

The fourth stage addresses the subject's position regarding the discursive object and the following one explores the opportunities thus opened or closed. Due to the common thread that closely ties the two stages together, I opted for a merged approach.

By constructing the discursive object as a gendered practice and a marker of identity, the subjects reaffirm their position inside their ethno-confessional group or with their self. Here, I am referring to the mobility of the association with the construct of identity on a scale from social to self. The tendency toward self-identity can be clearly followed in the discourse narrative and thus the varied experiences that it brings forth. Probably the main opportunity presented to the subjects is that of self-expression, women experience more freedom in choosing their design and also the meaning associated to it. The motifs are still read by the outside community as symbols of affiliation (a lecture strictly dependent on the knowledge of the reader) and the subject can gain certain benefits by such a quick categorization process. Some, like Marija Ladan, reinterpreting its original significance, utilize the markings to communicate their identity to a person of interest. While for others the motifs become surfaces of layered significance. Anica Marušić was faced with the opportunity of a memorial tattoo, by associating it to the memory of her mother.

Furthermore, another consequence of presenting tattoos as markers of identity was that the subjects exposed themselves to stigmatization. In the lifetimes of the subjects, the category of the out-group passed on to the Yugoslavian people, which, being more in the proximity of the in-group (than the original out-group represented my Muslim Turks), made it easier to identify with. During this period, people who displayed these markings were considered an affront to the dominant norms of equality promoted by the socialist regime. There is no concrete evidence of a legal ban, but it was certainly violating social norms. This opposition, however, was not necessarily one that was consciously assumed, but rather manifested itself as a consequence of the centuries-old practice. In this new context, some people no longer wanted to be considered as Catholic Croats and for this they sometimes went to extreme measures. There are several attempts of tattoo removal either from the respondent or acquaintances documented in the interviews.

Later I wanted to remove it, but I could not!<sup>64</sup>

I remember a man who had a cross on his hand, when old Yugoslavia was formed he wanted nothing more, than to take it off! [...] Now it is no more (the tattooing) because it was a symbol of recognition. It was so difficult for him at the time, he wanted to go and take it off, but the doctor told him, "You cannot do anything about it!"<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Marta Dramac's words quoted in Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce*, 67.

<sup>65</sup> Kata Perković's words quoted in *ibid.*, 103.

However, other subjects adapted to these new surroundings and found innovative ways to keep the tradition alive. If until then tattoos were placed on the most visible places of the body, now these were strategically moved to locations where they could be covered at will. At this point we can speak of a privatization of the practice, it was no longer for the eyes of the other, but for the self (see the declaration of Anđa Klarić).

## Subjectivity

Willig believes that discourses create a lens through which we make sense of the world.<sup>66</sup> It is in this final stage that the link between discourse and subjectivity will be explored by looking into the consequences induced by the subject position and its influence over personal experience.

To begin with, I would like to draw attention to the construction of meaning associated with the practice within the subjective discourse of the participants. It was interesting to follow how some respondents reflected on the role tattoos served during the Ottoman occupation, while others referred to personal interpretations.<sup>67</sup> Although, they incorporated this centuries-old tradition, some women stripped the original meaning associated with the symbols and replaced it with personal narratives. Therefore, while the tradition is kept alive in form, the meaning associated to tattoos becomes to a greater degree the result of personal negotiation, rather than being bestowed upon the individual by the community.

This is our tradition, you know how it was before we had to know that we were Christians, true Catholics, so that the Turks could not steal us! Because they did not want those who had the crosses (on the skin).<sup>68</sup>  
Do you know what I thought? The skin (on my hands) was chapped, so I thought that once painted (tattooed) it would be more beautiful, I thought that the skin would crack anymore! Tattoos? (laughs) I do not know what they mean, it's a decoration.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, regarding the viability of the practice, why and how it continued on reaching such a long life-span, several accounts refer to conformity or imitation. Subjects narrate how they became drawn to the custom either because they saw it on their mother, grandmothers or other members of the community, or because all their friends participated in the ceremony. It is interesting to note that Sanders identified

<sup>66</sup> Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*.

<sup>67</sup> From the total interviews of people wearing traditional Croat tattoos, when asked about the meaning of the practice, five of them referenced the Ottoman occupation, five interpreted these as decoration, while the others simply did not cover this topic.

<sup>68</sup> Perka Davidović's words quoted in Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce*, 100.

<sup>69</sup> Marta Dramac's words quoted in *ibid.*, 68.

this feature in the modern form of tattooing as well, he found that people often chose to get a tattoo because their acquaintances had them.<sup>70</sup> However, this does not imply that the subjects were stripped of their agency, this manifested in various ways. To begin with, nobody forced the tattoos upon others, only those who gave their accord were stung. Furthermore, individuals expressed their own decision regarding the motif, while there are cases when these were tattooed upon oneself.

This was fashionable at the time, as today is fashionable (to put on) something golden [...] I did it because all the other girls did it.<sup>71</sup>

I decided what to tattoo. I was around 13 years old. [...] Not all the girls did it, only the ones they wanted. Parents felt sorry for the pain. But both my mom and my grandmother had these (tattoos).<sup>72</sup>

You can do these tattoos even by yourself, I have done some of these alone, to myself, these on the forearm.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusions

The intention was to follow the evolution of a gendered practice through the discourses of the last modern representatives, tattoos being conceptualized as embodied signifiers of identity. Based on the analysis, I argue that the meaning associated with the inked symbols is not fixed, but shifts on an interpersonal-intergroup continuum. Finally, as a closure to the study, I aim to outline a longitudinal narrative, incorporating the discourse analysis into a wider historical context of the practice.

Even if the tradition is on the verge of extinction, the last living representatives still form a strong discourse around it. The domination of the original context in which traditional Catholic Croat tattooing was formed, suggests the strong ties of the practice to the interdependence between the two original competing social groups. Beyond this environment, the tradition enters into a slow disintegration process delayed only by constraints of custom or personal choice. The practice was originally viewed as a means of expressing agency over social forces, by displaying resistance to a foreign power and to help maintain the existing social structure. However, the meaning associated to traditional tattoos changed from a social protective practice to a predominantly aesthetic one invested with personal meaning. Also, the significance is no longer bestowed upon the individual, but rather personally negotiated.

The central line in these discourses, which also aligns with the academic perspective, is that by marking the skin with symbols through tattooing, the Catholic Croats aimed to preserve their ethnic and confessional identity when it came under threat. A material and symbolic link is created between the individual and society

<sup>70</sup> Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*.

<sup>71</sup> Anđela Jakovljević's words quoted in Ilinčić, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce*, 71.

<sup>72</sup> Marta Dramac's words quoted in *ibid.*, 67–68.

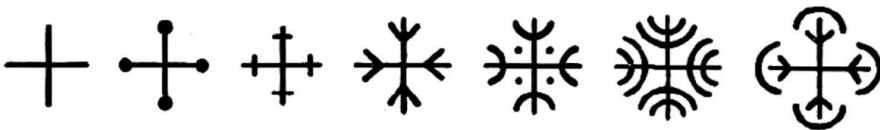
<sup>73</sup> Kata Perković's words quoted in *ibid.*, 74.

through the tattooed skin as a surface for the expression of social and later self-identity. These changes are also reflected on the bodily location of the inked designs, in the beginning the tattoos were meant to be seen, only to become privatized. Finally, it is my conclusion that the present manifestation of the practice is lacking the subversive subtext that potentially characterized it in the beginning. Rather, we are witnessing an alignment of this traditional form of tattooing with the modern practice, with an overlap regarding the private negotiation of meaning associated to the inked symbols as expressions of identity.

Also to be noted is that the present study used a discriminatory approach to the historical periods encompassed in this timeframe, as the focus fell on the lived experience of the subjects (which touches on the socialist regime of Yugoslavia) within the context of the custom's genesis (the rule of the Ottoman Empire). I did not discuss other noteworthy regimes, like the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire over the region. While I addressed the gender issue, looking into motives and implications of these Croat tattooed women, I neglected the implications associated to the male gender. It would be interesting to follow the masculine line, especially since it seems to elude most research dedicated to this tradition. Finally, there is an emerging wave of young people who incorporate traditional Catholic Croat symbols into their body projects. It would be a promising lead to follow their negotiation of meaning associated to traditional tattooing.

## Appendix

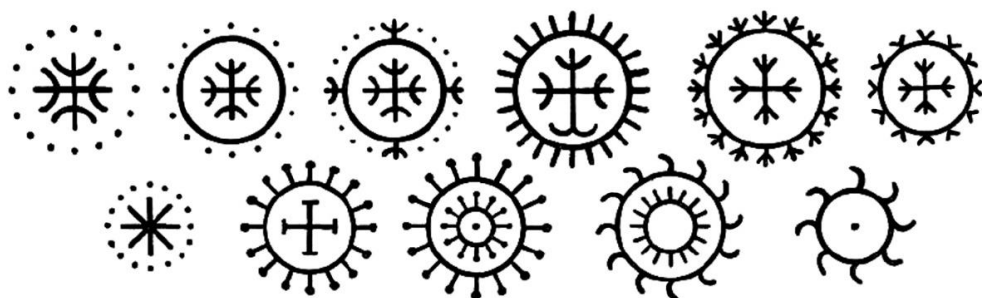
1. *Križ* (cross): this is one of the most popular symbols. While it comes under many forms, the main characteristic is that the arms of the cross have an equal length. It can be found as part of a composition or isolated.<sup>74</sup>



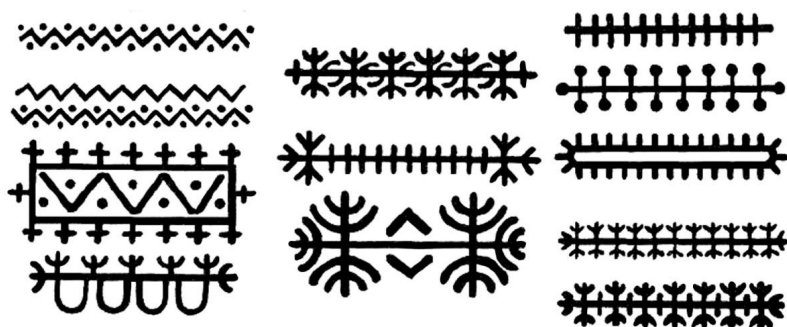
2. *Kolo* (circle, wheel): incorporates all circular designs. It can be found on its own, but most frequently it encircles a cross (*križ*), or a second circle. But it can also contain the following popular details: straight or curved rays, dots, twigs (*grančice*). According to some researchers, this could be a graphic representation of light.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> For the descriptions I reference Ilinčić (*Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce*) (unless otherwise mentioned); all illustrations are taken from Truhelka, “Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini.”

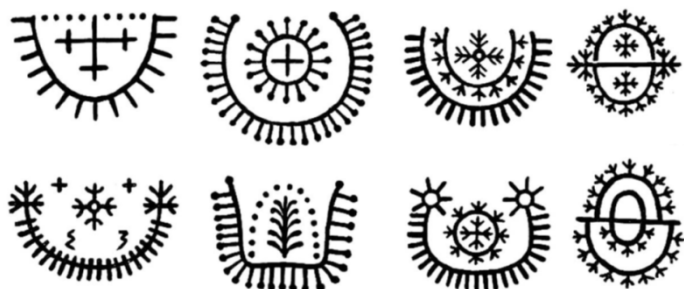
<sup>75</sup> Durham, *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans*.



3. *Narukvica* (bracelet): typically located on the arm, starting from the wrist. It can also incorporate other main motifs as the twig (*grančice*) or cross (*križ*). The design can vary from a simple – consisting of dots and lines - to more complex – zig-zag, undulating lines.

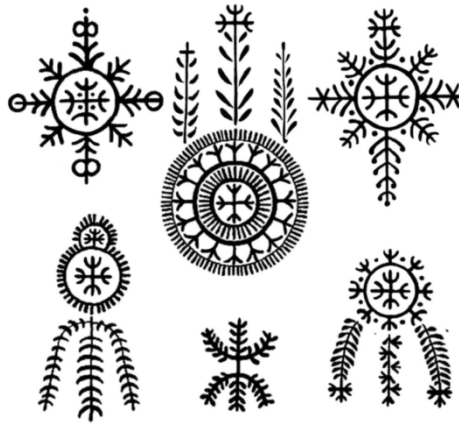


4. *Ograda* (fence): located on the back of the hand, above the elbow, or on the chest, it is specific to Bosnia, it cannot be found in other Balkan areas.<sup>76</sup> The semicircular design usually comes together with a separate motif, like the twig (*grančice*) or rays.



<sup>76</sup> Truhelka, "Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini."

5. *Grančica* (twig): is linked to nature and represents leaves, branches or trees. Most often it is used to complete the above mentioned designs.



## References

- Ashforth, Blake E., and Fred Mael. "Social Identity Theory and the Organization." *Academy of Management Review* 14, 1 (1989): 20–39.
- Atkinson, Michael. "Pretty in Ink: Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation in Women's Tattooing." *Sex Roles* 47, 5–6 (2002): 219–35.
- Brain, Robert. *The Decorated Body*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.
- Brandel-Syrier, Mia. "The Harem as a Socio-Cultural and Political Institution in the Ottoman Empire." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (1982): 40–0\_2.
- Carmichael, Cathie. *A Concise History of Bosnia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Craighead, Clare. "(Monstrous) Beauty (Myths): The commodification of women's bodies and the potential for tattooed subversions." *Agenda* 25, 4 (2011): 42–49. doi: 10.1080/10130950.2011.630530
- Dann, Charlotte, and Jane Callaghan. "Embodiment and excess: Constructions of tattooed mothers in the UK." *Psychology of Women Section Review* 19, 1 (2016): 43–51.
- Davis, Kathy. "Embody-ing Theory. Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body." In *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, edited by Kathy Davis, 1–26. London: Sage Publications, 1997.
- DeMello, Margo. "Anchors, Hearts and Eagles: From the Literal to the Symbolic in American Tattooing." In *Literacies: Writing Systems and Literate Practices*, edited by David Schmidt and Janet Smith, 93–110. Berkeley: University of California, 1991.



- DeMello, Margo. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- DeMello, Margo. 2014. *Inked. Tattoos and Body Art around the World*, Vol. 1. California, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014.
- Durham, Mary Edith. *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans*. London: Unwin Brothers Ltd., 1928.
- Ebin, Victoria. *The Body Decorated*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1979.
- Foucault, Michael. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1977.
- Foucault, Michael. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
- Foucault, Michael. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1927–1977*. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- Foucault, Michael. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*. New York: Routledge, Chapman, Hall, 1988.
- Glück, Leopold. “Tetoviranje kod katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini.” *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja I*. Sarajevo, Zemaljska Štamparija, 1889.
- Goffman, Erving. *Asylums*. New York: Anchor Books, 1961.
- Ilinčić, Nataša. *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce, un caso studio in Bosnia ed Erzegovina*. Tesi di Laurea. Corso di Laurea magistrale (ordinamento ex D.M. 270/2004) in Antropologia culturale, etnologia, etnolinguistica, percorso storico – geografico. Università Ca’ Foscari di Venezia, 2016.
- Krutak, Lars. *The Tattooing Arts of Tribal Women*. London: Bennett & Bloom, 2007.
- Kuzmanić, Marija. “Collective Memory and Social Identity: A social psychological exploration of the memories of the disintegration of former Yugoslavia.” *Horizons of Psychology* 17, 2 (2008): 5–26.
- Malcolm, Noel. *Bosnia: A short history*. New York: New York University Press, 1994.
- Ménage, V. L. “Some Notes on the ‘Devshirme.’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29, 1 (1966): 64–78.
- Mifflin, Margot. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*. New York: Power House Books, 1997.
- Moulines, C. Ulises. “Introduction: Structuralism as a Program for Modelling Theoretical Science.” *Synthese* 130 (2002): 1–11. doi: 10.1023/a:1013892808077

- Petrić, Mario. *Običaj tatauiranja kod balkanskih naroda: karakteristike, uloga i porijeklo*. Sarajevo: [s. n.], 1973.
- Pitts-Taylor, Victoria. *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Sanders, Clinton. *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.
- Sargent, Carey, Sarah M. Corse. "Picture My Gender(s): Using Interactive Media to Engage Students in Theories of Gender Construction." *Teaching Sociology* 41, 3 (2013): 242–56. doi: 10.1177/0092055X13480050
- Shilling, Chris. *The Body and the Social Theory*. London: SAGE Publications, (1993) 2003.
- Stryker, Sheldon. *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version*. Palo Alto, CA: Benjamin Cummings, 1980.
- Swami, Viren, Adrian Furnham. "Unattractive, promiscuous and heavy drinkers: Perceptions of women with tattoos." *Body Image* 4, 4 (2007): 343–52. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2007.06.005
- Tajfel, Henri, and Johan C. Turner. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, 33–47. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979.
- Tajfel, Henri, and Johan C. Turner. "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour." In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, 7–24. Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1985.
- Thomas, Nicholas. *Body Art*. London: Thames & Hudson world of art, 2014.
- Truhelka, Ćiro. "Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini." *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja VI*. Sarajevo, Zemaljska Štamparija, 1894.
- Willig, Carla. *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Berkshire: Open University Press, 2008.

Article received: December 10, 2018

Article accepted: January 23, 2019

Original scholarly paper