

Pain and Body Modification

Theodora L.B. Lang, mentored by Jacklyn Lacey

Special thanks to
Jacklyn Lacey and
AMNH.

Abstract

Most cultures throughout the world have traditions of body modification. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Asia, and the Pacific Islands, the people are traditionally tattooed, scarred, shaped, or pierced as means of altering their bodies. All of these processes are exceptionally painful and the pain that accompanies these permanent marks is in itself as significant as the mark it leaves. In fact, the painful process is often the fleeting proof of adulthood, respect, bravery, or beauty while the physical alterations typically act primarily as reminders of the pain, though they have others values as well.



A Nuer woman from Sudan. The Nuer use scarification to mark an individual's passing into adulthood.

Results

Culture	Location	Method	Pain
Tiv	Nigeria, Cameroon	Scarification/ Shaping (tooth chipping)	The price of beauty, as scars and tooth-chipping are meant to make an individual more attractive. Also as a means of enhancing natural beauty, the price is pain.
Igbo	Nigeria	Scarification/ Tattoo	Necessary mark of bravery and courage- necessary to be taken seriously and generally respected as an adult
Tanga/ Samoa	Samoa Islands	Scarification/ Tattoo	Mark of adulthood/ means of proving adulthood/ worth
Micro-Polynesia	Polynesia, Micronesia	Tattoo	Sign of respect for elders, commitment, maturity. Sharing pain (with those of a lower class) was a sign of privilege and high rank.
Bambara	Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Senegal	Tattoo	Means of legitimizing a person, grounds upon which to take someone seriously or to actually respect or heed what he or she says.
Luo	Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania	Shaping (Tooth pulling)	A process necessary for belonging/ to be considered a member of the Luo (specifically to enable an individual to correctly speak the language).
Mursi	Ethiopia	Ornamentation (Lip plates)	Feature meant to protect and identify a female as a Mursi member, as well as to beautify. The bigger the plate, the more beautiful.
China	Eastern Asia	Shaping (Foot-binding)	A necessary means of marrying in to a better family (hypergamy).

Tattoo

Process of inserting various dyes and inks into the skin through many small incisions, leaving a permanent and often colorful pattern.



Language

Members of the Luo tribe in Eastern Africa pull out their 6 bottom front teeth as an adulthood rite. With the 6 teeth still in a member's mouth, it is impossible to correctly pronounce the Luo language.

Beauty

The Mursi people in Ethiopia began cutting holes in their lips and filling them with increasingly large plates as a means of making their women ugly to other tribes, thus protecting them from being abducted. Mursi people find it to be very beautiful, however. A girl with a broken lip will never be able to be married.

Marriage

Chinese foot binding was performed on female toddlers, crippling them for life and making it impossible to work land in the hopes that they could live a life of luxury married to a wealthy man.

Shaping

Using tools or braces to change the shape of various body parts.



Ornamentation

Making a hole or incision through one's skin or appendage and filling the gap with an object.



Scarification

Method involving cutting the skin in a particular design and then often rubbing various substances into the wound to make keloid or colored scars.

