Alter/Natives:

Talismanic and Healing Aspects of Tattoos in Northern Philippines

Jaymee T. Siao

Buscalan, Kalinga

This bed negates my body. And yet at the same time, I feel every bone, every curve, the tiniest part of my body etched on the floor. It's as if someone is drawing my body, piece by piece, on the ground, hour after every hour that I spend sleeping on this thin mat on the floor. Of all the things I have done here in Buscalan, it's sleeping on the floor that's my greatest trial.

Two in the morning and I am wide awake. Whatever happened to the exhaustion I felt earlier this evening? After a half-day's worth of bus rides, almost two more hours of yet another bus ride (this time more life-threatening than the first), a half hour of a motorcycle ride on a dirt path, with the driver ignoring every bump, as we went flying into the air and back on the seat, a few minutes' rest at the place where the road ends and the walkway begins, and over an hour's worth of trekking up the mountains, I was ready to collapse. But being in a new place with new people raised my energy and I ended up hopping around from one house to another.

Timid at first. They wouldn't talk to me, nor let me take their picture. I felt threatened most especially by the small yet imposing figures of the older women in the community. They had full-sleeve tattoos, almost never smiled, and talked in their dialect. They wouldn't even look at me, stranger that I was. "Who is this foreigner that has come to 'study' us?" I was fright-

ened of them, period. They knew so much; they had so much, and I felt so small, so ignorant.

Some had "test taps" (small lines found usually on their legs), from when they tried to test their tattooing skills, and tattoos of different, more contemporary, designs (the girls' designs varied from butterflies to hearts for their boyfriends and break-ups, while the boys had designs varying from smiley faces to snakes).

Fig. 1 Full-sleeve tattoos of women; some details of sleeve tattoos such as names

When the rain started to pour, R and I decided to head over to Fang-Od's place, hoping to catch her. Earlier when we arrived, she wasn't home. "Where is this woman?" I wondered. Surely a 90-something year old woman should be at home, tending her pigs, looking after her sisters' grandchildren (she had no family of her own). But she was out visiting someone, going to the fields to harvest, and taking care of some other business. So I had to postpone my interview with her, and my plan of getting a tattoo.

We reached her house at six in the evening and there she was, cooking her usual black beans. All of a sudden the floor turned into a dining area; plates were spread, a large one containing a heap of rice, and a bowl filled with black liquid. This was going to be our dinner. I was passed a pink plastic plate, and was urged to get some rice. After pouring water on my hands, I quickly reached over and grabbed a fistful of rice, and then poured the liquid—containing black beans—on my rice. Together, we feasted on this. I was not used to the taste, and it was the first time that I tasted black beans, but I ate with them, surrounded by the buzzing of their dialect—R, Fang-

Od and her sister, all talking. I sat there quietly, observing the place. An old woman featured by the *National Geographic* and the *Discovery Channel*, and God knows what other foreign documentaries, plus local ones. In this house of hers were a couple of old pots where she cooked her daily fare, a plastic dish holder, and a few other basic (plastic) things. She had a couple of monobloc chairs (for visitors like me, I suppose), and a stool. They all sat on the floor and I felt like a fairy tale princess, out of place in someone else's kingdom. This formidable woman who had tattooed headhunters and warriors sat beside me on the floor, and it felt wrong to be higher than her. She talked quick and fast, and R told me that she would tattoo me at "first light."

Two in the morning and I am wide awake, remembering the day's events. I feel like I have done more today than I have ever done before. Yet a few hours of sleep, and already I'm awake. After I've been musing for an hour, a rooster starts crowing, and I know soon the whole community will be up. Sure enough, at four in the morning, I can hear the children pounding rice, and the little kids shouting as they wake up to another day of playing outside. I am fascinated at their swift movements; I feel incredibly inferior as I climb my way up the steps (stones jutting out), with the little kids leaving me behind. I have a lot to learn, I tell myself.

Buscalan is a small barangay that lies in the municipality of Tinglayan in the province of Kalinga. The group of people living in Buscalan is called Butbut, and their dialect Binutbut, which is a derivation of Ilocano. Buscalan has its own rice terraces which produce some of the best rice in the country. Nestled high up in the mountains, the homes offer a spectacular view. The people's main livelihood is farming, though there are also rattan weavers and blacksmiths among them. Yet the main attraction in this small community is Fang-Od, said to be the last traditional Kalinga tattoo artist. During my stay in Buscalan, however, I was able to interview other tattoo artists, but in terms of skill, Fang-Od surpasses the others.

Everything that happens in the community can be heard. One's senses are heightened, in a place like this: the roosters' crow, the puppies' cries as they crawl outside the fence and lose sight of where they are, the children pounding rice, the blacksmiths creating their bolos and knives, while someone else creates the handle and another, the sheath.

Tattoos are badges that the warrior proudly wears. Like the modern-day soldier, the more badges/medals he has, the prouder the person is—and more importantly, the more others revere you (Scott, 1992; Wilcken, 2010; Salvador-Amores, 2013). When the colonizers came, tattooed men and women—once regarded with pride—were regarded as criminals. That the natives misused Catholicism for their own gain, and even to rebel against the colonizers, angered the Spaniards. One can show the Pulahan Movement as an example. (Arens, 1979) The Pulahanes (members of the Pulahan movement and, in Leyte, the one which came after the Dios-Dios movement) syncretized religion and animistic belief with their anting-antings, as with the babaylan. These were the mountain people in Samar, and the movement's name comes from the term "pula," or red, because these people always wore an item with this color. They fought the American and Spanish governments and were quite successful in doing so. Many of them wore "Oracion amulets—written on paper and sewn in cloth, then worn as a necklace, called 'reliquias'." (Arens, 206) The magical and quasi-religious qualities of this movement helped people in making sense of their world, while at the same time reacting to the colonizers. It was both a promise to the people, and yet a lie. An example was the application for the movement. The person would be asked to pay a fee and to come back after a week. He would then be led into a room where a rigged crucifix had a string that would make Jesus nod, or His leg jerk. (219) Yet for people who had nothing to hold on to, this act became sacred.

Many have speculated on the disappearing art of tattoos. One researcher (Anacion 2008) quotes Francisco Ignacio Alzina, a Jesuit priest, in her paper which clearly shows his stand on the natives' art—the use of the terms "devil women," side by side with the "priestesses [who] instigated it," while speculating that there must have been a devil covered in tattoo who appeared among them—which needs no further explication. This is a priest who came and did not understand the people's culture, thereby choosing to eradicate it. It would not be a stretch to assume that most of the other colonizers/foreigners were like-minded; it would have been surprising to see a group of people "painted" (hence Pintados) from head to toe. Yet Anacion also shows the other perspective: that of

respect for having undergone such pain, at the very least. Medicine also became instituted by the colonizers, such as the Spaniards who brought in medicine to fulfill the need of taking care of their wounded soldiers in the fight for their empire, thus making medicine a mechanism of colonial rule (Anderson, 2007). This did not mean that people embraced modern, scientific medicine; in fact, it was quite the opposite. An example would be the natives trying to fight an epidemic through a procession, carrying the image of San Roque while praying that the disease would go away (Juanico, 1978, 5). This, naturally, helped spread the disease even more, as both healthy and infected people came together in close-knit groups.

That tattoos were based on animist beliefs is but one explanation as to why the Spaniards were heavily against such practices. Tattoos, apart from being a badge of honor for the men, and used for aesthetic purposes by the women, were also believed to be magical, and were therefore used as anting-antings. And what better way to keep one than to have it imprinted directly and permanently on one's body?

Fr. Richard Arens talks about the anting-anting, and the difference between talismans and amulets. He stresses the importance of such, that "no guerilla leader could gain followers if he was not known to have a powerful anting-anting." (Arens, 1971, 122) Talismans, according to him, "bring good luck or transmit certain new qualities to their owner, but may bring harm and destruction to others." (127) Amulets, on the other hand, "are preventive in character and therefore more negative." For certain reasons, despite the introduction of Christianity, locals held on to this belief. Perhaps owing to the fact that Christianity came with the colonizers, or was introduced by them, there was still resistance among the locals. But to focus on the cultural aspect, one can simply say that the locals did not easily let go of their culture, and instead, integrated it with the foreign one. Arens explains that "if no clear distinction is made between the 'magical power' of anting-anting, and the Christian sacramentals (or blessed objects), it is due to the fact that animistic and Christian beliefs are closely interwoven because of the ignorance of the barrio people in religious matters." (122)

Seven in the morning and we were at Fang-Od's place. Last night's feast felt like my last supper, with the stress and tension of getting a tattoo—my first one at that—from her. I saw that she had already fixed her 'studio;'

a small open space in front of her house that consisted of two monobloc chairs and a stool. The bowl of ink was ready, and she was ushering one of her sister's grandchildren out of her house. I smiled at her, despite the tension. This is it, I told myself, feigning an air of confidence. After the tattoo, I will interview her. This is what I came here for.

I watched her prepare the stick. She cut a small bamboo stick, and beside her was a flat, open tin can filled with strings, thorns, and various other materials. She picked a pomelo thorn which would serve as the needle, and I watched her thread it into the bamboo stick. After several minutes of preparation, she led me to the open area and I sat down on one of the monobloc chairs, understanding that the other one was for me to put up my foot. I showed her where I wanted the tattoo, and told her to decide on the design. She stared at my leg for several minutes, rather intensely, and I waited patiently for whatever came to her. She then took a long piece of stick, dipped it in ink, and drew two parallel lines on my leg.

That was all she drew. Two parallel lines. And then she began the long process of tattooing. I waited for the first tap, and when she began, I tensed up and looked away. The thorn snagging on the skin gave an extra sting to the whole painful process, and I was wondering how I'd get through the whole "ordeal."

In front of me were children, mothers with babies, and men who were all watching. R saw me tense up, and started talking to me. He was filling out a survey about the community prepared by several college students, and he was asking me the questions one by one. I was getting annoyed at his questions, but I answered all of them as patiently as I could. And then R told me, "Don't fight the pain. Just take it in." And I understood. The trick was not to fight it, but to accept it. As with all healing processes (as this felt like one to me), one must take in the pain, be one with it, and transcend it. Once I had accepted that, I could watch Fang-Od work on my leg. I became fascinated with the process, taking pictures and watching the design slowly come into being. I watched as she added the details, and I chatted with R and C, the owner of the house where I was staying. In the middle of the process, a group of men from the fields came by and watched the making of the tattoo. I could feel the community slowly open up to me, as they saw me being tattooed. Strange and proud as it may sound, I felt that I was being marked as one of them.

An hour after, Fang-Od stopped and admired her handiwork. "Beautiful," she remarked, "because you have fair skin." I was fortunate, said many, as some people, even with the smallest design, takes up to 2-4 hours of tapping. Fang-Od won't stop until she's satisfied that the ink has gotten into your skin, and for each person, it varies as to how one's skin accepts the ink. I looked at my leg and saw a centipede crawling up sideways. "For protection and safety, favored by the strongest warriors." I had a *gayyaman* on my leg, and it would serve as my protection and companion.

Fig. 2 Fang-Od at work; adding details to the tattoo

The Shaman, and the Power of Symbols

For Levi-Strauss (2010), there are three levels of belief when it comes to shamanistic cure, and these beliefs are said to be socially-constructed and maintained. A large part of the healing process, therefore, centers on the belief that one accords to the healer. And this belief, as Levi-Strauss astutely points out, are "enhanced by the manipulation of symbols in a ritual setting. The use of symbols, like the doctor's white coat, plays an important role in reinforcing the patient's beliefs; these symbols can be objects or words, but they have special meaning to participants." (124, emphasis mine) It is understood that the shaman has a particular effect on the patient together with the symbols used and rituals performed, as all these are primarily based on the belief system of the patient.

Does this discredit the healer, and what he does? In one sense, it may seem as if the patient alone holds the power, while the healer sim-

ply performs his job. In another, it is apparent that something should be understood by both sides. Does this not hold true for the modern-day doctor as well? His array of symbols (the white coat, the stethoscope, the medicines) and rituals (assessing and testing the patient) will only hold a certain value if the patient believes in it. The real process of healing begins only when the patient believes that he himself will heal. As Konner (2010, 113) maintains, "counseling and psychotherapy speed up recovery from surgery and heart attack and mitigate the suffering of patients receiving radiotherapy for cancer. Even a room with a view reduces the amount of pain medication requested by patients recovering from surgery."

This is the same for the universal value of symbols: that they add to the belief system, and, as Arens notes in his study of the rituals and amulets in Samar and Leyte, they show people's "motivations, hopes and fears." (Polo, 1988, 17) Such rites and amulets are a record of both fears and aspirations and a means of coping in the face of Christianity. Faced with the unknown, the locals tend to hold on to these symbols, the way any other person would, in times of crisis. This brilliantly reveals how early Filipinos have tried to make sense of the world around them, by charging objects with sufficient meaning—something akin to concretizing the intangible.

I interviewed Fang-Od after my session with her. I asked about tattoos in general, focusing on her experiences in tattooing. She sat on her stool, answered my questions in a very composed manner, blowing away some dirt that had settled on her arm. Each time she raised her arm, I saw a different design on her full-sleeve tattoo. I was amazed at her own tattoos. Here was a formidable 93-year old woman whose whole body was a beautiful canvas of art.

She has been practicing the art since puberty. I asked her about tattoos for specific diseases, and was surprised to hear that she refused to tattoo the sick, as the disease might be transferred to her. However, she went on to explain several diseases that are exceptions. First is goiter (or *whinor* in the local dialect), complementing the observations of other anthropologists. According to her, she would tattoo small lines (around four centimeters, as she drew on my notebook), which would stop the growth (but not remove the goiter itself).

Fig. 3 Details of Fang-Od's sleeve tattoo

Vanoverbergh (1929) has often been cited on tattoos' healing aspects, despite the fact that he discusses them only in passing. In his book, *Dress and Adornment in the Mountain Province of the Philippine Islands,* he explains how the Igorot "tattoo their deformities (i.e. goiters, etc.), in which case tattooing has a curative value." (189) He, however, does not further explain the significance of this practice, simply leaving it at that. His main focus is on the different ways of dressing (tattoos are seen as a "garment" of sorts, as they are "often a cheap, permanent and beautiful means of covering their naked skin, especially in the case of women." [188]). And tattooing is either an adornment, or a badge for the warriors in their headhunting activities. Dots and lines were shown as examples of tattoo designs (230). Vanoverbergh describes women as often having their hands/arms, as well as their thighs, tattooed.

Another example is ringworm (*uyad*), which Fang-Od would encircle with a tattoo, to somehow 'contain' it. Like goiter, this was also a persistent problem in the community.

The most frequent 'healing' tattoos she created were those for fertility. In the community, if you are married for six to seven years and still do not have a child, you will be told to separate (*ichang*), or to get a *fatok*, which was often a full-sleeve tattoo. Fang-Od enumerates three different women whom she tattooed: Whai and Chanao, who are now living in Tabuk, could not have children; and Adchamay, who gave birth five times to children who only lived for four to five days. All of them got a full-sleeve tattoo from Fang-Od, and all of them successfully had children after. It can just be one full-sleeve, and not two, as many women in the community

have. The design, according to her, is at the discretion of the tattoo artist (*mambabatok*).

Arachong was a different case. He had a lung disease which no one had diagnosed correctly. Nor could anyone cure it. His father took Arachong to Fang-Od, who read his blood, and said that she could not heal him. He eventually passed away.

There are cases when Fang-Od declines to tattoo a certain person, whether for healing or for simple adornment (such as the current influx of foreigners and locals who go to her for a "souvenir." I learned that nowadays, she declines requests less frequently, perhaps for economic reasons. People who go to her for tattoos are charged a certain amount. Fang-Od, being the one who earns most in the community, helps her sisters' families and other members of the community).

Traditionally, when one goes to Fang-Od for healing, one gives *ayyubo*—or red carnelian beads—as a gift. One can see these worn by many of the older women in the community, including Fang-Od herself. The typical necklace worn by Kalinga women is a necklace strung with agate, porcelain, and carnelian beads.

Another interesting practice in the community is that of tattooing one's name on one's arm; Fang-Od, Baydon, and Sigway, together with the other community members I talked to and observed (who had tattoos) all had their names on their arms. According to them, this was important so that when they die, especially when their heads are cut off, they will be recognized by their tattooed names, and be brought back to their community, their home.

Satisfied with my interview, I thanked Fang-Od for her beautiful design and for answering all my questions. Later, after she had fed her pigs, I knew she was going to the fields to take part in the harvest. Bloody and scarred, I went back to my room to rest a bit, and to check out my souvenir from this woman. I was limping a bit, but the pain no longer mattered to me. I knew I was fortunate enough to have been given a glimpse of this woman's life, and her community.

With my jeans rolled up, I strolled around the community, and when the people saw my *fatok*, they all had something positive to say about it. I felt the community opening up to me, and I felt the tiniest bit of being a part of them. It was nothing, really: a small image, a bit of pain, a little

knowledge. But I felt closer to the Butbuts than I ever had with the other communities I had previously visited in all my travels and fieldwork.

Baydon, a 93-year old member of the Butbut group, was one of the tattooed folks I encountered. I was fascinated to see the small x marks on his face, so I went up to him to ask what they meant. Salvador-Amores' (2002) paper on the batek[1] discusses its function in rites of separation. Here, she mentions the *linga-lingaw* which, according to her, is a tattoo that provides protection from the *alan-alan*, or spirits that are dwelling in the village. (113) Especially after a successful headhunt, the spirits feared are those of the dead enemies. The small x marks scattered on their bodies and faces, are supposed to "confuse" the spirits and prevent them from recognizing the people whom they want to take revenge on. It is noted that this tattoo is given to women and children for protection, as well as to ensure good health.

For Baydon, the x marks were not for protection, but rather, commemoration. Having killed five Japanese men during the war, he decided to have those small x marks tattooed on his face as a remembrance of what he had accomplished. I made sure to ask if the small x tattoos had any protective nature, but he denied this quickly.

Showing me the tattoo on his arm, Baydon tried to carve the missing letter "B" with a small knife, to show me his full name. I became alarmed, asking him to stop, but he just laughed at me.

1 Kalinga term for tattoo. The different terms such as *fatek, fatok,* were all "derived from the sound of the tapping of the stick to the tattoo instrument which pierces the skin. The word *tek* (*tik*) translates into: 'to hit slowly.'" (108) In this paper, the term fatok will be used, as it is closest to the Binutbut dialect.

Fig. 4 Baydon, a member of the community and his name tattooed on his arm

I was also informed that the more appropriate term for the small x marks was *linga-lingaw* (fly-like). He also had slanted lines on his cheeks, which I noticed on other community members. Some, however, especially the women, had dotted lines on their faces. These facial tattoos are called *dung-it*. All of these, according to them, were simply for adornment[2].

It is quite obvious that the practice of tattooing is common to all of them, and the meanings of these tattoos are also appropriated by each person. Though many writers have explained the meanings of the different Kalinga symbols, one must remember to be careful in generalizing, as the meaning may not necessarily be the same from one person to another. These symbols are appropriated individually. Moreover, one decides to have a tattoo to commemorate a certain event, so the meaning may be personal or, as is the case of some of them, for no reason at all, but simply as adornment.

I decided to visit the woman who tattooed Baydon. Sigway told me that the x marks tattooed on one's face are simply for adornment, and

2 I also asked Fang-Od about her own *dung-it*, and according to her, a woman named Sagoysoy did hers. The *linga-lingaw* and the two small slanted lines on her face were for adornment, and nothing else.

nothing else. For her, it did not hold any particular significance. This once again shows how each person appropriates the symbol, ascribing to it his or her own personal meaning. Sigway is also one of the community's tattoo artists, but she only did small tattoos with no complicated designs. I asked her if she knew of any tattoos for specific diseases, and she talked about tattoos for goiter. Living in the mountains with no bodies of water, salt was one of the commodities that these people lacked especially in the past. Hence the high percentage of community members suffering from goiter. She would put small dots or lines on the goiter, which it was believed would heal it.

Krutak (2005), who did studies on the symbols of tattoos, has pointed out that "simple markings had therapeutic value and were placed on goiters, tumors and varicose veins. Among the Kalinga particular arrangements of centipede scales were believed to ward off cholera." Jenks' (1905) own fieldwork shows how the Igorots have cross-hatched markings which are placed on goiters, varicose veins and other swellings and enlargements. Though he mentions that it is obvious that the Igorots believe in their therapeutic value, he was not able to get any statement to substantiate his opinion. (145)

This seems to be the pattern among scholars: the inability to explain how and why tattoos were used for health purposes, perhaps in part because there is no explanation behind it. There is simply the bearer's own belief in it. And there is, after all, no quantifiable way to measure one's belief in something; the potency of the tattoo as a symbol is only what becomes apparent. Also, it is of interest to note that there are often specific arrangements or practices necessary to make the tattoo effective in warding off or curing diseases. It is not just placed on the body like a bandage of sorts, as one does when one is sick.

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When I was going around with R, who usually served as my interpreter and translator, people would shout his name as everyone there knows him and I would often see people glance at me and ask "Hapon?" R would correct them at first, telling them I was "Tagalog," from Manila, but days later, he would just agree with them whenever they asked. I got angry with him but managed to laugh after he said he was tired of correcting

them. So it was that: a lone Japanese woman doing research (a word which they had no local term for), imposing herself on their community.

That same night, I went to another house. By then I had picked up a few local customs, such as taking off one's slippers all the time, hitching up your legs over the low barrier in front of the house, and sitting down on the floor, like everyone else.

It was the house of Grace's family. Grace is one of Fang-Od's sisters' granddaughter, to whom she passed on the skill of tattooing. At age 10, Grace started tattooing, and now, a college student taking up AB English, she is perhaps the youngest tattoo artist in the country, having joined the annual *Dutdutan* festival (a day of showcasing tattoo artists' talents). I asked her if she liked what she does, and she gave me a big smile, saying yes. On the wall, I saw her medals and plaques—a mix of academic and tattooing achievements.

I sat on the floor, a bottle of gin in front of me, and several glasses. One by one, men came inside the house, chatting with us and drinking. "Shot, Ma'am!" they would tell me with a smile, before taking a swig of water (chaser) and a shot of gin. I would smile, raise my bottle of Pale Pilsen (the only other available alcoholic drink), and drink with them.

Grace is busy preparing something. She uses a long stick to blow on the fire, as she boils water. She chats with us, and I ask her what books she likes to read. We trade stories; R and I show her pictures on our phones; she plays a song by Katy Perry on hers. I stand by the window, look outside, and am greeted by a large pig strolling right outside the window. We greet each other. Grace prepares a meal of *pancit canton*. She opens four packs, readies the rice, and before I know it, plates are once again scattered on the floor, with her urging me to get some rice to eat with the noodles. I am handed a spoon, and as I struggle to eat my noodles with it, I am more than content sitting there on the floor, talking to some of the most interesting people I have ever met.

She takes a bowl of clear liquid with some chopped-up pieces inside. R pours the liquid on his rice, scoops up a piece from the bowl, and feeds it to me. I eat it and the lovely taste of mushroom hits my mouth. I smile and eat more, talk more. Someone places another bottle of beer in front of me, not clearing the empty bottles. It is open, and I have no choice but to drink it. It's warm beer as there's no ice, no refrigerator in

the community, and I take a swig of beer as someone beside me takes another shot of gin.

Past ten in the evening, I go back to the home I have grown accustomed to, not feeling the least bit sleepy. My leg continues to throb, but it's a sensation that feels like a part of me by now. I climb up the steps to my room, and see Wade sleeping outside. The family's dog has taken a liking to me; I often meet him during my rounds in the community and he walks with me for a while. At night, he sleeps outside my room. Once, at two in the morning, he growled and barked angrily outside, and I wondered who the enemy was. I like to think Wade is protective of me, and refuses to let anyone bother me, even if his barking is often the reason I am jolted awake at strange hours of the night.

That night, I think of what R told me earlier, during dinner with Grace. In the community, if you say something about someone without proof, or simply badmouth a person, that person can complain to the elders, and the latter would convene. If they know that what you said has no basis, they can punish you and ask you to pay for what you did. For instance, you will be asked to pay two pigs. Upon receiving the tribute, the whole community will then feast on the pigs. It is a celebration of sorts, and the whole community will know of what you did.

My last day in the community: I am already being greeted by the folks, and I am running together with the children. I go to Fang-Od's home again to say goodbye, and before I start my long trek back to the place where I will catch the bus to Bontoc, I hear the news that one of the community members has passed away due to dengue. Sarah was only 27 years old, and I see some of the community members arriving. In the community, whenever someone passes away, everyone (those who are away, for instance those who work in other cities) is supposed to come back to the community to mourn.

I am sitting on the steps outside Fang-Od's home, and I see a long trail of them—men, women, children and even dogs chasing them—follow one path up to the highest spot in the community. Soon, a long line of men is coming up. A couple of them are carrying the body wrapped in cloth, on top of thick bamboo poles. I ask R why the other men have bamboo poles with them, and he says they are spare poles, in case the ones holding the body break. The other men are there to take the place

of the carriers should they get tired, as the body must not touch the ground.

I remember my own trek and how exhausted I already was midway through, and once again I am filled with respect and admiration for these people. When the body passes by, every person stops what he or she is doing, as a sign of respect. Later, when everyone has gathered on top, they will begin their ritual for mourning.

I sit there, all my worries of trekking with my throbbing leg fading. I marvel at how all the people I've spoken to before coming to this community had expressed their concerns and fears. They were anxious about how a community in the mountains would live. I had read accounts of people coming up, and how they instruct you to bring a particular item, or prepare you for the worst. It is actually I who had learned from this community. They needed nothing from me; I was the one who needed them. To teach me the values we have forgotten, to explain to me what family and community mean. And to allow me to heal, in every aspect.

When they have brought Sarah up, I say one last goodbye to Fang-Od who gives me a bright smile, and thanks me in return. R and I start our long trek down. I lead the way, and I meet several men going up to the community. I say good morning to all of them in Tagalog with a slight bow and a big smile, hoping they will understand me. All of them smile and give me a quick bow. When we reach the place where we can catch a motorcycle to cut our trek, we decide to continue by foot, as it will be disrespectful to ask someone to take us down, when everyone is headed towards the community.

Upon reaching Bugnay, we wait hours for the bus—there is only one per day, coming from Tabuk—and when the bus finally arrives, R points out to me a woman, Sarah's mother. I condole with her as I try to imagine her grief at losing a child. Sarah was one of the few people in the community who had earned a college degree. She helped out whenever there were activities in the community. I want to say something, but instead, I watch her unload all her things from the bus—from vegetables to chickens to boxes of different shapes and sizes. I help carry some of the things down from the bus, and between us is a silence which I hope will somehow transmit my message of sympathy. Aside from the fact that I cannot even speak their dialect, I know that no words would suffice, so I just send her a quiet

prayer. When everyone has finally disembarked, baggage included, I climb aboard the bus feeling a deep gratitude to the people for treating me as one of them, and feeling sorry that I am leaving. I always say that the best sign of leaving is feeling regretful that you are about to go, knowing that the place has indelibly marked itself into you, literally and figuratively.

The Symbol of Tattoos

Have we lost our tattoos, because they have been criminalized? Have we lost the body's power—as a dwelling place of the soul? No longer magical, our bodies have become objectified, and we have been alienated from our own culture, from our own bodies. This journey is a step back. This is a reminder of what the body once was, and still is.

In a time where tattoos are regarded negatively, and tattooing considered a criminal act, there are people who hold on to them because of the power of symbols in our lives. The body is sacred, and what is inscribed, imprinted on it, is also deemed sacred. Such is the power of the tattoo as a symbolic text.

I have tried to trace the art of tattooing by showing its health aspects and/or curative powers, instead of simply showcasing it as a part of warrior (*mingor*) culture. This is a reflection on both traditional medicine, as well as the art itself: that in fact, the two are intertwined. As tattooing is part of culture, so is healing. It harkens back to the fundamental need of every man: the preservation of the self. Seen as such, one can understand how the healing process is an over-arching process that subsumes—or incorporates—many different cultural aspects under it. The same is true of tattoos; when the colonizers literally and figuratively "marked" the natives as rebels, based on an art form which was part of themselves, they failed to see the importance of tattooing as a cultural by-product, meaningful to the Filipinos who practiced it. In some ways, the colonizers were correct in pointing out that the locals rebelled against them; tattooing, or the symbol itself imprinted on the body, was a sign that the locals chose to hold on to their belief system, and thus (re)claim their bodies. It was not an either/or; it was simply the natives making sense of their world, and to read the imprints is to read a cultural text that the colonizers failed to alter.

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We often say "hello" as a form of greeting, but for them, the people of Buscalan, it's "*Maayam*," which is a question. Where you are headed to? they ask. And they answer one another, telling each other where they are going, so that later, when someone goes missing, the last person who met him or her can tell the people where that person was last headed. And that is the meaning of community. Such a beautiful way to show that one cares.

I am going to the fields. I am meeting a friend, a relative. I am headed towards a place. I am here.

I am.

In this community, I belong.

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