

# Inking the Identity: a Study of the Apatani Tradition of Tattooing through Bakhtinian Chronotope

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## Abstract

Known for their inked faces, the last generation of 'tattooed' Apatani women stands as a testimony of this obliterated tradition of tattooing the tribe practiced. Started as a mark of uglification, this practice later turned to be a cultural epitome. A symbol of beauty, it became the celebration of being a culture, a tradition, a strong woman and an Apatani. Outlawed in the 1970s, this tradition is today considered as grotesque and is now only a site of the exotic. The last practitioners of this heritage reside in desolation in the Ziro valley of Arunachal Pradesh, after which this endangered customary paragon goes into extinction. The present paper will try to analyze the tattooed Apatani octogenarian women as Bakhtinian Chronotope. Their spatial configuration will be examined along with the patterns of trauma and identity crisis. In this process Bakhtin's idea of grotesque will also be analyzed taking into consideration the progressive Apatani frame of reference.

**Keywords:** Apatanis, Chronotope, Exotic, Grotesque, Tattoo, Trauma.

## Introduction

Tradition is an assemblage of societal semions that are preserved in a communally desired way and regarded as elevated and sublimated traits of life. These are certain beliefs and customs having their origins in the past and transmitted from generation to generation. They are generational inheritances, transmitted in the form of belief system, values, norms, and customs and so on. All these together constitute the greater cultural aura that humans are born into. Edward Shils (1984) says,

"Tradition means any things. In its barest, most elementary sense, it means simply a *Traditum*: it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present." (p. 12)

Culture, according to E.B. Tylor (1971), is

"that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (p. 01)

In essence, it incorporates everything that in a descending manner comes through ages. A social domain, the notion of culture is inevitably linked with tradition. A culture today is passed on as a tradition tomorrow. Tennyson said in his "Morte d'Arthur", "The old order changeth, yielding place to new." Tradition keeps changing with time and preserves the antiques in the pages of

memory. Tradition constitutes a rich granary of cultural heritage, which persists as a tool of socialization in a particular society. Its origin, basis, transition and present status are based on anonymous experience, superstition, physiological temperament and imagination. Tradition, in its transmission, uses the oral barge and imagination of the passer-by.

The modern fashion of tattooing that underwent its renaissance in the 1950s pertains to an age-old cultural tradition. This tradition of marking indelible or temporary marks on different body parts finds its roots in the Neolithic times as suggested by mummified preserved skin, archaeological records and ancient art pieces. The direct trace-back of mummified tattooed skin was possible only to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. In India, tattoo tradition has been prevalent amongst various tribes and communities. The Noctes, Wanchos, Apatanis, Singphos, Kanyaks, Mizos and many others from North East India cherish this tradition as a specimen of their glorious cultural heritage. This convention, with its distinct patterns, categorises a particular tribe as unique. Even today, various tribes from different parts of the globe nurture this exotic tradition.

### **The Apatani tradition**

The Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh inherit a history of inscribing tattoos. A means of protection, this custom was performed primarily by the womenfolk. The tribe recollects certain mythical discourses related to this ritual. The most popular story asserts the Apatani girls as very beautiful, who were constantly made victims of abduction by the other tribesmen. Therefore, in order to protect and label them, the tribe decided to carve tattoos on their faces, as a process of 'uglification.' As the other oral discourse avers, the Apatanis had to face frequent attacks from the neighbouring tribes. The men who died during those feuds returned to their homes as spirits. Failing to conceive their own death, they tried to connect with their wives, who were unable to see them. Feeling ignored, these spirits started to disturb the family causing mishaps. Frightened, those families called the *Shaman*, the Apatani priest, who informed them about the cause of those agitations. As a remedy, the priest advised the women to ink their face and make them self unrecognizable wherefore the spirit won't be able to recognise them and will depart.

The texture of the tattoo consisted of a thick straight line inscribed from the forehead to the tip of the nose and five straight lines drawn on the chin. These tattoos were inked on the women's faces typically at the time of their first period, around the age of ten. The needle used to inscribe tattoos was made by tying together a few of the three-headed thorns called *tipe-tere* or *iime-tre* (*vachellia nilotika*). A small stick hammer, *empiia yakho*, was used to put necessary pressure on the needle to pierce the skin. The ink called *chinyu*, made from pig's fat mixed with soot from the fireplace left a dark blue impression on the face. This tradition was practiced usually during the winters in order to quicken the drying process. In addition to the tattoos, the Apatani women also wore 'giant nose-plugs' called *yaping hurlo*. These nose-plugs were made of a particular wood found easily in the forests of Arunachal Pradesh.

With the passing of time, this device for security became a cultural emblem. From being considered a symbol of uglification, this tradition of tattooing later transitioned towards being a symbol of beauty. An Apatani woman now was considered ugly without the tattoo and nose-plug and therefore it became a part and parcel of her life. She could not get married until and unless she was tattooed. Tattoo and nose-plugs, thereby, became a mark of 'beautification' and pride and a symbol of fertility and prosperity.

With the onset of modernity, the Apatani youth started to render dissatisfaction towards this tradition. Considering it as an obstruction, the progressive generation of the Apatani tribe felt

alienated from the outside world as their appearance drew the eyeballs of the people. The device that once helped the Apatani women chisel their identity and beautify themselves, now became a mode of dissociation. Therefore, in the 1970s, with the formation of Apatani Youth Association, this tradition met its end as the then government put a ban on it. Thereupon, the tattoo tradition now remained just a sight of the exotic.

When Darwinian thought is applied to the human society or societal evolution, the integration between statics and dynamics creates the equilibrium. It solidifies the spatio-temporal dimension of occurrences and instigates both cultural and social verbosity. This exuberance is the seed of the traditional cultural narratives. Time changes everything. Therefore, in the socio-cultural domain, time stands as the worst annihilator of eccentricity and the best creator of dramatic profundity. But drama of life is not a well-knit conglomeration of episodes. It does not have measured configurations of time and space.

### **The Apatani tradition and Bakhtinian Chronotope**

Mikhail Bakhtin (1983) in his notion of 'chronotope' talks about configuration and re-configuration of time and space as represented in language and discourse. He opines,

"Time and space merge ... into an inseparable unity ... a definite and absolutely concrete locality serves at the starting point for the creative imagination... this is a piece of human history, historical time condensed into space. Therefore, the plot (sum of depicted events) and the characters ... are like those creative forces that formulated and humanized this landscape, they made it a speaking vestige of the movement of history (historical time), and, to a certain degree, predetermined its subsequent course as well, or like those creative forces a given locality needs in order to organize and continue the historical process embodied in it." (p. 49)

Both oral and written accounts can be base-narratives for these configurations. Written narratives are diachronic documents whereas oral narratives are wounds without scar. Although traceless, they are dominant and impactful in the society. The whole unlettered folk inculcate it and make a passage to the next generation. Oral narratives are very much prone to change as they are transferred from mouth to mouth, generation to generation. They always go through the imagination of the speaker and turn to be a layered version. The spatio-temporal unity that Bakhtin imagines does not go in compliance with the artistic minds and literary presentations. The idea of 'chronotope' as an inseparable blending of time and place creates particular 'spaces' or zones in history. His 'speaking vestige' (p. 49) integrates all the available versions of history, myth, folklore, legends and imaginary literary narratives and it erupts into language. It creates, binds, unites and above all, inks. The above cited folk accounts associated with the tattooing of Apatani women occupy particular Bakhtinian space in the history of the Apatani Tribe. This space can be talked about in three different dimensions: Geographical, Physical and Cultural. Chronotope simply means the configurations of time and place as presented in language, literature and cultural discourses. Understanding these dimensions will help have a grasp over the space an Apatani woman occupies.

Historically, the Apatanis lived in the mainland of Arunachal Pradesh. Destabilized by consequent attacks from other tribes, they migrated to Ziro Valley. With the experiences and memories of the past incidents, the women folk carried with them the fear in their hearts and the seeds of the *iime-tre* plant as a relic of their bitter experience. Thus their migration to the Ziro

valley marked the geographical space they occupy as this space provided them a sense of home and a scope to nurture their tradition. When it comes to the physical space, as seen in archival materials, the women's faces were largely affected by this symbolism. The physical structure of their face got transformed as the tattoos left irreversible imprints on their faces and the nose-plugs contorted their noses. The way these facial embellishments took a particular space in the women's bodies, in a similar manner, these women with tattoos confirmed a distinct physical space amongst the other tribes. The Apatani woman with tattoos designated her space in the accumulated Arunachali culture. She preserved a distinguished space in history. A woman with face tattoos and nose-plug is considered to be beautiful because of her societal associations or conceptions. As the popular myth and the above-cited folktale go, tattooing was a process of uglification that in a reverse manner justified the Apatani woman beautiful. As she continued with it, it became a tradition and strengthened her cultural space as a mark of distinction in the pages of the history of Arunachal Pradesh. This solipsism added to her pride. Therefore Tattooing is a remembrance of her cultural space, since it symbolizes her identity and her existence.

Though Bakhtin talks about spatio-temporal dimension in the context of novel only, its applicability is felt throughout genres. Bakhtin (1983), in a general sense, says,

“It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.” (p. 85)

The constitutive category called folk-tale or oral narrative is way different from other tangible categories like novel, drama etc. because in folk-narratives time is just an assumption, a hypothesis. The genres like novel and drama can be a generic chronotope making a fusion between time and space together, since, though vast, they have a connecting link. But, in folktales time is non-existent because it talks about characters moving everywhere in the infinite world of time. Therefore, folktales are more into making the human being the chronotope, because he is the most valid proof of spatio-temporal inseparability. He is more potent than the characters of written literary genres as he offers validity to the configurations of time and space. Bakhtin (1983) is of opinion,

“In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterize the artistic chronotope.” (p. 84)

The Apatani woman as a historical chronotope carries along a whole series of events, which in a way changed the course of Apatani life. So, as a characteristic feature of chronotope, the Apatani woman becomes the background of a whole series of incidents referring back to a large time-space entanglement, but not as a narrative. As a centre, it organizes a race, the actions and the events. Bakhtin names the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (p. 84), a chronotope, which is applied throughout genres.

The tattoos inked on their faces up to 1970s bore the vintage element of a speaking past, an unwritten historical account. The last generation of tattooed Apatani women still enjoys the privilege of having the tattoo and nose-plug on their face. But now it has become a sight of the exotic, created in front of the world. Narang Yamyang, as reported by *The New Indian Express*, is

the last Apatani woman to get a face tattoo. She still opines that women with face tattoos, nose plugs and elongated earlobes got good husbands. These octogenarians advocate in favour of the tradition as without it, they feel some kind of crisis of their identity. There is still a craving for its revival. Chronotope gives a particular time the scope to bind itself to the liabilities of a particular space. When time and space are well-knot into a composite whole and it manifests itself through a single entity, the entity becomes a chronotope. The Apatani woman's maneuvering through history, taking along the particular time-space juxtaposition, asserts her to be a chronotope. Though Bakhtin discusses chronotope as a shaping force only in the context of novel, it is adapted to different genres and accordingly, it has generic differences. A chronotope, above all, materializes time in space. The tattoo tradition of the Apatanis provides the ground for representability of events referring to different upheavals in different time zones and spaces. The Apatani woman here emerges as a bosom for manifesting representation and gives an effective push to the whole narrative.

### Conclusion

Karyn L. Freedman (2006) in her essay "The Epistemological Significance of Psychic Trauma" says that:

"In the wake of a traumatic event a victim's emotional state is volatile, to be sure, as she undergoes intense personal suffering, but this is only one side of the aftermath of psychic trauma—the shattered self. The other side is the shattered world view the consequence of trauma on the survivor's belief about the world after a traumatic event a survivor experiences a kind of cognitive dissonance as she is faced with a whole new set of beliefs that have cropped up, often very suddenly, which are inconsistent with previously held beliefs." (p. 105)

This decision for abandonment of the old tattoo tradition of the tribe inflicted a direct emotional trauma for the old Apatani woman, who is now considered as the woman of yesterday. For her it is the trauma of the displaced identity, the trauma of being uprooted from her cultural self. She is today displaced from her cultural identity, facing the shattered self that now is only a site of astonishment, a representation of the unnatural. The traditional Apatani woman today faces emotional and cultural displacement from her roots as she feels that she belongs to nowhere. Her status too now resides in absolute crisis, facing displacement and uprootedness.

The exposition of these 'grotesque' (p. 279) faced women to the open air belittled their anatomical identity. Their body today could no longer carry the cultural iconography as the novel acquaintances do not identify them with their vibrant past. This textual demeanor barred the social exchange that Bakhtin once proposed as indispensable along with corporeal literariness. Bakhtin(1984) states in his *Rabelais and His World*,

"Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world." (p. 26)

The modern Apatani woman perceived her past-image through visual feelers and declared it to be outdated, despicable and grotesque. But such an ideology inflicted an ambiguous sensitivity in their psyche. Although initiated but the impression of the tattoos could not be segregated from

the Apatani consciousness. That which was considered as a grotesque stayed inseparable from them, reminding them of their roots and their present ambiguous state of existence. Such ambiguity is always seen during the celebration of their various indigenous festivals like *Myoko*, *Dree* etc. The modern woman and girls ink themselves with false tattoos to signify their original identity, the identity of an Apatani woman. They try to return to their roots, which today can only be done as a celebration of the bygone, a recollection of the left past.

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