TATTOOING IN THAILAND’S HISTORY

By B. J. Terwiel

In view of the lengthy descriptions of tattooing from many other regions in Southeast Asia, it is odd that the Chao Phraya basin receives but little attention. The custom is usually not mentioned, or is given a passing reference as one rather old-fashioned habit to which modern observers need pay little regard. Accounts of central Thai tattooing which cover more than a single paragraph are rare. Moreover, this is in marked contrast to the extensive local literature on closely related subjects such as magical diagrams, protective spells, amulets and astrology.

It can readily be argued that the lack of interest in the literature is due to the fact that the practice is virtually extinct. More than twenty years ago de Young remarked:

"Only village men above the age of forty-five possess this specialized tattooing, and those that have the traditional designs are well above fifty-five."

In a similar vein Phya Anuman Rajadhon reported in 1964 that the practice survived only weakly. Such remarks would lead us to believe that the traditional practice would be little known amongst the central Thais of the 1970s and that it would be rare to meet men who carry tattoos for invulnerability. The custom, however, appears to survive remarkably well. In many villages of central Thailand it is not difficult to find a tattooed man. In the community with which this researcher is most familiar there was hardly a man, young or old, who did not carry some sort of tattoo. Some young men’s chests and backs were wholly covered with traditional designs. Even during the last four years there have been well-attended tattooing rituals during which many young adults obtained their sacred marks. Whilst most tattooing specialists in this region perform their skill part-time, and can be monks as well as laypersons, I am aware of at least one man who depends wholly upon tattooing for his livelihood and who travels from village to village to attract clients. The findings of R. B. Textor for a community not far from Bangkok support my observation that the custom has by no means died out. Therefore, the idea that there is only little attention given to central Thai tattooing because the custom has disappeared is not warranted, and we must look for different explanations for the marked lack of detailed description of the practice.

The main reason may well be that tattooing is regarded as rather vulgar and somewhat base in the eyes of urban Thais. It is considered a thing for lower class people. The influence of Westerners, who often look askance at tattooing, for they associate it with drunken sailors and anti-establishment groups, may have contributed to this feeling, though only in a minor way. Much more fundamental for understanding the attitude of the educated Bangkok Thai towards tattooing is the fact that the custom does not appear to have been part of the culture of
the ruling elite. In this paper the hypothesis is developed that religious tattooing, at present abundantly practised in the countryside, may well have been a relatively recent introduction into central Thailand through the assimilation of great numbers of people from outlying areas into the workforce during the late nineteenth century. It is proposed that the introduction of this practice via the poorest sections of the population is responsible for the view of many urbanites that tattooing is a thing for the poor, for roughnecks and loutish individuals.

Another reason for the relative lack of published reports on the custom is that research in the subject is by no means easy. Whilst there are established channels to gain access to teachers of traditional music, dance, and painting, the tattooer often cloaks his art in secrecy. Most of the present-day tattooing is part of an esoteric tradition and the specialist will only grudgingly give information about the spells and the powers inherent in his ancient art.

An exhaustive inventory of traditional tattooing will not be presented here, although this form of folk art needs to be recorded for its scope, its design and its methods. This form of art is by definition as perishable as the people who carry the symbols around,9 and without a wealth of comparative material we can hardly hope to discern fashions, themes and innovations.

In this paper Thai traditional tattooing is introduced from an historical perspective, and it will become clear that this exercise is quite fruitful. It has bearing upon the system of administration as well as the class structure and class friction. The historian must from the start recognise that there are two intrinsically different types of tattooing, the administrative and the religious. Each of these forms appears to have its own historical development and each may shed light on different aspects of the cultural history of Thailand.

Administrative tattooing

Historians familiar with the Thai scene will be well aware of the fact that the Bangkok authorities used to mark many of their subjects on the wrist. This was done by officers of the Department of Registration (Krom Suratsawadi or Krom Satsadi10), who kept records and statistics on males especially for the purpose of determining status, military conscription expectations, and taxation classes.

Thus we find in the famous poem Khun Chāng Khun Phaen, written some 150 years ago, the lines in which novice Kaew is warned against leaving the shelter of the Buddhist order. If he resigns from the brotherhood he will be drafted:11

Kharawāt nī chāt man chua nak
čha su'k pai hai khao sak eng rū' wā
khô mū' dam lâo rakam thuk wēlā
phlō kap bā bāek kan čhon banlāi

or
“Lay people have a terrible life.  
When defrocked, are you then to be tattooed?  
With blackened wrist carrying provender  
Without relief until death strikes?”

Historians have traced the custom of tattooing males for administrative reasons to the beginning of the Bangkok period. Thus Akin Rabibhadana cites the decrees of Taksin of 1774 as proof of an “innovation” in Thai administration, a “major step in the control of manpower”. He goes as far as to state that there is no evidence of such tattooing before Taksin’s reign.

However, it can be established that such markings did exist in the Ayuthaya period. Simon de la Loubère, who visited Ayuthaya in 1687 and 1688 reports: “... and as these are the Officers, which are also the Nai, every Officer has his Pagayeurs in his Band. They brand them on the outside of the Wrist with an Hot Iron and an Anchor over it; and these sort of Domestics are called Bao.”

From this it can be determined that during the reign of King Narai at least the class of servants (bào) was branded on the wrist; and Taksin’s measure almost a century later loses some of its innovative character. It could be argued that branding with a hot iron is intrinsically different from tattooing, and that the servant class covered only a section of the population. Such considerations must be set aside when we read in the report of the Persian embassy to King Narai’s court: “... they have taken to tattooing themselves with certain words of their own script.”

and

“of the officers who have the highest rank and are in charge of making arrests, executions and torturing, there are some who wear their sign on the right arm and others who wear it on the left. Those in the courier service and the office of roads have their own particular insignia.”

It appears thus beyond doubt that in Ayuthaya marking by tattooing for administrative purposes existed, and that there was a recognised system of distinguishing certain sections of the army by tattoo. It can readily be assumed that couriers carried a general laissez passer on their wrist to facilitate the quick passage of messages. Therefore it appears that Taksin’s measure of 1774 was more of the character of the establishment of a measure which was part of old administrative practice.

The remark of the Persian visitor regarding the fact that some officers carried their markings on their right arm, whilst others had it on their left, may have bearing upon the little understood division of government departments into Kroms of the right and Kroms of the left. It could be surmised that basically this division goes back to a system of administrative tattooing. It this be true, this type of body mark may even be traced to earlier Ayuthaya times.

Administrative tattooing is thus older than is generally assumed and may even
be of considerable antiquity. It is possible that Ayuthaya practice covered the whole system of registration of males for conscription purposes, just as Taksin's measure was largely designed to keep track of people who might serve the state. Already in Ayuthaya times the social system was very intricate, and even among the commoners there were many classes of people, ranging from bāo to phrai hua ngān. In one of the older decrees we find that a person who is not under the protection of a nāi (a patron), has to be registered as belonging to the crown (satsadī ao pen khon luang). It is, in the light of the remarks of de la Loubère and the Persian envoy, not too bold to assume that such registration also involved a tattoo mark. After all, the system of names remained so simple throughout Ayuthaya times and much of Bangkok times, at least for commoners, that without such a tag the officers could easily lose sight of their population.

From casual remarks in documents, and from word lists and dictionaries, it becomes evident that an extremely elaborate tattooing code came into existence. A person exempt from corvée through some infirmity or defect could obtain an exemption tattoo (sak phikan). Someone too old for corvée could obtain a mark for the aged (sak charā). Criminals who had been found guilty of some offence against the state could receive a tattoo mark on the face. Others could by order of the court have their wrist mark changed to the status of a person who has to cut grass for elephant fodder (sak pen taphun yā chāng).

The wrist thus became a register of a person's official status with regard to the government authorities and it could easily be checked at all times. It must have been a key factor in ensuring that the king could quickly raise an army, and in helping him to obtain manpower for public works. The system of tattooed wrists may at times have helped the central authorities to keep the wealthy classes in check, for private armies and personal slaves were tattooed as such and taxed. How important the system was in times of war is demonstrated by the penalty on making a false tattoo, prescribed by Taksin: those who faked an administrative tattoo could be put to death, together with their whole family.

The system of administrative tattooing appears to remain a cornerstone of the Thai government throughout the first four reigns of the Chakri dynasty. The thoughtful considerations of King Chulalongkorn, in 1874, with regard to the problems of emancipating the children of unredeemable slaves shows the reliance of the central authority upon tattooing:

“Slaves' children who are thus emancipated at 21 will probably be tattooed as slaves' children having to pay an annual sum of 6 sahu'ngs to the State. They are in all probability unwilling to be tattooed as soms, since this involves payment of the higher annual sum of 6 baht ...”

and a little further on in the same submission:

“Moreover, once the slaves are emancipated, their creditors will hasten to send them to Krom Pra Suratsawadi to be tattooed for fear of [the original creditors] having to continue payment to the State in respect of them.”
The proposed solution for the problem is as follows:

"Slaves' children who are emancipated and have had their wrists tattooed should still be called slaves' children, paying the State an annual sum of 6 salungs, whether they are with the old masters or with the new ones. If slaves' children thus emancipated misbehave and return to slavery, there should be a written evidence of the debt concerned. Once they have paid it up, they should be tattooed as soms according to the old law. Slaves or slaves' children with such written documents, after having gained freedom, should be similarly tattooed as soms. Slaves' children with no tattoo on their right wrist, having become free either because they have reached the emancipation age or have paid up their debt, should be tattooed as soms, unless they have become officials, since it is a penalty [an offence] to have evaded earlier tattooing."

From this quotation it is clear that tattooing is still very important in the later part of the nineteenth century. We can also remark that, in contrast to administrative tattooing during King Narai's time, government officials are exempt from such marks. Tattooing has thus become reserved for the lower classes and this fact may have contributed to the low status of present-day religious tattooing in general.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, together with the legal abolition of slavery and the introduction of family names for all classes, administrative tattooing rapidly became extinct. At present there are only very few Thais alive who carry such official markings on their wrists. The only example known to this researcher is the regimental tattoo of a central Thai farmer who served in the Siamese detachment in France during the First World War.

However, the wrist is at present still used by tattooers to place marks of no religious significance, the tattoos for decoration only (sak len). Little village boys, who can be found in the foreground whenever there is a diversion, and who love watching adult men receive their sacred tattoos, may badger a tattooer to give some also to the youngsters. The specialist will not give the magically charged symbols to any man under the age of seventeen, but he may be persuaded to execute a small geometrical design or the picture of a butterfly or a fish on the wrist of the bravest of the small boys. For a while these boys will be proud of their newly obtained decorations. They carry the sign that they could stand the pain of the needle, and they may feel a bond with the older males who are so ostentatiously marked. However, it will not be long before they are aware of the fact that their little marks are purely secular. The decorations on their wrists lack all the religious power ascribed to the patterns their seniors wear. What appeared to them to be a mark of adulthood is soon felt to be a sign of childish impatience which cannot be erased.27

*Traditional religious tattooing*

In sharp contrast to administrative tattooing, the marking of the body for magical reasons, for protection, strength, influence and invulnerability is still a
living tradition. Such tattooing is reserved for men of more than approximately 16 years of age, and a man's first religious tattoos may thus be regarded as a mark of adulthood.

This type of tattooing is characterised by strong religious overtones; before a tattoo is executed there must be homage to the wise teachers of the past who handed down this tradition; the tattooing is accompanied by the uttering of magical formulae; the tattooer may rub the client's skin and blow sharply upon the markings in order to impart power; and finally there is an impressive ceremony intended to raise the full forces which slumber in the designs. The tattooer uses no standard overall pattern when adorning the body with sacred designs. He has the choice of hundreds of magical diagrams, mythical animals, letters from the Khơm alphabet or combinations of these three. Each person is tattooed according to the inspiration of the specialist and no two people have exactly the same overall pattern.

Religious tattooing in central Thailand is evidently part of a practice which is widespread in mainland Southeast Asia. Magical tattoos have been reported for many regions, ranging from Burma to Vietnam and from Laos to Cambodia. Moreover, it appears to be a very ancient custom in the region. Marco Polo, travelling eastward from the upper Irrawaddy, relates of one of the city states (Cangigu or Caugigu, which has as yet not been satisfactorily identified):

"The whole of the people, or nearly so, have their skin marked with the needle in patterns representing lions, dragons, birds and what not, done in such a way that it can never be obliterated. This work they cause to be wrought over face and neck and chest, arms and hands and belly, in short the whole body; and they look on it as a token of elegance in that those who have the largest amount of this embroidery are regarded with the greatest admiration."

Marco Polo's observations in the beginning of the fourteenth century could, at first sight, be transposed to present-day Thailand, for there are many people in the Chao Phraya basin who proudly display lions, dragons, birds and other tattoos on their bodies, and the designs can be found on the top of the skull, the neck, chest, arms, hands and sometimes on the hips and upper thigh. However, a perusal of the literature does not immediately establish an unbroken chain of religious tattooings through Ayuthaya times to the Bangkok period. Even those authors who mention the administrative marks, such as the Persian narrator and de la Loubère, do not mention any sacred designs. The latter provides a drawing of rowers, clad only in loin cloths, and from this illustration it is clear that these men had their chest, shoulders, and upper arms free from tattoos.

The lack of specific accounts on religious tattooing for Ayuthaya does not necessarily mean that the custom did not exist. It may well have been a feature in at least part of the population. It is remarkable, though, that even in the mid-nineteenth century Siam described by Mgr. Pallegoix no sacred tattooing is mentioned for central Thailand, whilst he does take good note of the fact that it
is a common practice in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Phrae and Nan, i.e. in the northern regions of present-day Thailand.32

Many accounts, for the nineteenth century and later, report a strong tattooing tradition in the Shan states, the Chiang Mai area and some parts of Laos.33 The singling out of these regions may be related to the fact that there is a rather spectacular heavy tattooing of the hips, buttocks and thighs practised there. In some cases the skin has been blackened so heavily with designs that the wearer appears, from a distance, to wear black breeches. If there was a persistent religious tattooing tradition at all in central Thailand, this may well have attracted less attention in face of the striking northern practice.

In view of Pallegoix’s silence with regard to central Thai sacred tattooing comes as a surprise to read Phya Anuman Rajadhon’s assessment of tattooing practices around the beginning of this century:34

“... most male Thai particularly among the folk, tattooed themselves for invulnerability.”

It would be a simple matter to let Phya Anuman’s view outweigh that of Pallegoix, for the former justly acquired fame for his accurate and trustworthy accounts of folk customs. Bishop Pallegoix, however, was particularly interested in recording the beliefs of the ordinary people, and he tells us specifically about some methods, other than tattooing, with which the central Thai try to become invulnerable.35 He lived for more than three decades in Thailand and has only rarely been found wrong in his observations.

Therefore it may be wiser to attempt to reconcile the two statements by surmising that the custom of religious tattooing, if it was present at all before the 1860s, was only rarely seen in central Thailand; and that this situation had dramatically changed by the turn of the century. It is possible that the rapid opening-up of the agricultural potential of the central lowlands brought significant numbers of immigrants especially from the northeast. Genealogies of some communities in Ratburi province demonstrate a considerable influx of people from the northeast more than three generations ago.36

It could therefore be proposed that in the latter part of the nineteenth century, which saw an increasingly effective domination by Bangkok over regions where tattooing undoubtedly formed part of the indigenous tradition, and during which many new rice fields were opened up with immigrant labour, the tradition of religious tattooing spread over the lowlands.37 The types of designs so popular amongst farmers in the centre supports this hypothesis, for these are remarkably similar to those described and drawn by Nguyen-Xuan-Nguyen for the Lao people.38

Moreover, the hypothesis of a relatively recent introduction of the custom via the poorest section of the population would fit in well with the low status of the custom amongst city people. A usage which gains acceptance because it is believed in by the poverty-stricken is likely to be denigrated by the more
successful, rich and long-established families. This could be yet another reason for the scarcity of literature on the subject.

The prospects for religious tattooing

There is little doubt that the traditional world view of central Thai farmers is changing rapidly. The animistic orientation is especially being challenged by modern education. In the village school it is explained in detail how rainfall comes about, how the earth moves around the sun, and the way in which plants derive nourishment from the earth. Consequently, the old myths about the sun, the moon, the power of the earth goddess, and the beliefs surrounding the rice goddess, are relegated to the level of old-fashioned fairy-tales. The spread of modern lamps has caused the realm of evil spirits to shrink, and closely related is the waning importance of the old religious lunar calendar. A farmer who feels sick can, apart from asking the help of religious agents, contact persons who administer medicine without any supernatural coating.

These are but a few of the areas in which the traditional customs and beliefs are quickly being eroded. Every year there are more farmers who do not find time to give a feast for the rice goddess, and most of them rely upon the weather forecast rather than upon the old rain-making ceremony to ensure growth in the fields. 39

It could be argued that the whole of the old-fashioned magically oriented religion is rapidly disappearing, and that a custom such as religious tattooing is therefore also doomed. Such a view is based upon the idea that in a society with technical innovation and efficiency there is hardly place for traditional religion. Whilst this may be true for certain aspects of old beliefs, it does not apply to sacred tattooing. At present, young farmers spend considerable sums of money to obtain yet further tattoos; and the ceremonies to activate the hidden forces behind the tattoos, which can be organised in the rural monasteries, draw a considerable proportion of the eligible men. At least in the region with which I am most familiar, the custom shows no sign of abating.

One reason why tattooing persists today is that many farmers still believe that there is a good chance of its being efficacious. Many of the designs are reputed to help the wearer escape troublesome situations. Some of the sacred syllables are believed to influence other people so that they will feel sympathetic towards the person who carries them. Other letter combinations will cause an enemy’s weapon to miss. There are tattoos which can increase one’s physical strength so that, for example, the wearer can easily outrun a pursuer. Many diagrams can make the skin invulnerable to bullets or the knife of an aggressor. Whenever a farmer escapes a tricky or dangerous situation, he may attribute it to the protective value of his tattoos. Even if he gets hurt, he may believe that the tattoos have prevented worse.

Religious tattooing is therefore intimately connected with the abatement of
danger and insecurity. The continued interest in this type of folk art amongst the poorer sections of the population may therefore be related to persisting feelings of uncertainty. It may be a sign of the fact that modernization does not ensure safety, social security, or a feeling of well-being among portions of the farming population. There are indications of a growing class of landless farmers who are quite worried about their future and that of their children. Even the small landed farmer is beset by recently introduced problems of raising money, trying new strains of rice, fertiliser and small-scale irrigation. The continuance of tattooing may thus be indirectly linked with problems of modernization, and it may be related to a continued interest in amulets and general astrology.

The farmer who aspires to a different way of life will sometimes refrain from being tattooed ostentatiously, or will agree with the specialist to have his sacred markings done with sesame oil instead of ink, so as not to offend the higher classes. For some of the more aggressive landless farmers, tattooing in ink may also be an act of defiance towards the urban élite -- which mildly disapproves of the custom. As such it could be a sign of a rural proletariat which realises that for them there exists no social ladder to climb. If this be true, religious tattooing may acquire a novel symbolic value which may be of interest for the social scientist of the future.

NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented during the Seventh Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, Bangkok, August 1977.


3 As far as I have been able to ascertain, there are no books on tattooing in the Thai language and the only three authors who deal with central Thai religious tattooing in some detail are Phya Anuman Rajadhon in “Thai charms and amulets”, Journal of the Siam Society, LII, 1964, 187–190; R. B. Textor, An inventory of non-Buddhist supernatural objects in a Central Thai village, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1960, 102–105; and myself in Monks and magic: an analysis of religious ceremonies in Central Thailand, London, 1976, 83–93.

4 Village life in modern Thailand, 45.

5 “Thai charms and amulets”, 187.

6 Fieldwork was carried out mainly in a rural community in Ratburi province between 1967 and 1970, for a total period of about 17 months. The fieldwork was sponsored by the Australian National University.

7 An inventory, 102–105.

8 Phya Anuman Rajadhon, Thai literature and Swasdi Raksa, National Culture Institute, Bangkok, 1953, 20.

9 Only in certain exceptional cases has tattooed skin been preserved after the death of the owner. For mainland Southeast Asia, I am aware of two instances: one from Laos (See M. Bouteiller. “Le tatouage: technique et valeur sociale ou magico-religieuse dans quelques sociétés d’Indochine (Laos, Siam, Birmanie et Cambodge)”, Bulletin de la Société d’Anthropologie, 1953, 525); and one rather gruesome case of a Burmese magician, killed in Cambodia at the end of the nineteenth century, whose skin was taken to France (See L. Jammes, Revue Indochinoise, 1900, 739–740).
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10 In this paper, Thai words are transliterated according to the General System of the Royal Institute of Thailand with the modification that long vowels are marked by a macron. Place names and personal names are given according to accepted usage.

11 Sêphû ru'ang Khun Châng Khun Phaen, Chabap Hôsamut haeng chât, Bangkok, Department of Fine Arts, 1965, 130.

12 The organization of Thai society in the early Bangkok period, 1782–1873 (Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, Data Paper 74), New York, 1969, 57.

13 The organization of Thai society, 57.

14 The Kingdom of Siam (Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints), Oxford, 1969, 79.

15 The Ship of Sulaimán (Persian Heritage Series No. 11), tr. J. O’Kane, New York, 1972, 96.

16 See H. G. Quaritch Wales’ argumentation in his Ancient Siamese government and administration, New York, 1965, 81–82.

17 Kachorn Sukhabanij, Khômûn ðhâk adît, Bangkok, 1975, 34.

18 Ibid., 31.

19 Photochâhanûkrom Thai, Bangkok, chabap không Phraephitthayâ, n.d., 1324.


21 Khômûn ðhâk adît, 42.

22 Ibid., 41.

23 Prachoom Chomchai (ed. and tr.) Chulalongkorn the Great, Tokyo, 1965, 53.

24 The salu’ng is one-fourth of a baht.

25 Soms is short for phraisom, indicating those people of a dignity mark of less than 400 who were assigned to a specific individual, other than the king.

26 Chulalongkorn the Great, 54.

27 Monks and magic, 83–84.

28 The Khôm alphabet is Cambodian writing, which in central Thailand was traditionally reserved for all sacred texts. Since the Second World War the Bangkok authorities have stopped printing sermons in Khôm, but in esoteric skills the letters are still used.

29 See the references in M. Bouteiller, “Le Tatouage”.


31 The Kingdom of Siam, opp. p. 31.


34 “Thai charms and amulets”, 171.

35 Description du royaume Thai ou Siam, II, 47.

36 Some of the preliminary evidence of D. Lauro’s demographical study of a community in Ayuthaya province is consistent with this view (personal communication, 18 May 1977).

37 The trend appears to be continuing well into this century, see for example R. B.
Textor's *From peasant to pedicab driver* (Yale University, Cultural Report no. 9), New Haven, 1961.

**“Contribution à l'étude des tatouages au Laos”, especially illustrations 3c, 12b–15h and 23–25 (torso only).**

**See my *Boeddhisme in de Praktijk*, Assen, 1977, 113–116.**