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The social logic of tattooing on visible parts of the body among young girls in Bouaké (Côte d'Ivoire)

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Abstract
This text aims to understand the meanings of the staging of girls' tattoos on the visible parts of the body in Bouaké. To do this, he questions their motivations, their perceptions of social norms on tattooing before the decision to tattoo themselves and their representations of the external gaze on their tattooed identity. The data are mainly derived from semi-structured interviews. The results first show that there is a variation in motivations which reveals an increase in a feeling of freedom for girls to have control over their bodies. Then they explain that the predispositions to tattoo oneself are declined in a differentiated interpretation of the social acceptance of tattoos. Finally, the results indicate that the intention to confront social norms and expose oneself to the risk of social exclusion is not systematically linked to the decision to tattoo oneself. But it is appreciated in a process that highlights the ability of girls to socially assume or not their new identity.

Keywords: Meaning, tattoo, young girls, social identity, Bouaké

Introduction
Tattooing is a phenomenon that is attracting a great deal of interest in the social sciences, and in socio-anthropology in particular. This interest is justified by the fact that this form of body marking has become a social phenomenon that is the subject of a manifestly growing craze (Le Breton, 1988; Aubain, 2000) [11, 13]. Admittedly, these marks on the body are not recent inventions, but it is their increasing spread among people who do not belong to any 'social organisation' that is the new deal (Lamer, 2015) [14]. Thus, in most modern societies, tattoos have gradually emerged from cultural practices and forms of rebellion to reach a new, more individualised audience, dominated by young people and adolescents (Le Breton, 1988; Lamer, 2015) [11, 14]. In these new forms, which permeate all societies, the distinctive feature of tattooing is that it is a personal act that has become commonplace, affirming the body as an individual property that can be altered as one pleases (Forgues, 2009; Lamer, 2015) [7, 14].

Following the example of modern societies, the profession of tattooist and the practice of tattooing are in vogue in most of the major cities of Côte d'Ivoire. Tattoo studios are increasingly visible in neighbourhoods. Individual markers on the body are becoming fashionable and appear to be a way of beautifying the body, a new method of seduction for men, women, young people and even teenagers. In this local context, where the representation of the female body is still socially marked, the growing interest in tattooing on visible parts of the body among young girls is attracting particular attention. Although this social category has the option of reducing tattooing to a more intimate or concealable practice, away from prying eyes, they deliberately opt to make their tattoos visible, which exposes them to social exclusion. This controversial trend in the staging of tattoos among young girls is at the heart of the study. The underlying question is: what significance do tattooed girls give to their identity in the dynamic interaction with society?

This main question is followed by the following specific questions: why do young girls decide to tattoo visible parts of their bodies? How do they perceive social norms on female tattooing when they decide to get a tattoo? How do they perceive the outside world in relation to their identity as tattooed girls?

The aim is to analyse the siginifactions of the girls' decision to expose their tattoo.

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Specifically, the aim is to (i) identify the motivational matrices of the decision to make the tattoo visible, (ii) show the girls' perceptions of social norms in relation to tattooing before getting a tattoo, (iii) determine the girls' perceptions of outside views in relation to their tattooed identity.

The article is divided into three sections: the first deals with methodology, the second presents the results and the third discusses ssion.

Methodology
Study site
The study took place in four (4) neighbourhoods in the city of Bouaké. These were Sokoura, Nimbo, Air-France 1 and Broukro. These neighbourhoods were targeted because of the presence of tattoo studios, nail salons and ladies' hairdressing salons, locally identified as frequent haunts of young girls with tattoos or those who wanted them. On the other hand, certain public places have been identified as places where tattooed girls frequent, such as markets, maquis and restaurants. In addition, the choice of several neighbourhoods was based solely on the need to be geographically representative of the city.

Data collection and analysis
The survey took place between September and December 2022. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the study targets, girls with one or more tattoos on visible parts of their bodies. By visible tattoos, we mean tattoos located on generally exposed parts of the body, whether concealable or not. Examples include fingers, feet, arms, neck, face etc. On this basis, our respondents consisted of young girls with a variety of profiles, ranging in age from 18 to 35, who lived or worked in the neighbourhoods listed. The girls were pupils, students, school dropouts, shopkeepers and housewives. They were selected on the basis of their experiences with their identity as tattooed girls. The aim was to pay particular attention to how they reacted to their socio-cultural environment.

Twenty-nine (29) tattooed girls were interviewed on three themes arising from the different research objectives, namely: the perception of the tattoo before the decision to tattoo, the motivations for the decision to tattoo on visible parts of the body, the interpretations of the judgement of others in relation to the identity of tattooed girls, the perception of the tattoo following the experience of the tattooed identity. Two tools were used to collect the data. The interview guide and the observation grid. The interview guide dealt with the motivations, the situations experienced, the interpretations and reactions to these situations, and the social expectations of the tattooed girls in relation to their tattoo. What we're looking at here is the girls' self-representation, which is constructed through interaction with others and society. In other words, it's the link between what they hoped for with their tattoos and what society's response makes them understand about their identity. The observation grid enabled us to identify the tattooed parts of the body and the type of tattoo, the style of clothing (hidden or exposed tattoo), and the facial expressions of the interviewees (indifference, a little embarrassment or assertive pride).

All the data collected was analysed, and an analysis grid was constructed in relation to the categories of respondents. The information was selected and grouped according to trends, then named and analysed. The results of this exercise are presented below.

Results
Staging the tattoo as an expression of free self-construction
The interviews show that the girls we interviewed basically feel completely free to get tattoos on the visible parts of their bodies. At the time of the decision, the girls said they didn't care what other people thought, implicitly showing that they were in control of their own bodies. This feeling of freedom, which was unanimously shared, gave rise to an apparent self-identity in the girls, the justifications for which varied from one girl to another. That said, five main justifications emerged from the interviews: tattooing as an imitation, tattooing as an expression of affection, tattooing as an expression of a temporal event, tattooing as an affirmation of identity and tattooing as a consumer product on the market.

Imitation tattooing refers to the action of respondents who tattoo themselves simply for the pleasure of imitating close friends, celebrities or other people. According to the girls who said they tattooed for imitation, they decided to reproduce the various tattoos on their bodies out of passion or fashion. These tattooed girls do not give a socio-historical meaning to their tattoo. They see the act of tattooing as a spontaneous way of expressing their freedom to dispose of their bodies, but also of recognising themselves in these people who are role models for them.

Tattooing out of affection is also seen as a way of showing special affection for a loved one. Some girls say they have had tattoos to show their love for people they care about. This is the case of one respondent who had an image of her son tattooed on her arm to express her love for him: "I got this tattoo for my son, he's my reason for being [...] can you blame a mum who has a heart tattooed with her son's name? Other girls said they had done it to pay tribute to a loved one who had died, or to express their sincere apologies to a loved one they had hurt. For example, one respondent, who had a tattoo of a picture with her mother's name engraved underneath, said she had done it to apologise to her mother for the wrong she had done her:

"My mum was angry with me because I used to disrespect her when she was giving me advice [...] so she decided not to speak to me anymore. To make amends, I decided to get her name tattooed on my arm and I wrote 'Mum, I love you'" (Eliane, 23 years old).

Tattoos are also seen as an affirmation of a new identity that sets them apart from others. Some of the girls interviewed clearly showed the link between their tattoos and a new identity through which they wanted to distinguish themselves from others at all costs. It's a way for them to exist, to stand out and to regain a certain self-confidence that comes from belonging to a social or professional category. Some of them said that they never regretted getting a tattoo and that it was a personal and considered decision: "I like my tattoo too much...they can say I look like a prostitute, it slides on me...but I like my tattoo too much" (Miriam, 26 years old). In the same vein, another said: "I can't deal with other people's moods. My tattoos are already there, so whoever wants them can have them, and whoever doesn't want them is their own problem. Not everyone can love you in life. Those who love me as I am are already enough for me" (Awa, 22 years old).

Tattooing is also an ordinary act of consuming a product that meets with the satisfaction of these targets. For girls, the promotion of celebrities with tattoos on their bodies through the public and digital media has helped to demystify and legitimise tattooing for women. Visibility is the key to the consumption of tattoos as a legitimately acquired commodity on the market, as these girls attest:

"It's because I've seen it on people, on my artists, that I like it. So if I pay with my money, it's so that people can see it on me too" (Sabine, 24 years old); "Tattooing is something that everyone does now [...] if you put your money in and then no one sees your tattoo, it's as if you haven't done anything. You either do it or you don't" (Aminata, 25 years old).

It's a way of saying that it would be inconceivable for his financial investment in tattooing to remain in the shadows, since it would be considered a loss. According to this trend, exposing tattoos is an ordinary act motivated by the need to enhance the value of a product that has required investment in order to satisfy a need.

We can conclude that the motivations for tattooing that have been listed are not isolated from each other. What they have in common is the desire to express a certain freedom and personal satisfaction. However, the ideology and conviction underpinning this freedom to dispose of one's body remains one of the determining factors in understanding young girls' decisions.

Staging the tattoo as a reflection of an illusion of the collapse of social constraints

The interviews revealed that all the girls interviewed had tattooed as a conscious or unconscious act of voluntary exclusion. Their perception and interpretation of social norms at the time of their decision is therefore essential to understanding the convictions behind their choice. At first sight, the act of making their tattoo visible gives the impression that the young girls are expressing a conviction to confront local social norms that are more or less hostile to female tattooing. However, the data reveals that a significant proportion of the girls did not feel that they were confronting social norms. As a result, they feel that they are not necessarily prepared to deal with a certain level of hostility from the outside world. Two trends emerged in the tattooed girls' perception of social norms. For some, their tattooed identity seemed compatible with their social identity before they decided to get a tattoo. Others, much more aware of the risks of social exclusion, felt more able to assume their new identity in social interactions. There were three reasons why girls decided to get tattoos. The traditional and digital media, the representation of certain tattoos as compatible with social identity and the underestimation of social constraints.

Traditional and digital media

For some of the girls interviewed, the media have played down tattooing to make it legitimate. They said that their interest in tattooing had been strongly influenced by the media, which regularly promote the practice. Some say they discovered tattoo styles and forms on social networks and learned to contemplate them both from local celebrities and from people close to them via web publications. Others say they have been struck by the generosity of the comments made by Internet users, which suggest a popular support for tattooing:

"On social networks and even on television, it's tattooed people who are celebrated, they're the ones who are admired today because they're stars. Tattooing is no longer a secret to anyone, so I don't understand people who behave like old people towards girls with tattoos". (Awa, 22 years old)

On reading this verbatim, we can see that the traditional and social media have greatly contributed to trivialising the practice of tattooing. This favourable media environment for tattooing is interpreted as social acceptance of female tattooing. From this point of view, the decision to tattoo certainly appears to be a deliberate but more or less unconscious act of exclusion. The intention to assert oneself by confronting social norms is not explicit.

Categorisation and classification of tattoo styles from least to most compatible with social identity

One of the strong ideas to emerge from the interviews is that there is a subjective and discriminatory categorisation of the forms and styles of tattoos within the tattooed girls themselves. According to some of the girls, the feeling of compatibility between their identity as a tattooed girl and their social identity is based on two elements: the positive meaning that the shape of certain tattoos has for them, and the reconstruction of the acceptance of tattoos by their inner circle as a systematic form of social acceptance.

For these girls, the feeling of social acceptance of their tattoo is sought not in the eyes of others but in their own representation of it. It's an imaginary process which consists of projecting the "positive" representation they have of their tattoo as an objective social reality. So, according to some girls, tattoos should be judged according to their nature and meaning. From this point of view, while they find it normal for some tattoos to be the subject of social trial, others should be admired. Thus, according to their logic, tattoos that express the love of a child or a loved one and that take the form of a sign accompanied by writing engraved on the skin should not be subject to condemnation:

"There are even some weird tattoos, when you see it it's really weird... but for me there I've written my son's name in a heart to express my love for him. I don't think you can reproach a mother for the way she says she loves her child, can you?" (Elodie, 30 years old).

By projecting their own representation of their tattoo, this category of young girls do not see in their act a desire to assert an identity, but the expression of a legitimate feeling expressed in a different form. Hence their astonishment at seeing their tattoo lumped in with other tattoos that they themselves describe as bizarre (vulgar). According to this reading, a hierarchy of tattoos from "good" to "less good" would make it possible to rank judgements from the condemnable to the less condemnable.

For others, the feeling of social acceptance of tattooing results from a tendency to reduce the gaze of society to that of their inner circle. By "inner circle" we mean the people around them, such as friends and relatives, who share their new identity to a greater or lesser extent. From this point of view, the comments made by close friends and family about tattooing fuel their interest in tattooing and give legitimacy to the act of getting a tattoo: "At home, almost everyone has a tattoo, and I also have friends with tattoos, so I thought it shouldn't be a problem" (Ines, 28). This reductive view of opinion outside the immediate family was a key factor in their decision to expose their tattoos. However, these girls recognise that this feeling of compatibility does not negate

the reservations that some people may have. But above all, this feeling reassured them that they were not necessarily exposing themselves to social exclusion.

Underestimation of social constraints
Well aware of the risks of discrimination to which they could be subjected, some tattooed girls say that they initially chose to "confront" social norms by deciding to get a tattoo. They have engaged in a power struggle based on an overestimation of their capacity for resilience. For her, it's a question of making people understand that social dynamics need to be integrated into a globalised world where cultures interpenetrate. However, they will soon be disillusioned. The marginalisation they experienced in public places, especially in certain social spheres to which they belonged, such as religion, family and school, became increasingly unbearable. The confidence they once had in their ability to cope with social stigma is now being replaced by a sense of regret, even though they feel obliged to assume their new identity as tattooed girls.

The tattoo and the gaze of others: between desired identity and assumed identity
The objective representations that young girls with tattoos make of their tattoos are part of an interactional dynamic that assesses the conviction of an identity claim or an individual, emotional act of self-identity. There are two trends: girls who consciously or unconsciously renounce this identity in their confrontation with society. Then there is the trend for girls who fully assert their tattooed identity.

Desired identity or the illusion of an unassumed identity conviction
While for some girls the tattoo on their body is an unconscious act of voluntary exclusion, for others it is a conscious act. The difference is that these girls' conviction about their identity is rather illusory, since they do not fully assume their new identity in social interactions. There are two distinct tendencies among these girls: those who renounce their tattooed identity, and those who assume their new identity without asserting or claiming it.
The first trend concerns girls who, for various reasons, can no longer stand the tattooed identity they once wanted. These girls express regret about their decision. For most of them, this regret comes under pressure from certain spheres of life (family, school, work, religious community) or in relation to certain issues such as employment or marriage. This is the case for some girls who admit to having taken the decision to get a tattoo either out of immaturity or without having taken certain social issues into account. On this subject, a young tattooed shopkeeper confided:
 "I was unconscious when I got the tattoo, it was a childhood mistake [...] it hurts me what people think of me in my religious community and in associations, even if they don't say it in front of me. It's true that I'm tattooed, but I'm not that kind of girl". (Marlene, 27 years old).
In the same vein, another said: "What people say about my tattoo doesn't mean anything to me now. The only thing that scares me and makes me regret my tattoo is when people tell me that men won't want to marry me because of my tattoo [...] but I pray to God for that" (Makadi, 31 years old)
For others, regretting their tattoo stems from forms of social reprobation in public that they find unbearable. These forms of verbal or non-verbal stigma are difficult to deal with,

especially for girls who are less prepared to face hostile situations in public places. These hostile behaviours cause them to withdraw*:*
"One day when I was going to the market, people were staring at me so much I felt ashamed and went home to change. Now I only wear short-sleeved clothes at night". (Eveline, 18 years old); "when I walk down the street, people often call me a 'fille de joie' [...] it really hurts when people say that to me, I often cry alone in my room [...] I often have to wear a long dress to hide all my tattoos, it hurts, it really hurts" (Emiliène, 24 years old).
Under the impact of various social stigmas, these girls tend to renounce their new identity. This renunciation can be seen in practices such as hiding tattoos and adopting particular styles of dress during the day or at night. These girls also say they are reluctant to encourage their friends and family to get tattoos on visible parts of their bodies. In so doing, they underline the importance of lifting the veil on the illusion of self-identity based on the interactional realities of tattooed identity in the local context.
The second trend concerns girls who are not very proud of their tattoo, but who take full responsibility for it. These girls don't hide their tattoos in the face of stigma. Instead, they tend to mobilise the emotional resources they draw from the positive energies of their social network. For example, they call on the attention of people who accept them and who are just as important in their lives, as a source of comfort in the face of social disapproval: "I know that people criticise me...to err is human and thank God I have a husband and my tattoo doesn't bother him...my mother also ended up accepting so that's the most important thing for me". (Madoussou, 34 years old).
For this category of girl, confrontation with others reveals that tattooing is the product of an intention asserted through an individual act. So we're talking about a self-identity that is clearly different from a claimed identity conviction. Here the tattooed person's identity remains at the level of intention or wish (desired identity) and not of affirmation or claim (assumed identity).

Staging the tattoo as an assumed identity conviction
While a significant proportion of the girls surveyed do not assert their tattooed identity in social interactions, others do so openly. Their attachment to their identity as a tattooed girl is a commitment that is easily seen in their determination to assert themselves when confronted by outsiders. This desire to assert themselves can be seen in the clothing choices they make to make the symbol of their new identity more visible. For example, the girls with concealable tattoos said they wore provocative clothing to make their tattoos more visible. At the same time, those with less concealable tattoos are content to display a certain pride and enthusiasm in showing off their tattoo in public places. In both cases, this category of girls reveals a sense of well-being in belonging to the big family of tattooed girls.
During the discussions, they expressed a freedom that goes beyond simple self-representation. They said they were not intimidated by the social disapproval they experienced in their surroundings and in public places. Most of the women who took part in the survey work in professional environments that are favourable to female tattooing, particularly bars. For example, one young student told us that it was necessary for her to have a tattoo in her line of work, as she is a waitress in a bar. According to her, the

realities of this profession make tattoos a major asset: "It's normal for a waitress in our bar to have a tattoo, we don't need saints there [...] for the moment I don't intend to get another tattoo, but if the opportunity arises I'll do it without hesitation" (Corine, 26 years old).

In these cases, the assertion of the tattooed girl's identity is legitimised by membership of a professional field, or of social groups that practise or value the practice of tattooing. In fact, this category of girls proudly asserts their tattooed identity and undertakes to confront social norms.

Discussion

This study revealed responses in line with the objectives of the study. Thus, with regard to the objective relating to the motivation of tattooed girls, we note a variation in individual motivations. These highlight the rise of individualism, with a growing sense of freedom to dispose of their bodies and use them as they please. As far as the second objective is concerned, we can see that tattooing is certainly voluntary, but with no systematic intention of confronting or breaking with social norms. This result is important because it shows a variation in the ideological and mental predispositions that guide the girls' decision to get a tattoo. The results relating to the third objective show varied trends that can be grouped into two categories: the category of girls who assume their tattooed identity in social relationships and those who do not.

The results of the first objective are confirmed by local studies. The work of Tonga and Kapé (2020) [15] shows that tattooing by young people (girls and boys) is an expression of a form of identity claim. The sense of self-building through young people's freedom to dispose of their bodies is well confirmed in our fieldwork. The difference here is that the third result reveals a nuance. The claim to identity is sometimes illusory and only concerns some of the girls surveyed. This is all the more true given that confronting a significant proportion of them with the outside world shows that their identity remains at an individual level. This is because they are unable to assume it in the face of the restrictive power of social norms.

From this point of view, this third result is in line with the analysis of Dubet (1994) [4] and Admirat (2010) [1] who believe that the meaning of girls' tattoos varies between a desired identity (individual) and an assumed identity (social identity) depending on social experience. This thesis is also supported by Le Breton (2010) [17] who insists above all on the relationship to the norm (conformity or non-conformity) and on the interplay of affiliations when analysing the behaviour of tattooed people. Borel (1992) [16] considers that contemporary brands act as identity affiliation cards, whatever the nature of the group to which they refer. Similarly, Maertens (1978) [12] argues that tattoos serve to inscribe group membership in the rough contours of the excluded and marginalised. Consequently, the construction of identity depends to a large extent on the recognition of others, because identity itself is the internalized perception that others have of us (Le Breton; 1988; Forgues, 2011) [11, 6].

In view of the foregoing, tattooing cannot systematically signify a claim to or reclamation of identity. For this to be the case, it must be possible to show that this individual identity is assumed in social interactions (Le Breton, 2002) [9]. As a result, while young girls are driven by a sense of freedom to dispose of their bodies, they are not systematically aware that they are defying social norms, and even when this is the case, they do not always manage to accept it.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted a variation in the meanings of tattoo exposure, which helps to put into perspective the generalised preconceptions of young girls' decision to get tattoos as part of an emancipatory surge aimed consciously and systematically at confronting social norms, in a perspective of absolute identity claim. But the reality on the ground is far more complex than these over-globalising projections, which deny the sometimes far more important particularities. We can see that the meanings of tattooing are more a question of intension and claim, self-identity and social identity, conscious voluntary exclusion and unconscious voluntary exclusion, depending on whether or not it is assumed in the relationship with others.

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