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BODY BIOGRAPHIES: A STUDY OF APPRENTICESHIP AND EMBODIED EXPERIENCE AMONG TATTOO ARTISTS IN MEXICO

Biografie ciała: studium nauki rzemiosła i ucieleśniania doświadczenia wśród meksykańskich artystów tatuażu

Abstract. Based on the author's long-term fieldwork experience in Mexico, this article describes the apprenticeship experience of tattoo artists. It deals with the learning process of a craft, how artists develop skills and techniques, and how they share their knowledge with others. The text argues that the solidarity that the tattoo community creates passes not only through the relationship between artists and clients but also through the exchange and reciprocity between professionals through the mutual inking of their bodies, in what the author calls body biographies. The article also depicts the importance of social media in promoting an artist's work and how a person becomes an expert or a professional. Finally, it analyzes the growing popularity of tattoos in Mexico and the saturated market it creates, where artists compete for clients, prestige, and money.

Keywords: apprenticeship, art, body, economy, experience, social media, solidarity, tattoos

Streszczenie. Opierając się na wieloletnim doświadczeniu autora w pracy w terenie w Meksyku, ten artykuł opisuje doświadczenie zawodowe tatuatorów. Zajmuje się procesem uczenia się rzemiosła, tym, jak artyści rozwijają umiejętności i techniki oraz jak dzielą się swoją wiedzą z innymi. Tekst argumentuje, że solidarność, jaką tworzy społeczność tatuażu, przechodzi nie tylko przez relacje między artystami a klientami, ale także przez wymianę i wzajemność między profesjonalistami poprzez wzajemne tuszowanie ich ciał, w tym, co autor nazywa biografiami ciała. Artykuł przedstawia również znaczenie mediów społecznościowych w promowaniu twórczości artysty oraz to, jak dana osoba staje się ekspertem lub profesjonalistą. Wreszcie analizuje rosnącą popularność tatuaży i nasycony przez nią rynek, na którym artyści rywalizują o klientów, prestiż i pieniądze.

Słowa kluczowe: nauka rzemiosła, sztuka, ciało, ekonomia, doświadczenie, media społecznościowe, solidarność, tatuaże

Introduction

My first experience with a tattoo artist was back in 1995. I was a teenager, and tattoo studios or parlors were rare in Mexico City and expensive. In my childhood neighborhood of Villa Coapa, located in the south, however, I had a friend who claimed to be a tattoo artist and inked people at his home. His nickname was Lua; he was a punk rocker, a self-taught tattoo artist who learned his trade from magazines and his experience practicing daily with his clients. He may not have been the best artist in town, but he was dedicated and offered an option to individuals who did not have the resources to get a “proper” tattoo in the expensive parlors. I got my first two tattoos with him, paying a symbolic fare. Most of my friends followed suit and got their tattoos with him, too. Suffice it to say that over time, my tattoos did not look great, and finally, in 2010 and 2014 I got them covered. I lost contact with Lua in the early 2000s. However, when I walk through my old neighborhood on a hot spring day, I can spot

some people my age or older still showing some tattoos made by Lua in the 1990s, which have resisted the passing of time.

I tell this story because the situation today in Mexico, but also in many cities of the world, is very different. Tattoo parlors and artists abound and compete in a saturated market. In Mexico City, new studios open their doors every year, and some close or merge with others. The tattoo culture in Mexico has grown exponentially in the last decade, and it has turned into a hierarchical community marked by status, elitism, and exclusion, mirroring the stratified configuration of Mexican society. On the one hand, there are famous artists with peculiar nicknames like “Dr. Lakra”¹ (Jerónimo López Ramírez, son of the late Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo), “Piraña”, “Chanok”, and Wilson Posada, who were members of the collective *Dermafilia* in the middle of the 1990s, and who have a long trajectory and influence in the Mexican tattoo scene, even if some of them do not live permanently in Mexico, like Posada. On the other hand, some artists have their studios in their homes in middle-class and lower-class neighborhoods, and many more do not work full-time as tattoo artists or have just started tattooing recently.

It is difficult to give a detailed account of the tattoo community in Mexico, and even the concept of community is debatable as the limits of what constitutes it are not clear. It involves artists, tattooed persons, and owners of magazines and supplies; all are part of this subculture, but it is by no means homogenous. However, despite the differences and divisions, a sense of solidarity and communion exists between artists and consumers of tattoos.

Still, the history and anthropology of tattoos in Mexico are a work in progress. In this article, I focus mainly on the apprenticeship process of tattoo artists in Mexico. My interest centers on how they learned their art, got their knowledge about tattooing, and perfected their craft. In essence, this article addresses the question of how a person becomes an expert through practice and how they transmit and share their knowledge with

¹ The urban legend around the “Dr.” title of “Lakra” is that he used to carry a briefcase with his tattoo tools whenever he had an appointment, just like doctors visiting their patients.

aspiring tattoo artists. Basic anthropological inquiries appear here, like the conformation of a tradition, the accumulation of knowledge and techniques, the visual and sensual appeal of the body, the experience of pain, and the mystical and spiritual connotations of tattoos.

My theoretical approach is based on the anthropology of ritual, experience, and performance of embodied practices, popularized by authors like Victor Turner (1985, 1991), Paul Stoller (1989), Thomas Csordas (1997, 2002), and David Le Breton (2013). The framework of what could be called an anthropology of skills and embodied knowledge also benefits from the insights developed by Tim Ingold. In this sense, experience, skills, and embodied practices appear under a phenomenological perspective, which attempts to show the importance and meaning of tattoos in culture beyond a sociological simplified explanation.

The methodology implemented in this article draws on my long-term involvement in the tattoo scene in Mexico for more than twelve years. It is based on my participation in tattoo conventions, multiple tattoo sessions with artists as a client, and following the lives of tattoo artists for more than ten years. Long-term fieldwork in urban settings of your own culture allows developing a different kind of awareness of cultural practices, a slow-knowledge approach that takes years to assimilate and understand, as Paul Stoller has argued recently (Stoller 2020), but which provides a more in-depth approach to the development of anthropological insights about embodied practices. The perspective of the artists presented here is by no means representative of all the tattoo culture in Mexico, it offers only a window to what anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (1974) have referred to as the “Native’s point of view”. This methodological strategy is inspired by the works of Victor Turner (1991) on ritual (whose main informant was a “local” ritual expert, Muchona), Paul Stoller (1989) (who became a sorcerer’s apprentice), and the embodied study of charismatic healers by Thomas Csordas (1997). It is through practice, participant observation, and commitment to the artist’s perspective that it is possible to draw an ethnographically driven theoretical approach from the bottom up and not the other way around.

It is important to mention that anthropological works on tattoos tend to focus on the client's perspective. Sociological and communication science works have followed this trend by trying to delve into the causes, meanings, and symbolism of certain tattoos that people have. Although the client's perspective is relevant, I argue that the view of the artist is also essential in getting an understanding of the tattoo culture today. In this sense, the artist-client relationship becomes an indissoluble pair that signals the process of ephemeral interactions that culminate in intimate, fluid body biographies². I argue that these inked biographies become a roadmap for the self.

The first section of the article describes general aspects of the anthropology of tattooing, the history of this art, and the development of the tattoo culture in Mexico. The second section deals with the process of apprenticeship of tattooing as part of an embodied experiential practice, where tattoo sessions represent performative public acts and painful rites of passage for clients and moments of innovation for the artists. The third section connects the process of apprenticeship of tattoo artists with their experiences with their clients and how a bodily biography emerges from this relationship. The fourth and final section focuses on the commercial side of the tattoo culture, and the fierce competition artists face in a saturated market.

The Art of Tattooing

The practice of tattooing, according to Aaron Deter-Wolf and Lars Krutak, appears in numerous archaeological records. They argue that tattooing as a decoration dates back to the Fourth Millennium (Krutak and Deter-Wolf 2017: 3). Therefore, it is an ancient practice that has existed all over the planet. It is not exclusive to a region or a particular culture,

² Tattoos are not permanent. As Sinah Teres Kloß mentions: "They change and disappear when people die. They are transformed in shape and intensity on human bodies over time, for example as a result of aging, and are frequently reworked, removed, covered, or extended" (Kloß 2020: 3).

and there is not one exclusive place of origin. Archaeological evidence is based on skin remains in mummified human remains, in skin preservation, in graphically documented records, and in the tools discovered to make tattoos (Krutak and Deter-Wolf 2017: 5-6).

There is always the question of why cultures practice tattooing as decoration or as a religious or political symbol of power and social identification. There is no simple explanation and no such thing as a unilinear historical or evolutionary development of tattoos. In the social imaginary of modernity, we could portray a development from ancient cultures, passing through indigenous and tribal people, and finally arriving in the tattoo practices in the West today. This is a fictional narrative that does not correspond with reality. There is no such thing as “a history of tattoos”; multiple overlapping histories exist. Some of the narratives about tattoos are told to justify a new tradition for a community.

For instance, in her work *Bodies of Inscription* (2000), Margo DeMello argues that the development of specific tattoo representations in the culture of the United States operates under the narrative of an evolutionary process that goes from tribal non-Western societies to the appropriation of tattoos in America in the early Twentieth Century. She says:

In the case of non-native American tattooing, the tradition first came from the islands of Polynesia within the context of colonialism, then was adapted by various subcultures within the working class, and was once more reinvented in the 1980s, primarily by middle-class artists and wearers. Through each step of this evolution and re-invention, the participants must rework the tradition to make it fit the sensibilities of the new community. (DeMello 2000: 11).

For DeMello, the narratives of tattoo artists and clients correspond to recent developments of a cultural change that made tattoos more accessible and fashionable among the American middle-class since the 1980s. However, the evolutionary view of tattoos differs in Europe. Gemma Angel (2017) mentions that the European gaze on non-Western tattoo practices unavoidably confronts its prejudices about otherness (Angel 2017: 107). The tattoo collections in different museums, like the Wellcome Collection

in London, one of the most important in the world, contain the material culture of tattoos, meaning the preserved skin of tattooed people and artifacts for the inking process. However, Gemma Angel points out the lack of archival information about tattoos, at least in the Nineteenth Century (Angel 2017: 108). Just recently, academics have been trying to overcome the exoticism of otherness in the analysis of tattoos and body decoration and have moved away from a straightforward, unilinear historical narrative about this art.

Today, if it is possible to portray an “evolution” of tattoos, this relates to techniques and tools (utensils, machines, pigments, needles, and aftercare treatment). This imaginary trajectory traces a line that goes from the use of single hand-poke techniques popular in Japan and other Asian countries, passing through coil machines (commonly used during the Twentieth Century), and finally arriving in complex lightweight rotary systems like the Stigma Rotary machines invented in the first decade of the Twenty-First Century³. Techniques bring refinement and help tattoo artists; however, this doesn’t mean that artists depend exclusively on advanced tools to perfect their craft. The wide range of techniques used to create a particular tattoo style (an artist’s “signature”) relate to multiple factors, like prestige, more “authentic” and “ancestral” methods and procedures, the demands of clients, and individual preferences.

In Mexico, academic tattoo research focuses less on its indigenous pre-Hispanic origins and more on its urban development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Although there is archaeological evidence of the uses of body paint and tattoos in human remains found in Oaxaca and the Yucatán Peninsula, archaeologists like Enrique Vela argue that the evidence is scant and more work needs to be done, particularly in the analysis of ceramic humanoid figures depicting lines and decoration, in mural painting, and stone engraving (Vela 2010).

The anthropological and historical studies about tattoos in Mexico haven’t attracted many specialists. Research interests lie with art historians,

³ See the description on the Sigma Website explaining the rotary system designed to adjust soft and hard-hitting of needles in a matter of seconds: <https://www.stigma-rotary.com/about-stigma/>

journalists, activists, dermatologists, doctors, and tattoo artists themselves. Experts in criminalistic science and anatomy provided the first known works about tattoos in Mexico, according to Álvaro Rodríguez Luévano (2016). The pioneering work of Francisco Martínez Baca (1899) is, perhaps, the most known work. He was a military physician who did research on prisons in the state of Puebla and wrote the first book about tattoos in Mexico in 1889 called *Tattoos: A Psychological and Legal-Medic Study with Criminals and the Military* (See, Luévano 2016: 112; and Martínez Baca 1899). Martínez Baca kept correspondence with the famous Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who was the leading figure in tattoo research at the time. According to Rodríguez Luevano (2016: 115), Martínez Baca thought that through the analysis of tattoos in penitentiaries, it was possible to deduce the degree of moral degradation of individuals. For him, tattoos belonged exclusively to the lower criminal classes, and by making a registry of the tattooed people, it was possible to guess their origins and association with gangs. His theory got into methodological difficulties as tattoos also proliferated in the military. There, soldiers used tattoos as a form of identification, and by no means did this translate into moral degradation. Martínez Baca ended up creating spurious classifications of tattoos in both contexts, the military and prisons, related to the psychological character of individuals. Due to his prejudices, he also did not delve into the tattoo artists themselves, for him, they were just rudimentary technicians with no skills, prisoners who tattooed people just to kill time.

Despite his shortcomings, his classification also helped him to distinguish motives, figures, religious adscriptions, and ethnic belonging through tattoos. Rodríguez Luevano mentions that most of the tattoos registered by Martínez Baca were rudimentary, with poor aesthetics, and used low-quality materials (Rodríguez Luévano 2016: 123-124). Martínez Baca's book set a precedent for tattoo research in Mexico. However, it inevitably contributed to the stigmatization and discrimination of tattooed persons. This stigma hasn't completely disappeared and still exists in certain contexts of Mexican society.

Approximately twenty-five years ago, more investigations in Mexico carried out by anthropologists, psychologists, science communication

experts, and sociologists appeared which focused on contemporary urban tattoo culture. At the same time, more tattoo artists began to express their own views on tattoos in magazines, narratives, and interviews. The interest in some of these works turns around the tattooed people, their styles, the use of tattoos as a form of social identity, the psychological reasons for having inked art in their bodies, and the impact of tattoos in society (Perdigón Castañeda y Robles Aguirre 2019; Priego Díaz 2022; Rojas Bolaños 2009).

For instance, Samira Rojas Bolaños focuses on the notion of stigma and the psychological impact it has on tattooed people. Her research demonstrated that in certain professional occupations in Mexico, like doctors, lawyers, social workers, and psychologists, tattooed persons are still linked to criminality, even more so if the tattoos lack quality (Rojas Bolaños 2009: 72-73). Melissa Priego Díaz, on the other hand, focuses on the gradual acceptance of tattoos and how artists have contributed to such acceptance. She describes how tattoos become commodified as art in social media, and the interventions of bodies can carry certain altruism, like tattoos offered for free to women who have experienced breast cancer to cover their scars (Priego Díaz 2022: 7). Finally, Katia Perdigón y Bernardo Robles analyze the tattoos related to the cult of the Santa Muerte in Mexico City. Their research focuses on the different reasons people give to have tattoos of the Santa Muerte in visible parts of their bodies. It shows that tattoos are part of a religious devotion that provides direct protection to individuals. Here, tattooed images are seen as part of a global phenomenon of acceptance in society of the Santa Muerte cult, which exists not only in Mexico but also in many parts of the United States. Among tattoo artists who write about their profession in Mexico, topics range from the popularization of tattoos today to consumerism, cultural appropriation, and their own personal histories. Famous artists like “Dr. Lakra” often give interviews in newspapers and have exhibited their artistic works as painters in different national and international galleries. Tattoo artists have become the main producers of discourses about tattoos today, although these narratives do not derive strictly from academic publications.

How to Learn a Craft: Tattoos as Embodied Contemporary Rituals

Although there is no evidence to claim an “evolutionary” approach to tattoos, the division between the study of non-Western and “contemporary” tattoos mirrors the classic distinctions between the “primitive” and the “modern” perceptions of the body. On the one hand, tattoos in indigenous settings like those studied by Alfred Gell or evoked by Claude Lévi-Strauss on the Māori (but also in his analysis of face painting in the Amazon) belong to cultures where tattoos or body decoration and modification are part of a collective enterprise, and it is not a matter of individual choice; there is a ritual and even religious component that signifies identity, social belonging, and change of status as David Le Breton has argued recently (Le Breton 2013: 13). The often-quoted remark of Lévi-Strauss concerning the Māori, stress the value and power of the collective over the individual, he says: “The purpose of Maori tattooing is not only to imprint a drawing onto the flesh but also to stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group” (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 257).

On the other hand, tattoos in contemporary societies appear as a matter of personal choice, often dislocated from a territory or place of origin, and sometimes imprinted as a form of reappropriation of a lost tradition. David Le Breton argues that the tattoo artist hovers above culture and becomes a shaman of modern times as he can connect through his art different settings and cultural traditions (Le Breton, 2013: 41). Modifying the quote of Lévi-Strauss mentioned above, we could argue that a contemporary tattoo artist stamps in the mind of the tattooed a set of hybrid traditions selected from deterritorialized references.

Pain is a quality inherent in tattoos. It is inescapable and represents a temporary inner sacrifice. It is localized singularly in the person; therefore, it is a highly individualized act. In contemporary urban settings like Mexico City, the experience of pain is a choice that the tattooed accepts, and it signifies a rite of passage. Pain is what makes the process of getting a tattoo a contemporary ritual art form. As Le Breton mentions, pain anticipates change, a metamorphosis that the new tattoo brings to a person (Le Breton 2013: 33). The artist understands pain as he or she has tattoos,

too. It is very rare to find a tattooist who does not have tattoos. Therefore, there is a shared body experience between the artist and his clients. This momentary bond, which lasts until the piece is done, stays in the memory of the person getting the tattoo, and for the artists, it becomes a further development in their craft and proof of their expertise. The process of getting a tattoo turns into a liminal experience intensified by localized pain. As Victor Turner mentions, liminality is an in-between state marked by ambiguity, social invisibility, lack of status, and camaraderie in the ritual process (Turner 1991). Getting involved in a tattoo session means subjecting oneself to a liminal, intense body experience where pain is predominant. For some hours, the subject is left in the hands of the artist, so there must be mutual trust between the parties. The artist, on the other hand, needs to be careful not to make mistakes, so concentration is paramount.

If modern tattoos constitute personal neo-rituals, then the tattoo artist symbolizes the role of the religious leader in initiation rituals. He or she is the conveyor of knowledge, transformation, and permanence inscribed into others. His role is like the charismatic healer described by Thomas Csordas, where such a healer is a channel that controls the body experience of participants (Csordas 1997). The cultural phenomenology of healing in religious settings has other kinds of connotations and motivations. However, tattoo artists sometimes heal other persons through tattoos, covering scars, signifying important moments of their lives, and marking, sometimes forever, a memory in time through pain.

Therefore, there is a legitimate anthropological question about the cultural importance of tattoo artists, how they have become skilled professionals whose craft has changed drastically in the last thirty years, and whose work remains in high demand. In Mexico City, the most famous tattooists have a background in arts, graphic design, or visual arts. Some are self-taught, like “Dr. Lakra”, born in 1972, who says, “I started just drawing. At school, I liked to draw a lot. I did comics, and then I entered the Friday Workshop at Gabriel Orozco’s house, where he taught painting. At the same time, I started tattooing. A friend started tattooing me, and I saw that the machine was very easy to make. Then, in the late 80s and early 90s, I started tattooing other friends. So, since everything went

a little hand in hand, I was doing painting, drawing, comics, tattoo, I don't have it so separated" (López Ramírez 2018).

Wilson Posada, for instance, began tattooing in 1994 when he joined the collective *Dermafilia*. He learned his craft with the people of the collective, and his uncle taught him jewelry too. In 2007, he moved to San Francisco, California. Apart from being a tattoo artist, he is also a musician and won the legal battle to use the name "*Dermafilia*" in his art collective (Valencia 2014).

"Chanok", another of the most famous Mexican artists in Mexico City, who started tattooing in the middle of the 1990s, is also a self-taught person. He said in an interview for the website *Tattoo Life*:

When I started, I didn't know anything about tattoos. I had seen it done and thought I could do it too since I knew how to draw... A lot of the Punk iconography that we used came from the blue *Tattoo Time* (*Music & Sea Tattoos*). We copied designs out of the few magazines we could get, gangster stuff too "street style", images of the Virgin, skulls, etc... Getting books, colors, or even just some good advice was very difficult back then but conventions started happening in Mexico and that began to open things up. That's when we could meet other artists, watch them work, get tattooed, and buy supplies.⁴

Interviews with other tattoo artists offer similar responses. In the case of Marco "Panké" Nicolat, he transitioned from skateboarding to tattoos in an almost natural way. He was part of a family of artists; his deceased father was a famous painter who lived in Oaxaca for many years, and his two brothers were also artists and were interested in tattoos and mural painting. Marco told me he began learning about tattoos with his friend Iván, who had been living in Berlin since the late nineties. Marco decided in 2007 that he wanted to learn for real about the art of tattooing so he could make a living from it, as he was growing old and was piling injuries from skateboarding. He tried his luck and decided to make Berlin his home. Although he did not start his learning process in Mexico, he

⁴ <https://www.tattoolife.com/a-great-interpretation-of-traditional-style-by-el-chanok/>

regularly traveled to his home country and there he got to know many tattoo artists in places like Mexico City, Queretaro, and Guadalajara. He owes his expertise to the help of Iván, who began tattooing in the late 1990s in Mexico City.

In the case of Alfredo Chavarria, he studied visual arts at the ENAP (Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas⁵) in the late 1990s. He was always interested in drawings, the culture of comics (he is a big fan), and design. In an interview he gave for the YouTube channel La Casa del Tatuador (Tattoo Artist House) in March 2023, he mentions that he learned about tattoos from his friend Rodrigo López de Lara (Roy)⁶. Through Roy's influence, Alfredo became involved and interested in tattoos from a creative perspective. Roy gave Alfredo his first inked piece in 1998, a tribal design. Alfredo tried his luck in different graphic design firms where he worked as a freelancer illustrator until that work almost dried up, and he had to do something else, so he began working as a sales assistant and tattoo apprentice in Tatuajes México at the trendy Colonia Roma neighborhood, where his friend Roy worked at the time. Tatuajes México was a studio and a shop that sold materials, tools, and designs, and it was a place where artists went to buy products. Through this job, Alfredo got to know slowly the thriving community of tattoo artists, and this studio allowed him to try out his first works as an apprentice.

These brief sample stories of tattoo artists who began tattooing in the middle of the 1990s and early 2000s show a cultural tradition in the making, almost starting from scratch. There was not much cultural background to rely on beyond the tattoo magazines and the trips that emerging artists with resources could make to the United States. This is important for anthropology as the transmission of skills normally assumes that there is a corpus of ancestral knowledge on which the initiates depend. For instance, when Victor Turner asked about the meaning of symbols

⁵ National School of Plastic Arts. Now rebranded as the Faculty of Arts and Design, it is a public school that belongs to the UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico). It is one of the most prestigious in Mexico, it has careers and postgraduate studies in Visual and Plastic Arts, Graphic Design, and Visual Communication.

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_ZIU5_JOSA

in Ndembu rituals, there were experts like Muchona who gave detailed explanations to him about ritual procedures, uses of colors, rules, and taboos. Even in so-called “invented traditions”, there was a manipulation of cultural references used for political reasons (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2000) and creative responses that depended on a set of cosmological innovations (Sahlins 1999). With tattoo artists in Mexico in the 1990s and early 2000s, their craft developed as a form of experimentation where their only solid ground was their artistic background in graphic design, painting, architecture, or the simple curiosity they had. However, as tattoo artists say, to work on human skin is very different; it has a depth that challenges any drawing project, it faces the resistance of another human being, it also tests their endurance as tattoo sessions tend to be long and both artists and clients must remain seated in uncomfortable positions. Learning a craft for these emerging artists was not a case of an “invention of tradition” without any cultural “authentic” reference. Here, it is important to remember the words of Marshal Sahlins about the importance of the specificities of cultural formations, “From what I know about culture, then, traditions are invented in the specific terms of the people who construct them” (Sahlins 1999: 409). In the case of emerging tattoo artists in Mexico City, they invented their tradition and craft by giving it motives, themes, images, symbols, and artistic techniques, which came from their Mexican traditional backgrounds (Skulls from Día de Muertos, Pre-Hispanic imagery, religious motives, wrestlers, masks, names, and tribal styles). In this way, their development was quite unique. They did not have a master tattoo artist to rely on, and they worked with hybridizing techniques, experimenting with tools, and even learning from some self-made tattoo artists in jail. They would become experts years later, and they would lead a new generation of emerging tattoo artists in the 2010s and the coming years. It was at the beginning of the 2010s that the figure of the tattoo apprentice gained traction in studios and parlors all over Mexico.

Body Biographies in Mexico City

Today, individuals learn about tattoos by working as apprentices with more experienced artists or by transitioning from other graphic or visual arts to tattooing. What is true is that there is no institutionalized apprenticeship at a university or a specialized college where one can get a formal education in tattooing. An artist becomes so by practicing and learning from others via the oral transmission of knowledge. Though advertisements about learning to tattoo online have grown in the last five years, most artists are reluctant to use this form of learning. Today, self-taught has its limits. Many reject the idea or even the possibility of learning to tattoo online. To become an artist, you must practice and be close to the studios and the people who know the craft and are more experienced. Besides, famous artists are unwilling to share their trade secrets with people who know nothing about tattoos, even less for free. However, these artists may offer seminars and tutorials for more experienced fellow artists, sometimes online or during tattoo conventions.

To be a tattoo artist means to work with ink lines inscribed into the skin. Like many other arts, like drawing, sculpture, calligraphy, pottery, and painting, tattoos form lines, and the artist's creativity sparks from techniques and appliances on the body of such lines. Here, it becomes inevitable to relate tattoos to the reflection on lines developed by Tim Ingold (2007). For Ingold, lines become essential to show human creativity and movement through history. In his work, he describes the process of writing by hand and drawing as experiments in innovation. He highlights the importance of human movement as leaving linear traces on a surface, as "tantamount to a way of life" (Ingold 2007: 80). For him, writing goes beyond the modern association with inscription provided by typography in a computer or a mechanical device, and to understand its value we need to appreciate it as a form of a drawing of lines, which follows a trajectory traced by the artist's hand on a surface (Ingold 2007: 128).

Surprisingly, Ingold does not make any direct reference to tattoos in his book. I find this omission puzzling, considering that other anthropologists like Alfred Gell have dedicated a substantial analysis of indigenous

tattoos as art forms (Gell 1998). We can only take some of Ingold's references to lines and adapt them to the context of tattoos, like the technological implementation of tools and the creative display of the artists as they develop their art as an unpredictable unfolding process (Ingold 2007: 142-143).

In the case of Gell, indigenous tattoos among the Māori form part of a particular artistic style, which relates tattoo patterns to other forms of representations of culture inscribed in artifacts, like ceramics, shields, canoe carving, and face painting. However, tattoos are manufactured objects that convey agency. Gell mentions that:

Manufactured objects are 'caused' by their makers, just as smoke is caused by fire; hence manufactured objects are indexes of their makers. The index, as a manufactured object, is in the 'patient' position in a social relationship with its maker, who is an agent, and without whose agency it would not exist. (Gell 2007: 23).

Gell warns the reader that not all cultural objects appear to be manufactured by a human artist; some are believed to be divinity creations. Sometimes, the origin of such artifacts dissipates or is forgotten by people. Traditional Indigenous tattoo art had religious and ritual motives, and the tattoo artist did not always have to be remembered. What was of relevance was that the tattoo offered protection to a person in the afterlife; so, maze tattoos, for instance, protected women's bodies when they died and guided them in the afterworld, as documented in many parts of India (Gell 2007: 90). However, there are exceptions. In other cultural contexts, the importance of the tattoo artist was recognized and praised by people. Among the Māori, an artist got fame and prestige through his art, where his skills and techniques were highly appreciated, though their artistry was related to how well they could faithfully reproduce a particular cultural style and not about expressing their individual creativity (Gell, 2007: 158). For Gell, the limits of creativity imposed by what he called "tradition" differentiated tattoo art in indigenous settings from the West, where tattoo art focuses on individual innovation. Although there are standardized styles in contemporary tattoo production, these do not necessarily

relate to the artist's cultural milieu and are often borrowed or taken out of context from other cultures. Thus, a Mexican artist may become an expert in Japanese imagery, as is the case of "Dr. Lakra", whose work is inspired by Asian cultures, or a German artist may become a specialist solely in the realism of horror Hollywood movies. The freedom of individual expression makes possible these types of cultural hybridization.

Not all Mexican tattoo artists work under a unique stylistic framework; the majority use diverse techniques and patterns depending on the client's demand. The question is how they develop their individuality through tattoos and how people assess their quality. To begin with, it is worth mentioning that most, if not all, tattoo artists have tattoos themselves made with a different array of fellow artists and friends. Their bodies become biographies and like with their clients, they transform their bodies into vast canvases for experimentation, where reciprocal links are constructed in what they argue is the karma they pay for being tattoo artists themselves. They ink others, but they need to be inked and experience the pain, too.

The reciprocity of tattooing each other is a form of solidarity among artists. It shows commitment, trust, and respect for others. Alfredo Chavarria, for instance, has mentioned that artists and clients may become collectors of tattoos, showing pieces of art from a wide diversity of creators. In the tattoo world, collected tattoos also add to the status of a person. To show a tattoo made by a famous artist enhances the body representation of a person and the admiration of others. For instance, a tattoo made by "Dr. Lakra" or "Chanok" gives prestige to the tattooed person who wears it. However, it is rare to find a tattoo artist who has tattoos only from one colleague. The body of the artist is a body biography that traces a trajectory in the tattoo environment and is a symbol of a life story. It also affects how clients perceive them. A heavily tattooed artist may bring more confidence to persons who decide to have their first tattoo as it shows passion and commitment to the art and the seriousness of the profession. A committed artist also inspires apprentices to learn the intricacies of the trade.

Artists continue learning after they master their trade. In the case of the artists mentioned in the previous section, the complexity of tattoos, their history, specialization, and development of techniques demand ongoing

actualization. One never stops learning and experimenting. Artists sometimes foray into other arts like painting and photography to develop new skills. Learning new techniques involves getting acquainted with new technologies, like social media, particularly Instagram. It is through this last platform that tattoo artists advertise their work to the world. I will describe the impact of social media in the next section. To update their artistry, tattoo artists invest a substantial amount of time in good-quality products, updating their knowledge of ink brands and cartridges, machines, needles, equipment in general, and hygiene.

Competition in a Saturated Market

Early tattoo artists in Mexico initially did not know they could make a living tattooing people. In the middle of the 1990s and early 2000s, there was not much information available in Mexico about tattoos; only a couple of magazines existed, mainly in English, no widespread Internet access was available, and just a few tattoo parlors were around, and few people got tattooed. With time, the tattoo culture in Mexico expanded. New companies like Tatuajes Mexico emerged, which offered good quality products for the Mexican market at a large scale and accessible prices. New magazines in Spanish began circulating, and tattoo studios opened their doors all over the country. In Mexico City, the tattoo scene grew because of the increasing demand and the social acceptability of tattoos in society.

More people in Mexico are getting inked today than ever before. Many companies in the public and private sectors employ workers with tattoos. In theory, no employment agency should discriminate by advertising jobs explicitly banning tattoos. Nevertheless, there is still a stigma in some sectors of society about tattoos, particularly those that look poor in quality or are placed on the face, head, or hands. However, because of their acceptability, they have acquired a high demand and have become a symbol of status. “Dr. Lakra” mentions that the popularity of tattoos today is mainly due to the hegemony of the visual culture over the written one, the

desire to create stronger bonds between people, and as an act of social and individual memory preservation (López Ramírez 2022)⁷.

Nowadays, more people are trying to make a living from tattoos, not only as artists but also as business partners, distributors, and sellers of equipment, in advertisements, magazines, consultancy, and social media as influencers. Therefore, there is much competition, and the tattoo scene in Mexico today has created a saturated market with a hierarchical structure where old-school tattoo artists compete with the new generation, who may have other interests and perspectives on tattoos. There is a generational gap, and to survive, many tattoo artists organize themselves in collectives. For instance, “Dr. Lakra” together with other artists from his generation, opened the “Sigue Sigue Sputnik” (SSS) collective in 2016. Located initially in the Colonia Guerrero, and since September 2023 in the trendy Colonia Roma in the Center of Mexico City, SSS is a tattoo studio and art shop that also serves as an art gallery.

In a saturated market, many anthropological issues arise. How do we identify a true artist from a fake one? Price, location, and trends might not depict an artist’s quality. Therefore, there are multiple factors to consider. One is the history of the artist him/herself, particularly who taught him/her and mentored him/her. Second, how long has he/she worked in the trade, and in which studios? Third, the quality of his/her portfolio. Fourth, the recommendations he/she gets from other artists or clients. Even though it is still difficult to assess the real professionals from emerging artists and amateurs.

In this saturated market, the creation of a *persona* (character) on Instagram and Facebook is as important as the work of the artist itself. How many followers the artists have, how these artists interact with their virtual audience, and how often they are under demand and on tour in other cities or countries are essential factors to consider in the world of tattoos. The virtual *persona* adds a layer of legitimation to a tattoo artist. Being part of an influencer culture plays an important role, too. If a famous influencer talks about a particular artist or gets a tattoo from him

⁷ <https://www.jardinlac.org/post/el-tatuaje-como-un-texto-desbordado-entrevista-al-dr-lakra>

or her, it elevates the artist's prestige and demand. Therefore, today, not only in Mexico City but also in other cities, tattoo artists depend on social media to get work and to advertise their products. There is no escape from that, and if they want to make a living from tattoos, they need to have an active online presence, at least on Instagram.

Artists like Alfredo Cahavarría mentioned that due to the saturated market in Mexico, established artists do not take apprentices too often. Either because of previous bad experiences, because they do not want more competition, or simply because they do not have the time, these artists don't share their knowledge with beginners. Less common even for artists is to share their knowledge without remuneration. They may give courses, seminars, and tutorials for a fee, but they will think twice before mentoring the uninitiated unless they are family members or people they genuinely trust. As far as I know, Marco, Alfredo, "Chanok" and "Dr. Lakra" do not have apprentices today, mainly because they do not have the time to teach. Other tattoo artists from a younger generation I have met in Mexico City and San Luis Potosí were more willing to have apprentices, but in these cases, they were their sentimental partners or people they had known for many years.

The reluctance to share knowledge may impact the tattoo culture in Mexico City and beyond. Because tattoos are an art passed through oral transmission and practice, the lack of proper guidance may have a negative influence on the quality of an artist. New artists are impatient, too, and they are often very eager to start making a living from tattoos and rush the process without taking care of the proper development of their artistry. A saturated market also impacts the remuneration an artist gets. As more artists and studios are available, some lower their prices in order to get clients quickly. However, Alfredo and Marco argue that professionals should always charge a fair fee, depending on the characteristics of the tattoo. Still, they shouldn't overcharge or sell their art cheaply. Normally, low prices in a studio should be delegated to apprentices or people who are beginning their careers. However, what is true is that to get inked by artists from the old guard like "Chanok" and "Dr. Lakra" is usually expensive, and they have a waiting list of many months to arrange a booking.

There are no census or statistics about how many tattoo studios exist in Mexico City and less information about how many professional artists make a living from tattoos. The closest one can get to surmising the dimensions of the tattoo scene is to attend one of the many tattoo conventions in Mexico City and other cities. It is at the conventions when artists get together to showcase their work. Studios use this opportunity to promote their business by handing out cards, merchandise, and stickers. The conventions include tattoo exhibitions, contests, live music, and quick tattoo sessions. It is a place for artists to get to know people, make connections, and meet artists and suppliers from other regions. Although it shows the competitiveness of the trade, the conventions also help promote tattoos as an art available to everybody to make them more accessible and acceptable to society in general⁸.

Conclusion

The tattoo scene in Mexico has changed substantially since I was first introduced to it in the middle of the 1990s. Today, there are more professional tattoo artists than ever before in Mexico. What does it make an artist a professional? This question lingers throughout the text, and it has no simple answers. As there are no formal institutions that legitimate professional tattoo artists nationally or internationally, or even if they exist, they are not universally recognized, artists legitimate themselves through their work, experience, and time spent performing tattoos. To know their trade means to learn from somebody willing to teach them. The lucky ones, like my friend Alfredo, learned when the tattoo scene was not so overcrowded, and he had the support of his friend Roy, who introduced him and kindly taught him the basics of tattooing. Other artists were self-taught, like Marco and “Dr. Lakra”, who learned from different sources or got into tattoos by transferring previous skills learned in other arts, like painting and graphic design. For those who learned as apprentices, the

⁸ For more information about tattoo conventions from an anthropological perspective see De Mello (2020).

road to mastering a trade involves constant training, being associated with studios, and getting to know more established artists who may recommend their work (the apprentice's work).

The success of a career depends on the skills artists gain, their gift, and, in some cases, the development of a unique style (their "signature"), self-discipline, a business-oriented approach, and their own personalities. In the world of tattoos, creativity is important, and in Mexico, the creative skills of an artist may define his or her popularity. The quality of the final product is also a determinant. Still, the life paths of tattoo artists have not been easy, and they currently face fierce competition in a saturated market.

Despite the commodification of tattoos, for many, the experience of having one is still a rite of passage. Pain is unavoidable, and tattoo artists inflict this pain for artistic purposes. As artists see their craft as technical prowess, sometimes, if they are not too excited about the design a person wants, if it is too repetitive or something they have tattooed many times, their craft becomes mechanical, a mastery that does not involve their full interest. When an artist develops his or her own project or a tattoo that he or she considers aesthetically pleasant, he or she will become more engaged and interact more with the client. Here, the intensity of the experience involves both the artist and the tattooed.

The analysis of the apprenticeship experience of tattoo artists and the ritual of getting a tattoo are important aspects of the anthropology of embodied practices. Artists, apprentices, and clients form the core of the social relations that exist in a tattoo performance (performance in the sense of a social practice between at least two persons in a public sphere). The body as a canvas for the experimentation of lines, as Tim Ingold would say, allows the artist to innovate and leave a mark. As "Dr. Lakra" mentions: "Tattooing another person's skin and leaving a mark that will stay for the rest of his life is special; it is not done in solitude, but in coexistence, and that's fun" (López Ramírez 2022)

In this article, I have focused mainly on the artists' perspective. The focus on the artists forms part of an anthropological strategy that considers the perspective of the experts as a vital component of human creativity. Like in ritual, performance, dance, and a variety of social practices, where

the views of the experts form the core of the transmission of knowledge, in tattoo contexts, the artist embodies the craft of an art form. By using lines, like Ingold correctly says, an artist leaves an indelible impression on the bodies of others, either for a short period or for the rest of one's life.

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