

Tattoos in a Muslim Community: Stuck Between Forbidden and Beauty

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Based on in depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation conducted in the last ten years, this paper discusses continuity (and discontinuities) of traditional tattooing among Muslim communities in the South-Eastern Anatolian peninsula. The practice continues despite tattooing and tattoos are prohibited by Islamic Law. The research is based on field work and material and written sources mostly collected in the provincial area of Şanlıurfa (Urfa). The area surveyed consists of an Arab tribe which is nominally Sunni and Shafi.

For Muslim believers, the source of the prohibition of tattoos and tattooing is in the words of Prophet Muhammad (*alayhisselam*). This paper will first consider the words of Prophet Muhammad by reference to this prohibition. It will then contrast Prophet's prohibitions with data obtained from field research conducted in areas where, despite the Islamic prohibition, tattooing is still being done in a Muslim (Sunni and Shafi) community.

For a traditional Muslim (Sunni) society, the sources for understanding and experiencing religion are in the Qur'an, in the Hadith, in the Ijma and in the Kiyas (*analogy*). According to the Hadiths and to data obtained from these Hadiths, tattoos are prohibited. Indeed, words such as 'vesm' and 'veshm' are used in the Hadiths. They point precisely to *the* various changes that people can make upon their own bodies. Even the tools used as well as all sort of operations product of the use of these tools are specifically prohibited.

Nevertheless, tattoo and tattooing continued to exist among local groups and beliefs despite the manifest prohibition coming from the traditional religion. Thus, despite the ban, there are strong reasons and solid connections to justify the continuation of the practice. Among the reason we can consider social reputation, beauty, spiritual and physical health, bad thoughts and protection against negative influence; these are maintained with a plurality of justifications and connections. As a result, despite the fact that the members of the tribe are aware of the prohibition, due to the above reasons and their connections, the practice of tattoo and tattooing continue in the villages of Siverek area, Şanlıurfa, Turkey.

Key words: Tattoo, Dek, Vesm, Veshm, Turkey, Sanliurfa, Siverek