Symbolism is part and parcel of pre-colonial Filipino warrior culture. A certain clothing, tattoo or cicatrix may connote the wearer’s status in the warrior society.

Tattooing was widely practiced in pre-colonial Philippines both for the purposes of ornamentation and rite of passage. This was particularly prevalent in the Visayas and among the highland tribes of northern Luzon. So widespread was the practice of tattooing in the Visayas that the Spaniards coined the Visayans “pintados” [painted] because their bodies were covered with tattoos. Batuk is the general term for tattoos in the Visayas. Even today, an annual feast called Pintados Festival is celebrated in Tacloban to pay tribute to the ancient tattooing tradition of the Visayans. On the other hand, in the mountainous part of northern Luzon, tattooing traditions are still preserved today within certain tribes.

The Visayas

William Henry Scott, in his book “Barangay: Sixteenth Century Philippine Culture,” explains that the display of tattoos plays an important part in psyching up one’s opponent in battle, he wrote, “Still more rugged were those who submitted to facial tattooing. Indeed those with tattoos right up to the eyelids constituted a Spartan elite. Such countenances were really terrifying and no doubt intimidated enemies in battle as well as townmates at home. Men would be slow to challenge or antagonize a tough with such visible signs of physical fortitude.”

The location of a tattoo also indicates a warrior’s experience in battle as Scott notes in the following texts, “Chest tattoos which looked like breastplates – less frequently, tattoos on the abdomen – only came after further action in battle; and still later, those on the whole back, widest field for the tattooer’s artistry. Facial tattoos from ear to chin to eye were restricted to the boldest and toughest warriors.”

Just like in modern times, tattoo works then were done by skillful artists who charge for their services. The process is pretty much unchanged over the centuries, which include the tracing of the design on the body, pricking it with needles then rubbing soot into the fresh wound. The process is
very painful, which is why some men though qualified as warriors avoid the operation for as long as possible until shamed into it. On this, Scott comments, “The operation was not performed all in one sitting but in installments, but even so, often cause a high fever and occasionally infection and death. Baug or binogok was the healing period when the wounds was still swollen, and if infection caused the designs to be muddied, they were called just that – mud (lusak).”

In addition to tattoos, battle-hardened warriors were also known to burn decorative scars on their bodies.

Scott names a few common patterns of tattoos of pre-colonial Filipinos, he says, “Labid were the distinctive inch-wide lines, both the straight ones and those which, in Father Sánchez’s (1617, 283) words, “go snaking or zigzagging up the leg to the waist.” Ablay were those on the shoulder; dubdub, those on the chest up to the throat; and daya-daya – or tagur in Panay – on the arms, Bangut (a muzzle or halter) were the ones that made of the face such a frightening mask, also called “gaping” like a crocodile’s jaws or the beak of a bird of prey. Hinawak – from hawak, a tight, lean waist – were men tattooed below the waist, and lipong were heroes tattooed all over (except under the G-string) like the fancy linipong porcelain from China.”

Besides tattoos, certain elements of clothing of pre-colonial Filipinos connote an individual’s warrior status. A red pudong [headdress] called magalong for instance was donned by those who have already killed an enemy in battle. The most coveted kind of pudong in the Visayas was made of pinayusan, thin abaca fibers tie-dyed and polished to a silky shine. This kind of headdress was reserved only for a valiant few.
A vintage illustration from the Boxer Codex depicting a Visayan Pintado.

The Cordilleras

Analyn Ikin V. Salvador-Amores, a teacher of Social Anthropology and Political Science at the College of Social Sciences, University of the Philippines Baguio published a scholarly paper titled “Batek: Traditional Tattoos and Identities in Contemporary Kalinga, North Luzon Philippines.” Her report, which was presented to the 17th International Conference of Association of Historians in Asia at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2002, tackles in details the connection between tattooing and warrior culture in certain highland tribes of northern Luzon.

A tattoo artist in the Cordilleras is called “manbatek.” Two instruments were used in the process, the “pat-ik,” a light stick that is used for tapping the “gisi,” which is the tattoo instrument that holds the needles. Among the Bontoc, Ifugao and Kalinga tribes of the Cordillera, the ritual of tattooing is closely associated with headhunting. The term for warrior in the Cordilleras is ”mai’ngor.”

Explaining the symbolism of Kalinga tattoos, a part of Amores’ paper reads, “Tattooing starts at the back of the hand and the wrists. The first kill is denoted with stripe patterns which appear like tie band called gulot, or pinupungol. The term munggolot refers to the chief of the headhunting raid
and literally means the “cutter of the head” (Billiet and Lambrecht 31), so when the gulot tattoo is earned, this means that the person has killed someone or has become a “headtaker.” Those who have killed two individuals have tattoo patterns on their hands. Warriors who have killed ten or more are the individuals who are permitted to wear the chest tattoos and other elaborate insignias (like the head axe) at the side of their stomach, back, thighs and legs and even the cheeks to connote unrivalled bravery of a warrior in a certain village (warrior status as mai’ngor or mu’urmut).”

The advent of Catholicism in the Philippines vanished the traditions of tattooing to a large degree. The practice of tattooing survived among escrimadores during and after colonial period, this time though tattoos were often Latin prayers for protection in battle. Two FMA legends, uncle and nephew Regino and Antonio Illustrisimo both have tattoos of oraciones [magical prayers] on their bodies. Regino had one on his leg while Antonio on his chest.

About the Author:
Perry Gil S. Mallari has been a practitioner and researcher of the Filipino martial arts for the last two decades. His single stick method of escrima bears the stamp of approval of Ignacio Mabait, an old-school escridero who was also a former eight-rounder boxer. Manong Ignacio, a product of the juego todo (all-out stick fighting matches) era, has employed his escrima while fighting the Japanese in Manila during World War 2. Realizing the connection of Filipino escrima and Western fencing, Perry studied the art fencing with the foil in the early 1990s under Socorro Olivan at the then Quezon City Fencing Club ran by Celso Dayrit Jr. Dayrit’s father Celso Sr. is the father of sports fencing in the Philippines. Perry considers himself primarily a largo mano (long hand or long range) fighter because of the influence of his Western fencing training. Perry also practices hilot, the Filipino healing art of bone setting and therapeutic massage.

While concentrating on the FMA, Perry also cross-trains in other martial arts whenever his schedule permits. Perry believes that the principle of body mechanics is the uniting factor of all martial arts.

A professional journalist by profession, Perry’s column “Martial Talk,” published every Sunday in the Manila Times is the only column about martial arts published in a national broadsheet in the Philippines. He is also a regular writer of the Rapid Journal, the country’s only martial arts magazine for the past 11-years. His articles on the FMA is a weekly feature of fmapulse.com a US-based website aiming to unify the global FMA community.