PERPETUALLY SHROUDED IN MIST, the Kalinga village of Buscalan sits high up in the Cordillera Mountains of northern Luzon, Philippines. Although all of the tattooed warriors are now gone, the village is teeming with tattooed elderly women that wear the artistry of the last Kalinga tattoo artist: 89-year-old Whang Od who learned the art of batok (tattoo) from her father.

Whang Od is a graceful woman who despite her age continues to work in her family’s rice fields nearly everyday. That may seem like nothing special, but then again Buscalan sits high atop the ridge of a mountain that dives 1,500 feet down towards a raging river that feeds numerous terraced rice fields below. Every morning at sunrise, Whang Od scales down some one-thousand stairs that shimmer in morning dew passing waterfalls and lush foliage in her worn-out flip-flops that have lost their treads. After reaching the river, she heads one mile upstream on a series of treacherous and muddy footpaths that eventually lead to her family’s rice terraces. She works all day until the heat of the afternoon sun drains all of her strength. Just after 4pm, the trek back up the mountain begins and Whang Od now has a fifty pound basket of rice attached to her forehead with a tumpline. Singing a few melodies along the way, she takes care to not miss a step and slowly, and very methodically, she plods her way up the staircase that seems to have no end. Once she reaches her hut, the rice basket comes to rest on the creaky wooden floor and then she immediately begins to prepare her dinner consisting of rice, greens, and a little pork that was gifted to her. As the sun starts to fade, crisp mountain air begins to permeate the cracks of the wooden walls of the house and Whang Od moves closer to the fire in her kitchen where she always sleeps. Tomorrow, she will repeat her routine as she has for over seventy years.

89-year-old Whang Od never married and dedicated her life to tattooing. She is the last Kalinga mambabatok or tattoo artist.
The journey from Manila to the village of Buscalan is only 220 miles by Jeepney but takes twelve grueling hours because of the intense traffic in the lowlands and then the tortuous and winding roads of the Cordillera. It’s a journey that is not for the faint-at-heart especially on the mountain roads which often disappear in landslides or rockfalls. Although it’s a spectacular ride - lush rice terraces, plowing water buffalo (carabao), villages dotting steep hillsides, and raging rivers at every turn - there are no guardrails in the Cordillera and if your brakes go out, your vehicle will plunge hundreds of feet into the deep canyons waiting below.

**KALINGA BATOK, THE HEADHUNTER’S SHRINE, AND A MODERN-DAY WARRIOR**

Whang Od tells me that when she was twenty-five, the man she was in love with died in a logging accident. Instead of looking for a new husband, she dedicated her life to tattooing and now sixty-four years later she is the last practitioner of an art form that many scholars believe is nearly one thousand years old.
rich tradition of body art continue to be worn by Kalinga elders: including the last generation of headhunting warriors whose numbers have perhaps dwindled to some thirty men. These World War II veterans who bravely fought Japanese machine gunners with spears, shields, and axes incited great fear in their Nipponese enemies; because once captured their heads would be taken and their bodies left to decompose in the moist air of the mountainous jungle terrain.

One of the last Kalinga warriors (mingor) to wear the traditional tattoos of his ancestors is 88-year-old Lakay Miguel (Lakay means “respected elder”). Miguel earned his marks for inter-village combat before WWII and for the heads he took during the great conflict. Because he killed or wounded more than two enemies he was permitted to receive the bikking tattoos on his chest which are the headhunter’s primary emblem. But Miguel’s bravery on the battlefield was unsurpassed and he was also allowed to receive the tattooed khaman or head-ax on his rib cage, markings on his back, and tattoos on his arms. The human anthropomorph tattooed beneath his khaman symbolizes his Japanese victims and also denote that he is a warrior of the highest rank. He also wears a faded cruciform between his eyes, three marks on his Adam’s apple as a preventive therapy against goiter, and small tally marks behind the ear that represent his number of enemy engagements.

Miguel is a WWII veteran who earned most of his tattoos combating Japanese forces. He is worried that future generations of Kalinga youth will perhaps forget what the tattooing culture of his people represents once he’s gone. “First the missionaries came, then the school teachers and then people in the towns began discriminating against those men and women who wore tattoos. Now we have no more tattooists and our custom of tattooing will disappear when my generation dies.” Batok cover his back and chest and the khaman or head-axe design adorns his side. Kalinga warriors also wore tally marks behind their ears or beneath their armpits that for some men represented the number of enemy engagements.

Miguel confided to me that one of his fondest memories was when he took the mandible of a Japanese enemy and began using it as the handle of his gangsa gong; a traditional custom of the Kalinga people. Today, gangsa gongs with human jawbone handles are considered priceless heirlooms and are only used during very special occasions.

In the Buaya region of northern Kalinga Province, most enemy skulls – minus their jawbones – usually came to rest in the sanga sang or village shrine. Village shrines were the location where trophy heads and the severed body parts of enemies were stored after a headhunting celebration. Although individual family shrines were located in
people’s houses that sometimes contained a bit of enemy skull, the village shrine was the most revered in the community because of the extreme supernatural power that emanated from it. In the Kalinga village of Buaya this enclosure, which stood at the outskirts of the village in a bamboo thicket, was believed to be protected by spiritual guardians of the sky, underworld, and water: each resembling a kind of aggressive or bloodthirsty beast (kakayap) or demon (alan). But the shrine also housed more beneficent entities like protective “friends” (bulun) and companions (bilbulun) that sometimes aided Kalinga headhunters on their human quests. If a village did not construct a sangasang, an evil spirit called a bingil was believed to plague the settlement until a shrine was erected or a blood sacrifice was made. These foul creatures resembled humans but their bodies were covered with pus and festering, decomposing wounds that smelled of rotten flesh.

Lakay Dilag wears a very intricate bikking or warrior’s chest tattoo. Traditionally, these V-shaped markings represented the gayang or eagle: an oracle bird and messenger to the Creator God Kabunian. However, this once abstract motif has been accentuated and replaced with a figurative rendition of the eagle that many WWII Kalinga veterans borrowed from peso or centavo coin designs from the American commonwealth period (1935-1946). The star (bituwon) beneath the eagle symbolizes the beacon or light that guides the headhunter on his way. Sadly, there are perhaps less than thirty tattooed Kalinga warriors living today. Lakay Dilag died in 2008. Photograph courtesy of Ikin Salvador-Amores.

Nowadays these shrines have for the most part been all but neglected because headhunting has lost favor. Rumors of recent headhunting raids are still heard throughout Kalinga territory, but these accounts are more fictitious than real. Even though there is a long history of blood feuding in the region and scores of victims have not yet been avenged by their family members, automatic weapons and rifles have replaced spears, shields, and head-axes, making headhunting less practical today than in the old days. A more typical feat is to simply shoot a foe at long range rather than attempting a close encounter of the enemy kind. Moreover, the agricultural areas around villages, which for centuries have been the primary hunting grounds, have been clear-cut to promote spotting enemies from a distance. So unless you’d like to make yourself an easy target in the scope of a M-16 assault rifle, most contemporary warriors don’t even think about taking heads because today’s warfare is long range and chances are that you would fail before you even started.
We did happen to meet one modern-day warrior named Fanah from the village of Bugnay who recently avenged the murder of an elderly man in his village. In retaliation, he shot and killed three Bontoc men from the village of Betwagan that lies just to the south of Kalinga territory. Fanah recounted the tale: “A neighboring tribe, the Bontoc, was trying to take some of our land and they shot and killed one of our elders who was tending to his family’s rice fields. So after hiking over those mountains all night (he points over his shoulder), we waited in ambush near their village. It was dawn and we spotted three men coming down a path and I shot them in revenge. It’s an honor to kill in order to protect my village and my people. We have scores to settle and since this incident we have had no further problems. We now have a peace pact with those people.”

But Fanah’s story didn’t end there. His hometown of Bugnay is part of a cluster of several Kalinga villages that comprise a regional unit of trading and marriage partners including Whang Od’s village of Buscalan. Having heard about his recent encounter, she offered to tattoo the brave warrior in the custom of his forefathers. And perhaps for the first time since WWII, a Kalinga man received a bikking or warrior’s chest tattoo that marked his status as a killer.

Fanah is a modern-day Kalinga warrior who is perhaps the first man since WWII to receive a bikking. The tattooing process begins with a stencil made from a long piece of dried grass. Then, Whang Od begins to hand-tap Fanah in her backhanded style. As the blood begins to flow, Fanah’s facial expression starts to change and eventually he is writhing in pain. After the base layer is completed, everyone takes a brief rest and then Whang Od adds more
ink to the wounds with her stencil so that the second layer can be applied. By now, Fanah’s wounds have begun to resemble welts and soon he will ask Whang Od to stop.

Fanah’s tattoo consists of three sloping lines: each were said to represent the number of enemies he killed – three. Whang Od told me that these lines also symbolized the outstretched wings of the eagle - like a man swooping down on his prey.

Whang Od keeps her tattooing tools under the floor boards of her stilted hut. Her hand-tapping kit is comprised of a coconut bowl to mix a pigment of soot and water, an orange thorn needle (siit) attached to the end of a small bamboo stick, and another short stick used to tap the thorn into the skin. She told me her father used a different tool called a kisi which was a water buffalo horn bent by fire that held four razor sharp orange or lemon needles at its base. Sometimes he used a wooden stencil that held intricate patterns for the arms. She and her father both back-handed their tools; a style that is completely different from Polynesian hand-tappers practicing today (e.g., they work hand over hand).
Bontoc is the first large town you encounter when traveling to the Cordillera of the Philippines. The Bontoc people have been traditional enemies of the Kalinga and live just to the south of their territory. Bontoc warriors also marked themselves with tattoos and so did their women. I came across three Bontoc ladies in Bontoc town. Two were sitting at a gas station and one was working in her garden by the roadside, and all were eager to display their arm tattoos. One of the Bontoc women named Pachakeg said she was 8 or 9 years old when she began to receive her tattoos. In just seven days she received all of her arm tattoos; she was tattooed by two different artists. Tattoos of that size often swelled for many days, as shown in this ca. 1910 photograph (above), but work in the rice fields never stopped and newly tattooed girls were expected to continue their chores even if their tattoos became infected. Some of the Bontoc designs include lightning, steps, stars, centipedes, and plant motifs.

The Bontoc call tattooing *fatek* whereas the Kalinga call the art *batok*. Other writers use *batek* to refer to Kalinga tattooing but this is an Ilocano term.

Picking up a long piece of dried grass, she meticulously began laying out her tattoo template on Fanah’s chest: a base of three curving lines that resemble a V-shaped chest marking stretching from the shoulders downward towards the abdomen. I was told that these three lines not only represented the number of enemies killed, but that they also symbolized the outstretched wings of the *gayang* or eagle which is the Lord of Birds and messenger to the Kalinga Creator god Kabunian. During their headhunting celebrations, the Kalinga used to perform the eagle dance (*turayan*) to commemorate successful campaigns. Performers moved in a circular motion imitating the position and movement of the eagle’s wings as it scanned its hunting grounds far below. Then, the dancers suddenly swooped down towards the ground with arms outstretched like an eagle upon its prey; this movement symbolized that the warriors had come home victorious from their recent battle. Today the eagle dance continues to be performed during important ceremonial occasions to the beats of the *gangsa* gong.

With each tap of Whang Od’s tool, droplets of blood began to form around the punctures until they converged to form a small river of blood that cascaded down Fanah’s chest. Sometimes the needle caught a piece of skin and pulled it upwards and Fanah winced in pain. It was truly an amazing sight to witness: all of those
pricks, thousands of bloody pricks with a razor sharp needle about one hundred times a minute!

Harvesting rice near Bontoc.

After the three lines had been completed, Whang Od took a brief rest before she added a second layer of tattoo ink to the first layer of pricks. Fanah nervously inhaled a few Marlboro’s I brought and then Whang Od proclaimed: “Tattooing is a ritual and serious religious experience. The spirits expect Fanah to act bravely. If he doesn’t, they’ll inflict death and destruction on the community.”

She continued: “Before I drew first blood, I repeated a chant so that no spiritual harm would come to Fanah. I also observed a taboo last evening and did not drink any alcohol. If I did, the tattoos I am creating today may become infected and Fanah could even die. And if you or I or Fanah sneezed before the tattooing began, this would be a very bad omen and I would have to stop. It is believed that a lurking spirit makes someone sneeze because it is jealous or has deemed it wise to postpone the tattooing for a future time.”

I did not learn if this “spirit” was good or evil, but they are believed to be deceased ancestors that occasionally demand something from their descendents (e.g., a sacrifice) so that they will continue to offer them protection. Spirits of the “good” ancestors mingle with the living, while the “wicked” ones are sometimes under the command of witches and live in caves and dark forests where they join in the destruction of the living by causing disease, sickness, or death. Not surprisingly, Kalinga children are usually named after their dead ancestors so they may be known to them and receive protection.
Carabao plowing in a rice terrace.

But there is another level of ancestral spirits called *pinading* that are extraordinarily powerful souls of the dead. They punish their descendants for wrong actions. Some are also said to be derived from the souls of slain enemies. *Pinading* act as village sentinels who dwell in the trees skirting a village.

After fifteen minutes, Whang Od motioned that she was ready to begin the second phase of tattooing. Fanah didn’t seem too enthusiastic, but soon enough he would walk among the countless generations of tattooed Kalinga warriors that came before him. He would bear visual proof of his martial exploits in the form of an indelible tattoo that would confer to him special privileges and lifelong respect from other members living in his community. But unless Whang Od passes on her skills to an apprentice, Fanah could be the last warrior to receive a Kalinga warrior’s tattoo.

Fortunately, Whang Od’s eleven-year-old niece Grace has shown interest in the tattoo arts of her ancestors. But Whang Od is not convinced that Grace has what it takes to become a *mambabatok*. It is a difficult skill that requires a lot of patience, practice, and dedication.

The scenic village of Bugnay sits beside the Chico River and is home to Fanah and many tattooed women.

A very early 20th century photograph of a heavily tattooed southern Kalinga warrior covered in python
scales and centipede designs. I have traveled throughout Kalinga territory and I am always amazed to learn that each region, even each village within a particular region, may have different names and meanings associated with their tattoo designs. I was told by one man who wears similar motifs on his abdomen that the horn-like projections branching outwards from the navel symbolize the horns of the carabao and were reserved for “war-leaders.” Of course, amongst all of the many Kalinga men I have interviewed over the course of two research trips I have never heard comparable information, but then again my informant was the only man thus marked.

THE URGE TO FIGHT

Over the course of four-hundred years of foreign occupation – first by Spain, the U.S., and briefly Japan – the Kalinga were one of the only tribes not to come under direct foreign rule in the Philippines. The Spanish never stationed a garrison in their lands and during the American regime Kalinga Province retained semi-autonomous status because it was governed by a team of American administrators in concert with influential Kalinga men. At the onset of World War II, Kalinga warriors fought alongside their American allies to repulse Japanese forces who were active in the area.

But the Kalinga’s skill in hand-to-hand guerilla combat and especially their fierce reputation for headhunting are perhaps the most important elements that have contributed to their relative cultural autonomy. Extending back to the dawn of time, headhunting has been a strategy related to the prime duty of Kalinga warriors to defend their country and to honor the traditions of their forefathers. But headhunting also resolved disputes over regional or village boundaries, unfulfilled penalties for the breaking of peace pacts (buddongs), the acquisition of agricultural, fishing, or hunting territory, and to satisfy psychological needs including revenge for killings or to end periods of mourning that can last for weeks if not months.

Headhunting also had many religious implications because it was seen as a human sacrifice of the highest order to the most powerful of spirits and gods. And because the future harmony of any village rested in the hands of these entities, headhunting raids had to be carried out at regular intervals to appease them. These ideologies stem from the idea that a severed head produces a general state of welfare in the village, protects it against epidemics and famine, and assures that food will be plentiful. Many elderly Kalingas claim that during the headhunting days, disease was less common, health and nutrition were better, and fewer people died prematurely. Of course, headhunts were sometimes called for to fulfill the urge to kill or cure the apparent insanity brought about by sangasang affliction.

As noted in the northern regions, the village sangasang or shrine was the place where headhunting trophies came to rest after a successful hunting campaign. Sangasang also refers to a category of spirits that inhabit the shrine. In some remote villages, these shrines continue to play a role in village life because of the many taboos that surround them, and because illness and insanity are attributed to violations of these taboos. As the former Roman Catholic priest Jules de Raedt noted for the shrine in Buaya village:

Sangasang affliction causes shivering, trembling, and a hanging tongue, as well as unpredictable laughing, shouting, dancing in the middle of the night, chasing at the slightest provocation, and biting oneself and others. The spirits of the village shrine who cause these illnesses are...Tayadan (Shiver), assisted by watchmen named Pakkuyan (Shout), Payudan (Sentinel), and Takang (Gaping Mouth).
All of these aggressive spirits were male and possessed female spirit mediums or “priestesses” called mandadawak. Kalinga priestesses communicated with the spirits of the sangasang to bring about good fortune and health to the village. In many villages, headhunts were also organized and undertaken on the advice of a mandadawak who began her prognosticating with a blood sacrifice of a chicken or other animal to divine how each member of a war party would fare. She then became possessed by “dwarves” (bulbulun di mangayaw, “friends of the headhunters”) who guided the men on their human quest. The headhunters themselves would look for signs that their dwarf “friends” (bulun) were coming to meet, guide, or offer favorable omens (or ones of impending danger) through earthly messengers like python snakes, centipedes, large lizards, or even wild roosters. Interestingly, many Kalinga tattoo motifs are based on these creatures, especially python or centipede designs worn on the body. In Buaya, it is told that the mandadawak accompanied war parties and began most attacks with a high-pitched yell followed by the ceremonial launching of her sacred war spear towards the enemy village.

In other Kalinga regions, it was the eldest male leader of a village (pangat) who consulted particular omens to determine if the time was auspicious for a raid. This man, sometimes in concert with the mandadawak, would listen for the call of the ichaw bird, the chief omen bird of the Kalinga that forecasts future happenings and possibilities, or he would observe signs in the skies the night before the war party headed out. When the physical signals in nature and the forecast of the ichaw were favorable, all able-bodied men prepared for battle.
There were, however, several kinds of organized headhunts (*kayaw*). The invasion of enemy villages at dawn, nightfall, or even in broad daylight was one type, and in such cases fighting would continue until one of the belligerent sides was defeated. Another form of warfare was the pitched battle. One village would call their enemies to a hand-to-hand clash in an open space – a common tactic in the central and southern Kalinga areas. If the engagement resulted in a stand-off, the invaded village offered rattan, bamboo poles and other materials used for littering the dead and wounded. This gallantry was observed only when the fighting took place in an open field and never when the raid was by direct invasion. If the battle was lopsided and the village was vanquished, it was often burnt to the ground. The remaining survivors fled and hid from the pursuing victors who looted the village for precious beads, gongs, porcelain jars, gold and other articles and slaughtered all enemies along their way. Bodies of the defeated were thrown into the rivers, or sometimes just left in the fields to be eaten by dogs after being decapitated. The final form of combat, which was the most popular, was of the hit-and-run variety and called *lipot*. Two or three men kept watch near an enemy village and waited in the shadows for a victim. When someone appeared, they were beheaded or simply killed. Although *lipot* was perhaps the most dangerous form of headhunting, those warriors who met with success were the most honored of heroes.

Headhunting victims could be men, women, or children. In raids where many people were killed, each headhunter would take home only one head, or the fingers and hair of the victim if time did not permit for the head itself. But it was preferred that a live prisoner be taken who would later be sacrificed at the village shrine.

As soon as the raid was completed, the war party fled back to their home village with great speed to evade any acts of retaliation. A few of the men would move to the rear of the column and plant sharpened bamboo spikes (*suga*) in the ground; these were camouflaged with vegetation. Or they placed these devices in dead-falls to slow down their pursuing attackers. These spikes could produce wounds that punctured deep into the feet, legs, thighs, and even abdomens of anyone unfortunate enough to make contact with these devices.

Once it seemed that the successful warriors were out of harms-way, they sang victory songs to the accompaniment of bamboo musical instruments. The headhunting party soon trumpeted a series of piercing cries within a half mile of the...
first village of its home region. These were quickly answered by the *ayay* call of the women, an eerie staccato sound made by quick movements of the tongue against the upper teeth. This call was made only when a victorious headhunting party was returning to its home region. Then, the warriors proceeded to the village from which the leader had come or from which most of the party had been drawn. Two long wooden stakes were then slipped across the village gate to block any enemy attempt from entering the settlement, and to keep the souls of the heads and any illnesses associated with them from entering. The severed heads and other trophies were kept outside the village until the celebratory feast could be held. Afterwards the headhunters themselves climbed or jumped over a house ladder held upright at the village gate to symbolize that they had separated themselves from the world of their enemies.

Once safely inside the village gate, excitement and shouts of joy greeted the warriors. Within moments, however, the warriors were stripped of their clothing and weapons by the villagers who awaited them. This ritual was believed to bestow the good health and luck of the warriors to the village people. Then the *potol*, or evidence of the kill, was brought in and examined. The basket that would come to serve as the receptacle for the body parts (head or heads, hands or fingers) was lined with red hibiscus flowers. Meanwhile the priestess and her helpers performed the *sagang* ceremony. In this rite, the *mandadawak* petitioned the *sangasang* spirits with gifts of wine, betel nuts, and cloth to bestow long life on the warriors. She also performed an erotic dance with the headhunters, and sang songs boasting about how they enjoy more sexual pleasure than any other men in the community.

After the dance, the *mandadawak* took the severed head, hands, or fingers to the shrine where she uttered a series of chants. Eventually the *mandadawak* returned the *potol* to the basket in the village where they remained during the festivities; these celebrations often lasted two or more days. One of my Kalinga guides told me that if a man lost his head in battle but his fellow warriors were able to retrieve his body from the battlefield and bring it home, the priestess would chant, drive wooden sticks in the ground and call upon the *sangasang* and ancestral spirits to fly back to the enemy village to weaken its inhabitants. Through these actions, the priestess ultimately asked the spiritual guardians of her village for revenge on the next headhunt.

Water buffalos and pigs were then butchered and the choicest pieces were given to the distinguished heroes of the recent battle. Miguel Sugguiyao, a noted Kalinga historian, also wrote that these revered warriors or *mingor* were served in public by their wives or fiancées. It was told that this singular act of honor ignited such strong feelings of “suicidal bravery” among the unmarried males in attendance, that they desired to be honored likewise and soon enough they were back on the warpath.

Gifts of seed beads always please elders and I never leave home without them.
Dean Worcester, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior of the Philippines (1901-1913), also witnessed the victory festival in Buaya in 1906 and wrote of the head-trophy: “[T]he fortunate individual who took the head carefully cuts through the cap of the skull with his head-axe and removes it, scalp and all. He chops it into as many pieces as there are members of the party, and each warrior on returning from his home is presented with a bit as a keepsake...It is asserted that it is a common practice to pour basi [sugarcane wine] over the brain, which has been exposed by the removal of the top of the skull, and to mix brain-matter and basi by vigorous stirring. This horrible concoction is then passed around, the head serving as a drinking cup, and those who will may partake. It is said that only the very brave do so, and this can readily be believed! The skull is then cleaned by boiling, and the lower jaw is used for the handle of a tom-tom, or gangsa [gong]...The old women [priestesses] take charge of the remainder of the skull and place it, with similar relics, in some safe hiding-place.”

The safe hiding place that Worcester refers to was the village shrine.

THE VICTORY DANCE

Wanting to learn more about the specifics of the headhunting ceremony myself, I asked several old Kalinga warriors one evening if they could choreograph the scene. By the light of a blazing campfire, Old Aydan, a revered warrior and elder from the village of Butbut, regaled me with tales of the headhunting days and began to perform the victory dance.
The brave warrior enters a dance circle surrounded by squatting men and standing women. Four men beat their *gansa* gongs in dual alternating rhythms and everyone in their midst becomes excited and agitated. The women now add another layer of music with shrill and ululating war cries announcing the entrance of the hero of the occasion. In his finest regalia and bearing those weapons (the shield, lance, and head-ax strapped into his belt) from the recent fight, he lifts his voice and spear and as he acts out his exploits, the gongs grow silent. With a few energetic hops, some high stepping dance moves, and several jabs of his spear, he narrates the battle blow by blow through word and pantomimic action. He displays his deadly skill in the manipulation of his weapons, and as the crowd grows ever more excited the hero shouts a series of short bloodcurdling war-cries. He grasps his victim’s hair and severs the head from its neck with one deadly blow of the head-axe. He then places it in his rattan backpack and continues his victory dance until his voice and body tires. How carefully and appropriately a warrior chose his words and how cleverly he rhymed them marked him as a master of the narrative art. Some of the old headhunters goaded the young men to hunt for heads and spoke of those who did not dare to engage in the practice as despicable weaklings; supporting the idea that the Kalinga, above all, practiced headhunting to gain personal prestige and renown.

At the conclusion of the headhunting celebration, all of the young warriors who made their first kills or participated in their first combat were entitled to receive their first tattoos. Typically, this did not occur for some time because a man’s “coming-out” party called the *datum* was a serious rite of passage ceremony that was scheduled for a later date. However, it was the prerogative of the neophyte warrior to receive his tattoos before the next battle, because these markings no doubt provided him with certain advantages in combat – a confidence in his own ability, and the tendency to unnerve an enemy combatant. In short, the tattoos of a great Kalinga warrior could inspire great fear in his enemies especially if they were less heavily marked than him. I heard tales that during and just after WWII (when headhunting laws were temporarily relaxed by the Americans) entire war parties of Kalinga men who had killed Japanese soldiers were tattooed by their village tattoo artists during extravaganzas that lasted two or three days. Of course, there was a rank and file system associated with who could receive a tattoo and who could not, but typically speaking if you headed out to war and your war party was successful you could get tattooed even if you didn’t make a kill. And once a man had killed more than five enemies he could wear whatever tattoos he wanted.
One WWII era account stated: “If in killing or disposing of an enemy, a warrior fell into either of the following categories, he was entitled to one or any succeeding stage of the tattoo. After having obtained the first five tattoos, he could have any or all the rest without any further “killings”: (1) wounder of the living enemy, gimaiyang; (2) giver of the coup de grace, manela; (3) taker of the lower jaw – it is taken before the head is severed, samí; (4) taker of the head, maniwat; (5) wounder of the torso, dumangin.”

The stages of a Kalinga warrior’s tattoo were as follows: back of the hand and wrists; arms and forearms; shoulders and breast; back; stomach; a “belt” across the juncture of chest and belly; a band across the throat; cheeks.

Of course, those Kalinga men who possessed tattoos played a significant role in their communities. As a warrior (mingor) grew older he became a revered warrior or mu'urmut, and a respected elder (lakay). He acted as a consultant in peace pacts (buddongs) between other villages and tribal groups, and because of his distinguished headhunting record he was looked upon as an aggressive personality and persuasive arbiter skilled in the art of negotiation and gaining the favor of his opponents. His tattoos were a permanent record of his many kills and just as people were afraid of such men, they were equally proud to be identified with them: for a regional population enjoyed high status and security if it could count among its members men of mingor rank who were considered to be the “soul-force” of the community.

**TATTOO: THE MAMBABATOK’S ART**

Although mingor were perhaps the most respected individuals of any Kalinga village, their masculine violence required acts of female mediation and spiritual guidance on behalf of the mandadawak. Of course, some Kalinga tattoo artists were also female and they permanently inscribed a man’s masculinity for all to see. In fact, tattoo artists were the only individuals that could make “real men” in the eyes of the community, since only they had the power to physically transform boys into men through painful tattooing rituals.
Of all Kalinga tattoo motifs, centipedes and python scales seem to dominate. Both creatures were considered “friends of the warriors” (bulon ti mangayaw) and are believed to be earthly messengers of the most powerful Kalinga deity Kabunian – the Creator of all things. Many women said that their skin didn’t wrinkle if fortified with these designs. Whang Od recounted a Kalinga myth where a centipede was responsible for helping warriors take human heads like the insect takes its prey. Tattooed centipedes are also believed to make a warrior more aggressive and fierce. Some women were tattooed with “necklaces” to appear permanently beaded and beautiful.

But mambabatok also transformed girls into women through the beautiful and intricate tattoos they created. Whang Od told me an old myth that says that women should be tattooed to increase their fertility. That is why many of the women in her village are tattooed and have large families. “I tattooed many of these older women before they reached puberty, because once their hormones kick in…we believe that the tattooing hurts more at that point. Women not only receive tattoos for fertility, but also for beauty, and some women can receive additional marks if their male relatives received some for success in war. Most of their designs came from nature, like rice bundles, ferns, steps or snake scales and especially centipedes which are powerful spiritual guides and friends of the warrior. Some of the women also have tattooed necklaces.”

Other male and female individuals like Whang Od wear small X’s on their faces either between the eyes, at the center of their cheeks, or at the tips of their nose. Some elders stated that these markings were placed on girls who struck (with family weapons) those human heads that were brought into the village. Others told me that they are simply beauty marks. For example, when a woman is walking in the village, a man will take notice of her facial features because these tattoos are strategically placed at the contour points and they grab visual attention.

Elisa and Lukya of Buscalan wear various patterns of snake scales and /\ /\ /\ /\ motifs representing stairs or steps. Tattooed scales are derived from the python. 80 year-old Lukya with white tank-top and numerous beads said Whang Od made all of her marks in three days when she was about thirteen years old.
Whang Od’s other tattoos were given to her by her father. Upon closer inspection, her legs are completely covered with faint tattoo tracings which she said were her “practice marks.” She even compelled me to tattoo her on the back of her hand so that I could learn more about the art of Kalinga *batok* through active participation. After puncturing her heavily veined hand with a centipede (*gayaman*) design, I made a *sipat* gesture to remove any taboos associated with inadvertently drawing blood in the village. The *sipat* is similar to an exchange of peace tokens, and begins with the sacrifice of a chicken whose blood is rubbed near the injured body part. A brief chant is given to ward off any evil spirits, and then I placed a red carnelian bead (*arugo*) on a string around her wrist. This bead is also a protective device against malevolent spirits; it “pays off” any spirit in the vicinity.

The *mandadawak* practice similar rituals when seeking to cure their sick patients of illness. In her attempts to determine which evil spirit is causing an affliction, the *mandadawak* sacrifices a chicken, pig or other animal. With a piece of green leaf, usually an orange leaf, soaked in the blood of the sacrifice, she sprinkles the crimson liquid on the hands and legs of the patient. She prays in a frightful manner over the head of the patient, and demands the evil spirit to accept the offering and to get out or remove the malady from the body.

Fagki and Ghalina wear XXX designs that can be placed horizontally or vertically on the arms. These motifs represent rice bundles or *panyat*. Other designs are derived from fern patterns and the activity of planting rice itself.

Interestingly, the Kalinga believe that the smell of orange leaves is disturbing to evil spirits. And after a deceased family member is buried, the thorny twigs of the orange tree are placed at the entrances of the house of the dead for three to five days to keep its spirit from coming back into the neighborhood during the night and haunting anyone in the area. Although Whang Od could not give me a definitive answer, I suspect that the reason why she and other *mambabatoks* use orange thorn tattooing kits (*siit*) is because they have similar magical properties; evil spirits should always be kept away from the living especially when flowing blood may attract them. This is a common belief among many indigenous peoples that tattoo.
For hundreds of years, the Kalinga have overcome deadly colonial and tribal conflicts that threatened their security and survival in an unkind wilderness. Moreover, Christian evangelization profoundly altered their spiritual and social outlook, and new colonizers in the form of transnational logging, mining, and hydroelectric corporations threaten to usurp ancestral lands that have been, as one elder reported, “nourished by our blood.”

Out of these bitter struggles, however, the Kalinga have continued to be vigilant, courageous, and peaceful even though the 21st century is a time when the dynamism of modernity regularly clashes with their cultural practices and beliefs.

As more and more villagers migrate to towns and cities in search of jobs and college educations, many Kalinga have become dislocated from their ancestral traditions while others remain firmly rooted to them. But as long as the mountains and rivers of the Philippine Cordillera continue to rise and flow, their unity as a people will remain constant as this Kalinga proverb suggests: “From the mountains we derive our strength, the rivers our peace, the valleys our hopes and from the skies, the wisdom of our ancestors.”

For the Kalinga, nature has always provided a kind of talisman against unbridled change and a link to ancient traditions because it is constant, perpetual, and eternal. Nature was the basis from which many Kalinga cultural traditions sprang and none more so than the ancient art of tattoo. Tattooing was a natural language of the skin that gave voice to the ancestors and their descendants who attempted to emulate them by sacrificing their own bodies to make them more lasting and sacred.

Sadly however, Whang Od’s generation may be the last to wear these indelible symbols so closely tied to nature, Kalinga identity, and the ancestral past. And like the marauding headhunters who once roamed the mountains and forests of Kalinga only a century ago, these elders are the last vestiges of an era that will soon fade away into memory; but one that will always remain in story, song, and above all spirit.
Whang Od taught me many things about the art of Kalinga tattoo and I couldn’t leave Buscalan without a special gift on my right ankle. She told me that the centipede (gayaman) tattoo is a powerful spiritual guide that will protect me wherever I may go. Both she and Grace worked together which made my tattoo even more special.

Whang Od said that Kalinga warriors paid more for their tattoos than women. Fifty years ago the price could be twenty centavos, three bundles of rice, and a valued carnelian bead. Other large heirloom beads that were equivalent to a water buffalo (carabao) were sometimes given. More often than not, the payment consisted of a large pig, or two medium sized pigs and even articles of clothing.

LITERATURE


