Deep in the Cordillera highlands, an 87-year-old Kalinga woman has tirelessly preserved a forgotten ritual: tribal tattooing. Seduced by its skin-deep mystique, a Swiss-Filipino traveler gets inked indelibly.

The backbreaking, 18-hour journey to Buscalan, Kalinga is overwhelming even for the most seasoned backpacker. Skirting through the countryside in an overloaded and decrepit jeep, the splendor of the Cordillera panorama is overshadowed by the need to be alert on the treacherous, fragile roads. The trek up to the village under the unforgiving Kalinga sunshine is exhausting, especially with all the gear on our backs. Had we not made a pit stop in Sagada, the trip would have been too physically tiring. It would have given us little time to recuperate and make the final trek and preparations for what was in store for us.

The inhabitants of this idyllic village were excited to see us, the exhausted tourists, and they hungrily fired away questions which, I can only guess, may have stockpiled since the last outsiders made an appearance. Visitors are rare in this isolated part of the country. The village is surrounded by mountains, and there is only a single way in and out of the area. Students would rather stay home than make the hour-long hike to the closest school. We city dwellers would describe this postcard scene as “backwards,” as the people here have yet to abandon many of their tribal ways, largely due to its inaccessibility and relative remoteness. Evidence of anything modern is limited to a couple of Marian Rivera posters and electricity for only a rice cooker and a single light bulb. There is no
network signal here. No bathroom. No television and radio. In Buscalan, one is truly disconnected from the rest of the world.

The long trip was behind us on this Holy Thursday, and in a moment of suspended animation, there she was: Fang Oud. Her name translates into “the eldest of God’s children.” She is 87. This slender lady is covered in tattoos and looks like the toughest little woman on the planet. That’s the aura she exudes. She is a tribal skin artist—and I was to be her canvas.

As the “alpha female” of Buscalan, she looks intimidating—but she is not. Considered a master in her field and recognized internationally (she has a copy of a European skin art magazine in which she was featured, and the Discovery Channel recently came to film a story on her), she is the most humble human being you will ever encounter, despite her innate pride. By humble, I don’t mean the withdrawn persona that is so common among Filipinos—she knows her flair, but there is no need for any unnecessary ego. Maybe her confidence is a product of the wisdom she has earned in the near-century of her existence. The villagers reaffirm this absence of self-inflated egos, as it becomes apparent that the survival of the place depends on the unity among villagers and their relations with the nearby communities. The people of Kalinga are farmers. Many of the elder women sport hunchbacks developed from years of planting rice and vegetables and herbs. No chemicals are added to the soil here; fertilizers are too difficult to bring to this part of the Philippines and they’ve survived through traditional farming methods.

Fang Oud lets us stay in her house. She cooks for us. She gives us the best of what she has. We drink gin together. She makes sure we are always hydrated in this humid valley. Filipinos were always revered for their hospitality, and this famous trait is very evident here. She doesn’t ask for anything in return. Call it genuine kindness.

The truth about the people of Kalinga is that they no longer collect tattoos the way they used to. Tattoos were a right of passage for both men and women. The women would begin the process after they got their first menstruation. Today, however, the women don’t see the point of covering their bodies with permanent art, at least in the way their elders did. The men complain that the process is
too painful and prefer the modern machine; and true enough, most of them do bear rather modern
tattoos. Another truth is that the men traditionally had to earn tattoos by killing someone from a
rival tribe. They would tattoo the face of the men they killed on their chest. I was reassured that
headhunting had ceased about twenty years ago, and, fortunately, killing someone was not
necessary for me to receive the tattoo. The only thing that would keep me from getting my tattoo
was me chickening out. Weeks of planning (and mustering enough courage) had come down to this.

I was now staring at my soon-to-be tormenter, the woman who would administer my sacrifice the
following day, which, by pure coincidence, happened to fall on Black Friday. While I consider
myself to be deeply spiritual, I am not remotely close to being religious, at least not the religion we
were taught. The invasion of Christianity has removed the need for some traditions, like skin art, to
survive.

Fang Oud would giggle every time we made eye contact, as if to tell me to re-think what I was
getting myself into. You see, traditionally, I do not deserve a tattoo on my back (also called the
“Fiat Uk”). This was reserved for men in their forties. The Kalinga people believe that age is an
accomplishment; and reaching 40 was a rare achievement. Skin art are symbols of milestones and
accomplishments for them, or at least they were in olden times. Today, it is considered art and Fang
Oud’s heart swells with happiness when people appreciate it.

There was a full moon on the eve of my tattoo ceremony, the perfect prelude to the big day. The
silvery, moonlit valley—surrounded by rice fields and low rising peaks—made Buscalan all the
more mystical. One does not even have to believe in the invisible energies of the world to feel the
intensity of nature. Moments like these made me ponder why I was living in the city (for most of
my life, I lived in a province in Mindanao), where life is often reduced to a rat race, blinding us
from the immense bucolic beauty of our planet.

The sunrise of the following morning was more proof of this endearing life the mountain people
enjoy. The scenery is dominated by rice stalks that carpet the countless terraces, as they dance in the
wind and absorb the rich golden rays of the sun. A nearby waterfall was the perfect venue for a final
swim and some last-minute mustering of courage. There was no more turning back now.

There are a few guidelines to getting a tribal tattoo: I cannot drink alcohol (before, during, and two
weeks after the tattooing) and my next shower would have to wait two days. Our guide Madrid
offered another: “Don’t shit in your pants.”

It was now time. Fear was encroaching every fibre of my existence as the crude tools were brought
out: a stick with a large pomelo tree thorn, a second stick that would be used as a hammer, a smaller
stick with three smaller thorns to thicken the patterns, and a coconut shell filled with charcoal and
oil. She pulled out a small stool for me to sit on and a lusong (rice pounder) to lean on. It was
reminiscent of a scene from A Tale of Two Cities where convicts would place their head on top of a
large log before the axe would come down and heads would roll into a basket. As circumstance
would have it, my partner of four years (who is an adventurer herself) sat on the rice pounder and
let me lean on her lap. It took a few minutes of frustrating translation—and endless sketching of the
design, a traditional snakeskin Kalinga pattern which I wanted to be circular —before the eager
artist voraciously hammered in the first blows.

“Why is she hammering it in so deep?!” was the first thing I said upon first contact with Fang Oud’s
tools. “Because she has to,” came a sarcastic reply. Of course I knew that. My methods of
distraction were inadequate, as the pain of the deep puncture wounds exacted out on my back were
beyond anything I had ever experienced. I decided to place it on the upper center of my back. It
wasn’t long before I would regret that decision, as I found that the shots to my spine and shoulder
blades were excruciating. I was gasping for air. Talking, as well as any unnecessary expenditure of energy, was no longer an option for me. It was now evident that only pure willpower would get me through the ordeal.

The thing about being subjected to extreme pain for a long period of time is that it dulls the senses. It was easier to suck it up in the beginning because I could isolate the exact place the thorn was moving through. I could still judge its depth, intensity, and pace. In the beginning, finding a meditative state was attainable. But after a few trips through the bones, the pain just resonated with a shooting, burning sensation which starts from the directly affected area, then spreads throughout the body. I was in anguish. I lost all sense of time and place, and the only sensation still working was my sense of touch. All I could feel was the painful throbbing on my back. The unvarying sound of the sticks engulfed me in its vibrations, which drowned out every other sound. I still cringe today when I hear sounds similar to it. The punctures are perfectly placed in uniform depth, as her steady hands masterfully control the strength of each hit. If she hits too hard, she might damage a nerve; too weak, and the charcoal will not stick to the skin permanently. I twitched involuntarily every time she hit the thorn into my spine. It is said that when one gets a tribal tattoo, the bones underneath the skin also get tattooed.

This master tattoo artist did not tire despite her age. She was graceful and relaxed while she worked. Her eyesight must be 20/20 since she never missed her mark. Her endurance was unmatchable. It was I, the canvas of her art, who needed a break. Fang Oud just kept on going.

The worst part was not the physical pain, but rather how the process slowly breaks you down mentally and emotionally. The loss of large quantities of blood did not help, either. The stick with the three thorns (for the second layer of the tattoo) is brutal, as it goes through already-wounded skin a second and third time. Rarely in life have I questioned my willpower. “What the fuck am I doing here?” I questioned myself and, by doing so, began the process of breaking down emotionally. When your body is in shock, and saving your ego doesn’t matter anymore, all you want is for the pain to end.

In the silence of the mind of a broken man, all pretenses are washed away. All that is left is the truth; a mind in sync with the heart.

Three hours into the process, that’s exactly what happened: I had cathartic, self-revelatory moment of complete honesty.

All of a sudden, I felt I had enough. In my mind, I had conceded and I walked away. I was shivering under the scorching sunlight. My sweat was cold and all I wanted to do was throw up and call it a day.

It was the combination of a 30-minute break, encouragement from my friends and my partner, and seeing Fang Oud patiently sitting on her little wooden stool waiting for me to regroup. Her tiny, ancient eyes were smiling at me in sympathy. After sixty years of tattooing and having been a recipient of this traditional rite herself, she knew what I was going through. I finally knew what it meant to dig very deep, to find every last ounce of strength and courage to master a situation that had already defeated you.

The result, in the end, was a masterpiece by a master. The process is excruciating, but the juice is worth the squeeze. The tattoo was fantastic in all its flaws. Its rawness radiated perfection. And its creator was proud of my appreciation. It humbled me, and in some inexplicable way, I gained another layer of maturity.
There were no major celebrations that night; just a relaxed evening under the moon and a very deep, satisfying sleep to recover my strength. Leaving the next day was bittersweet. It is hard to quantify what the trip meant to its travelers. The unfortunate reality is that humans are so limited by words. Emotions and experiences have to be reduced to a combination of letters when the dictionary of the spirit should have no limits.

Why did I do it? Many have asked. Initially, I thought it was about cementing my sense of country, to prove that I am more Filipino than I am Swiss. But the reasons have changed. This was about breaking down borders and judgments.

I find it sad that Fang Oud’s clients consist mostly of foreigners. The locals don’t seem interested or, worse, don’t even know the practice still exists. At 87, she is the last of the original artists in the Cordilleras. She is training a 12-year-old girl who, she claims, needs another eight years of training. By that time she will be 95. There is a large chance that when Fang Oud passes away, the practice will go extinct—along with much of the culture her generation has tirelessly preserved.

They still hold rituals and dances—usually in reverence for the cycles of life, deaths, and births—but year after year is slowly fading into memory. Sooner or later, the ways of the Kalinga will be gone forever, and Fang Oud knows it. She cried when she told us that she is the last of the tattoo artists. Her tears tugged something deep in my soul, too. Whatever the fate of this dying Philippine art—a skill so untainted by the modern world—I take consolation from a singular, sobering fact: history will always be on my back.

Ref.: http://rogue.ph/art/entry/the_fading_art_of_fang/