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## **The Tattoos of Armenian Genocide Survivors: Inscribing the Female Body as a Practice of Regulation**

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# The Tattoos of Armenian Genocide Survivors

## Inscribing the Female Body as a Practice of Regulation

### Abstract

In the course of the Armenian Genocide (1915–1917), an unknown number of female victims were forcibly tattooed, often on the face. Inscribing them with an alien identity, their captors permanently regulated the women's bodies in order to assimilate them into their communities. Some women eventually escaped and found shelter in orphanages or women's houses, but the tattoos remained on their skin, constituting a barrier to their reintegration. These women were stigmatized and shunned, their tattoos seen as a sign of sexual impurity and "transculturation". The tattoos needed to be removed – and the women's bodies regulated once again. Approaching tattoos as a means of regulation, this article explores how inscription materializes power dynamics in the context of the female body.

### Keywords

Tattoos, Armenian Genocide, Regulation, Sexuality, Conversion

### Biography

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Black dots and lines are scattered over L. Bilandjian's face, marking the tip of her nose, her forehead and cheeks, running down her chin and throat. They appear to be tattoos, but an examination of their origin and significance leads us far away from the contemporary understanding of tattooing, from the "tattoo renaissance"<sup>1</sup> that has emerged over the past decades as tattoos have become a common, fashionable practice and a part of popular culture. Bilandjian's tattoos (see fig. 1) are a record of the horrors she was forced to

1 Caplan 2000, xi. See Velliquette/Murray 1998.



Fig. 1: L. Bilandjian, 17 years old, from Aintab. (© Nubarian Library collection, [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php) [accessed 9 January 2021])

endure as a consequence of the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1917. Like many other female refugees, Bilandjian was forced to live in a non-Armenian community, presumably among those who identified as Turks, Kurds, or Arabs.<sup>2</sup> Although some women were eventually able to return home, the marks remained inscribed on their bodies as permanent reminders of their past, of stories that involved suffering, sexual violence, and the deprivation of freedom. In this article, I will analyze how this form of tattooing is connected to the regulation of survivors' bodies during the time of their capture as well as after their return. While in an academic context, tattoos are often viewed either as a means of individual self-expression<sup>3</sup> or as a form of corporal punishment,<sup>4</sup> in the context of the

Armenian Genocide, they take on a rather different significance, as a form of regulation expressed in terms of assimilation and exclusion. If we focus more narrowly on the female experience of the Armenian Genocide, this process of regulation is connected to sexuality, religion and ethnicity.

Photographs of the tattooed women constitute the main source used for this article. They can be accessed via the online exhibition hosted by the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute and derive from accounts of relief efforts undertaken by volunteers and missionaries in support of Armenian women and children. Many of the photographs were taken by Karen Jeppe, a Danish

2 Researchers have given the creators of the tattoos various labels. This issue will be discussed later in the article. I am aware that ethnicity is an ambiguous concept and correspondingly read ethnicity not as a natural phenomenon, but as an analytical notion. For our present purposes, it is necessary to distinguish ethnicities such as “Armenian” and “Turkish”. For further reading on this topic, see Eriksen 2019.

3 See Martin 2019; Thompson 2015.

4 See Anderson 2000; Gustafson 1997.

missionary who ran a shelter in Aleppo where nearly 1,700 women and girls lived.<sup>5</sup> Written records of eyewitness accounts will be used to round out the visual documentation.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to the survivors' return to Armenian communities and the work of the volunteers who were in charge of the rescued women, I rely on research by Rebecca Jinks.<sup>7</sup>

In the next section, the concepts of "tattoo" and "regulation" will be defined using an approach grounded in religious studies. Subsequently, I will illustrate the role of gender during the Armenian Genocide, present the historical context in which the tattoos originated and describe their design in detail. In the main section, I will discuss how the tattoos functioned as a means of regulating Armenian women's bodies. More specifically, I will focus on their role in expressing processes of assimilation and exclusion that occurred both within the non-Armenian communities in which the women were forced to live and in relation to the Armenian communities to which they subsequently returned.

## Approaching Tattoos as a Means of Regulation

Tattoos<sup>8</sup> are bodily practices that have recently attracted considerable attention in scholarly research, particularly in religious studies. Regula Zwicky conceives of tattoos as visually coded media that enable a revealing approach to the analysis of sources in the study of religion. She argues that two pivotal aspects characterize the tattoo: (1) it originates from an intentional action; (2) it is a permanent mark on the skin. Although nowadays methods for removing tattoos exist, they cannot be simply taken off or washed away; they are meant to last a lifetime. Following Fritz Stolz, Zwicky understands religion

5 Jinks 2018, 87, 115–116.

6 Svazlian 2011 collected more than 300 testimonies. The eyewitness accounts were sometimes recorded many years after the events in question and should be seen as memories. Still, they are a vital source, providing access to the stories of the tattooed women.

7 Jinks 2018 examined the treatment of tattooed Armenian women by relief workers in particular.

8 The term "tattoo" derives from the English term "tatow", which was, in turn, borrowed from the Tahitian word *ta-tatau*, which can be translated as "hitting a wound". While the technique developed independently in different regions of the world, drawings found on the body of the natural mummy "Ötzi", which dates back to approximately 5,300 BCE, are presumed to be the oldest known examples of tattoos. See Hainzl/Pinkl 2003, 8–9 and 18–19.

to constitute a communication system, within which tattoos are carriers of a polysemic meaning, which is transcribed through the interaction between the tattoo and its recipient. It is therefore essential to consider the context of the tattoo, as well as the relationship between the tattoo, the tattooed person, and the tattooer. These relationships are of crucial importance for this article, since here they are governed by violence and coercion.<sup>9</sup> In the present context, regulation will be understood as a process of assimilation and exclusion. The use of the term “assimilation”, instead of “inclusion”,<sup>10</sup> is intentional here and its meaning is interpreted, following Jutta Aumüller’s reading of Mary Douglas, as being connected to purity (*Reinheit*) and obliteration (*Auslöschung*). Aumüller refers to “purity and danger”, whereas Douglas identifies the separating out of the impure, the dirty, as an identity-forming factor. Assimilation is related to the inability to endure difference. It can be understood as a combination of appropriation (*Vereinnahmung*) and cleansing (*Säuberung*). Coerced tattoos were an appropriation of the enemy’s body. They are an interference in a person’s physicality that is not eliminated, but reshaped at the will of another.<sup>11</sup>

This process of regulation erases and establishes difference, which is made visible. Hence, tattoos are relevant for symbolic and social boundary formation. By marking social differences connected to unequal access to resources and opportunities, tattoos represent and document an individual’s position within society and may radically transform it.<sup>12</sup> As we shift our focus to the tattooed women of the Armenian Genocide, the dialectical process of boundary formation is crucial, since assimilation is always simultaneously accompanied by social exclusion. Through the irreversibility of the tattoo, the deprivation of freedom assumes an all-encompassing character. The tattoos embody a continuous actualization of their origin – an act of violence – and preserve the tattooed person’s experiences.<sup>13</sup>

9 Zwicky 2013, 81–83, 90; Zwicky 2014, 260.

10 Following Akçam, Bjørnlund, and Derderian.

11 Aumüller 2009, 41. See Douglas 1966.

12 Grigo 2015, 80; Dahinden/Duemmler/Moret 2011, 227; Häusle-Paulmichl 2018, 20, 37–38; Caplan 2000, xiv.

13 Zwicky 2013, 81–83. Boundary formation is especially relevant in the context of tattoos, since they are inscribed into the self’s most fundamental, physical point of demarcation, namely the skin. In other words, tattoos mark and modify the boundary between self and world. See Häusle-Paulmichl 2018.

## Gender and the Armenian Genocide

An estimated 1.5 million Armenians were killed during the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1917 in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> The genocide was planned and executed under the leadership of the Committee for Union and Progress, also known as the “Young Turks”. Gender played a crucial role in the organization of the genocide.<sup>15</sup> Katherine Derderian asserts the existence of a “definite link between genocidal and gender ideologies”,<sup>16</sup> which included the assimilation of women and children and the prevention of childbirth. The genders were separated; the male population was then massacred, while many members of the female population were raped, abused, and taken as slaves or brides, in addition to being forced to convert from Christianity to Islam. This separation of the genders was grounded in the assumption that only adult males acted as carriers of “ethnicity”, while women (and children) could be assimilated into non-Armenian society, their cultural values erased and reprogrammed. Assimilation and conversion were thus important structural components of the genocide and aimed at erasing Armenian identity.<sup>17</sup> As a result of this worldview, many Armenian women and children experienced different horrors than the men. Instead of being immediately put to death, they often faced months-long death marches, marked by recurring sexual violence. Rape, prostitution, and murder were widespread, and camps and deportation convoys evolved into slave markets. Karen Jeppe stated in 1926 that amongst the thousands of Armenian women and girls she had encountered, all but one had been sexually abused.<sup>18</sup> A huge number of Armenian women and children had ended up kidnapped, sold, or “voluntarily” living among their captors to escape deportation. It is estimated that around 5–10 percent of the Armenian survivors resided in non-Armenian communities. In the course of their assimilation, many Armenian women were tattooed in the same way as the members of their new communities. At the time of the genocide, tattooing was a widespread practice in eastern Anatolia and the northern Levant. Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Yazidis, and many other ethnic groups decorated their bodies with tattoos. However, the use of tattoos was not a common custom among Armenians.<sup>19</sup>

14 The number of victims varies depending on factors such as the period considered.

15 Bjørnlund 2009, 17.

16 Derderian 2005, 13.

17 Derderian 2005, 2, 10, 13–15; Bjørnlund 2009, 17, 34; Üngör 2012, 182.

18 Bjørnlund 2009, 24–25; Akçam 2012, 312, 315.

19 Akçam 2012, 314; Okkenhaug 2015, 440; Jinks 2018, 86; Smeaton 1937, 53; Field 1958.

As a result of a large-scale assistance mission after the First World War, many female victims were “reclaimed” by the Armenian community. Many found shelter in rescue homes, which were often established by North American and European missionaries and volunteers. However, not all Armenian women were treated in the same way. The tattoos which some women carried on their faces constituted not only the violent inscription of an alien identity, but also a barrier to readmission into their home communities.<sup>20</sup>

## The Origin and Design of the Tattoos

It is difficult to identify which ethnic groups were responsible for the tattoos documented on the photographs of the Armenian women. In the scholarship, their new communities and thus the presumed originators of these tattoos are labelled as Turks, Kurds, Arabs, or Bedouins.<sup>21</sup> In general, scholars seem to concur that all of these new communities followed Islam.<sup>22</sup> The oldest evidence of tattooing in the region dates back to the Mesopotamian city-state of Ur in 4,000 BCE. Figurines found there have black markings on their shoulders, which are interpreted as depicting early tattoos. Although tattooing was and still is controversial in Islam, it was a common practice among rural communities. Yet, as Winifred Smeaton noted in 1937, over the course of the 20th century, it was gradually becoming unpopular. In the area corresponding to present-day Turkey, tattooing was mostly practiced in eastern and southern Anatolia and was usually called *daqq* or *dövün*.<sup>23</sup>

The practice appears to have been very similar in Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab communities. The pigment used for tattooing was made out of diverse ingredients, although the fundamental component was lampblack. The design was painted on the surface of the skin before being poked into the hypoderm using a needle. The tattooists were mainly women, whether professionals, women who tattooed themselves, or mothers who tattooed their children. Although it was more common for women to receive tattoos, men were also

20 Jinks 2018, 87–91.

21 See Okkenhaug 2015, 441; Jinks 2018, 87; Akçam 2012, 315. The term “Bedouin” describes not an ethnicity but a way of life among the Arabs. See Chatty/Young 2014.

22 See Okkenhaug 2015, 440–441; Jinks 2018, 90; Üngör 2012, 181; Derderian 2005, 9.

23 Field 1958, 8, 12; Smeaton 1937, 53; Birkalan-Gedik 2006, 46.

tattooed, mainly on their hands or wrists. Among women, the chin, neck, chest, ankles, and hands were common places for tattoos.<sup>24</sup>

The tattoos documented in the photographs are located on the faces, necks, and hands of the Armenian women and are dark in color.<sup>25</sup> The tattoos vary in form: in some photographs, they consist of fine dots and delicate lines, while in others they are thick and irregular. The marks are usually arranged symmetrically and are quite small, up to a few centimeters in size.

The most important location for tattoos seems to have been the face. All of the women display marks on their chins, which sometimes continue down their throats in a line usually consisting of intermeshing crescents.<sup>26</sup> Located towards the lower edge of the chin, the designs are often of crosses and circles. Several of the women also have designs right below their mouths that resemble an upside-down Y or have their chins divided by a straight line. Another important place is the middle of the forehead. Often, the design here is comparatively large and grabs the viewer's attention right away. Two women display designs reminiscent of an eye: they consist of a central dot surrounded by a semicircle with three/five short lines branching off. In other cases, the forehead is marked by simple geometrical designs like dots, circles, or crosses. The cheek is another location where several of the women were tattooed. Here, the design often consists of three closely arranged dots.<sup>27</sup>

The second important location visible on the photographs is the hands. In only two of the photographs are the hands visible, and in both cases they are tattooed. This may be an indicator that the hands were only included in the photograph if they were tattooed, which would, in turn, indicate that only a few of the women had tattooed hands. The hand tattoos seem more extensive than the face tattoos – they are bigger and closer together. One woman's hand displays an assortment of designs that do not seem to be arranged in any particular order, while the second woman's hands are marked with symmetrically arranged designs. The backs of her hands are divided by

24 For more details on the recurring motifs see Smeaton 1937, 54–60; Çağlayandereli/Göker 2016, 2557; Birkalan-Gedik 2006, 46; Field 1958, 15–18, 24. Field's and Smeaton's records attest to an orientalist perspective. But since they studied tattoos in the region relatively shortly after the Genocide, their sketches and descriptions are the best available source for analyzing and comparing the tattoos.

25 Eyewitnesses mostly speak of blue tattoos, e. g., Gayané Adourian. See Svazlian 2011, 446.

26 See figs. 1, 2. This kind of tattooing is called *şadr*, see Field 1958, 15.

27 See figs. 1, 3, 4.





Fig. 2: Astghik, 16 years old, from Urfa. (© Nubarian Library collection, [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php) [accessed 9 January 2021])

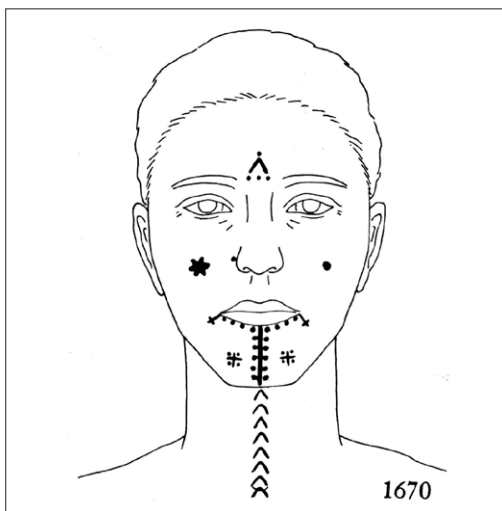


Fig. 3: Depiction of the tattoos of a Solubba woman. (© Henry Field (1958), figure 5)



Fig. 4: Mariam Chaparlian, 27 years old, from Marash. (© Nubarian Library collection, [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php) [accessed 9 January 2021])

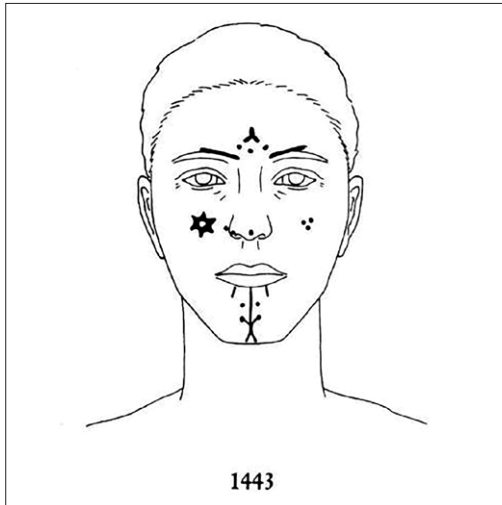


Fig. 5: Depiction of the tattoos of a Schammar woman. (© Henry Field (1958), figure 5)

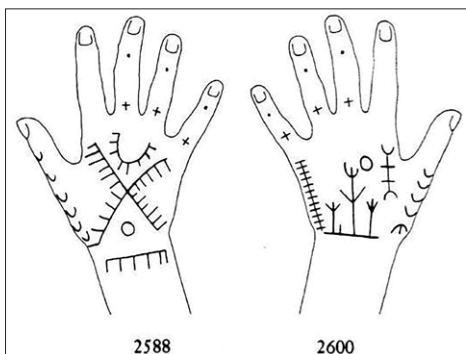


Fig. 7: Depiction of the tattoos of Yazidi women (© Henry Field (1958), figure 4)

Fig. 6: Jeghsa Hairabedian, from Adiaman. (© Nubarian Library collection, [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php) [accessed 9 January 2021])

large crosses and her wrists are bordered by an edging consisting of small designs.<sup>28</sup>

The Armenian woman in figure 2 and the Solubba<sup>29</sup> woman in figure 3 display very similar tattoos. Both women are tattooed with a line along the chin and neck, which is called *şadr* and consists of dots and crescents.

The woman in figure 4 has a design on her forehead that matches exactly the one seen on the Solubba woman in figure 3. As in figure 3, in figure 4 too the design consists of three dots, a reverse V, and another dot on top. Additionally, a comparison with figure 5 shows strong similarities. The latter image is of a woman belonging to the Schammar.<sup>30</sup> Both women have three dots tattooed on their cheeks, though on the opposite sides of their faces. The designs on their chins are also very similar: in the center, starting beneath the mouth, is a line with two dots to the left and to the right, terminating in a reverse V. In figure 6, the tattooed hand of Jeghsa Hairabedian, an Armenian woman, is visible. We know that her tattooists were Kurds.<sup>31</sup> Her marks resemble the hands depicted in figure 7: on her wrist, we see an extensive

28 See fig. 6.

29 The Solubba were nomads living mainly on the Arabian Peninsula. See Betts 1989.

30 According to Field, the Schammar are Bedouins, that is, Arabs. See Field 1958, 13.

31 Jinks 2018, 121.

comb, while on the back of her hand, there are arrangements of circles and dots resembling suns. However, the hands depicted in figure 7 belonged to a Yazidi woman, which shows once more the similarities of the markings across ethnic groups.

## Inscribed and Erased: Regulating the Body through Tattoos

According to the findings of Henry Field and Winifred Smeaton, the practice of tattooing in Asia Minor was rarely connected to coercion. Mostly, women served as tattooists, which highlights the link between this practice and gender. However, it was neither an inherited profession nor was it reserved for a certain ethnic or social group.<sup>32</sup>

While in non-Armenian communities, women were the agents and the tattoos were seen as voluntary, for the Armenian women who were assimilated into these communities, the tattoo took on the opposite connotations. Alongside other bodily regulations, like rape and captivity, tattoos were a form of deprivation of physical integrity. Tattooing was a means of assimilation along with forced marriages, the imposition of non-Armenian names, and the compulsory learning of a new language.<sup>33</sup> Haykoush Miridjan Ohanian describes how the process of being tattooed was connected to violence: “The Arabs held me, put me down on the ground and put a mill-stone on my breast. I was kicking my feet saying: ‘I don’t want’, and they wanted to tattoo my face, to make me look like an Arab girl.”<sup>34</sup> Not only were the Armenian women brought into alignment with the women in their new communities, but their old identities were supposed to be overwritten. It was the visual level that made the assimilation evident and irreversible: Through the tattoos, a line was to be drawn between the Armenian women and the Armenian community, between the Armenian women and their “Armenian-ness”.

For those Armenian women who escaped their captors, their tattooed bodies were once again a matter of regulation, both within the women’s refuges (often led by Christian missionaries) and within groups composed of other Armenians. A tattoo symbolized a disgraceful memory and was therefore to be ignored, suppressed, and, in the best case, removed from the skin. Gayané Adou-

32 Smeaton 1937, 54–60.

33 Derderian 2005, 10–12.

34 Svazlian 2011, 338.

rian recounts how her mother tried to remove her tattoos, which led to further injury: “But they used to laugh at me. I did not know Armenian. There were blue tattoos on my face. My poor mother tried to remove them with nitric acid, but it burnt my skin. It corroded my skin and left scars up to this day.”<sup>35</sup>

But often it was North Americans and Europeans who prevented the reintegration of the tattooed women into Armenian communities: Jinks states that only Karen Jeppe accepted all Armenian women into her women’s house without discrimination. The tattooed women rarely appear in the records and fundraising materials, an indicator of the discomfort surrounding tattoos among relief workers. Moreover, there was an “obsession”, as Jinks calls it, with removing the tattoos surgically. Doctors working for relief missions asked for advice on how to remove the tattoos, while publications printed photographs of successful operations.<sup>36</sup>

The women were thus assimilated into a foreign tattooed community, while being excluded from their own non-tattooed community, into which they could be reassimilated through the removal of the tattoos. Three aspects of these processes of regulation were especially relevant: sexuality, religion, and ethnicity.

## Regulating Sexuality

Many of Smeaton’s findings suggest that tattooing among the communities she observed was sexually meaningful. She writes about women who tattooed themselves in order to keep – or lose – their husband’s love. In other cases, tattooing was supposed to induce pregnancy: interestingly, the tattoos were to be applied on the second or third day of menstruation. Smeaton speculates that tattooing might have constituted a puberty rite for girls, who were mostly tattooed around the time they reached puberty, or at least before they got married. One could also argue that these sexual connotations were reflected in the places on the body where these tattoos were applied, for example on the abdomen, in a line going down from the navel (fig. 8).<sup>37</sup>

These areas are not visible on the photographs of the Armenian women. However, one eyewitness report also suggests a sexual motivation behind the tattoos: Tagouhi Antonian states that through the tattoos, the Bedouins protected them from the Turkish “harem”: “There we spoke Armenian with each

35 Svazlian 2011, 446.

36 Jinks 2018, 78, 90–91, 100, 107.

37 Smeaton 1937, 54–57.

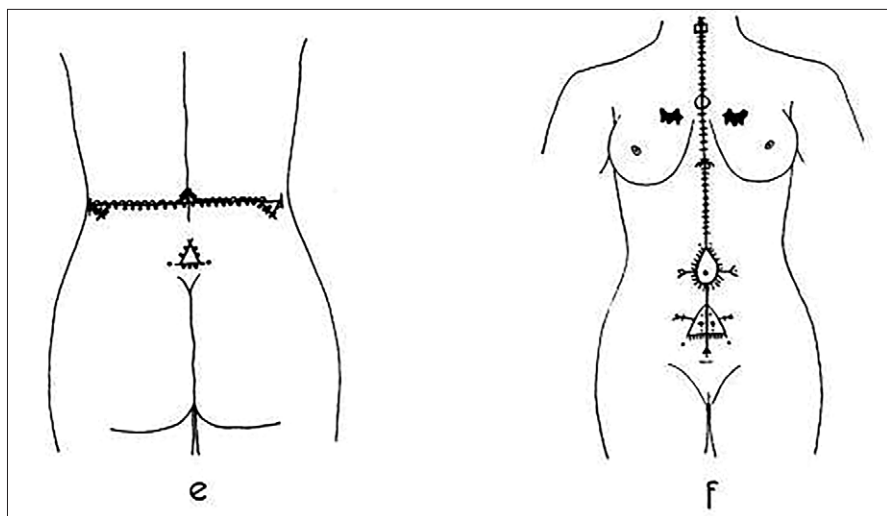


Fig. 8: Depiction of the tattoos of a “Non-tribal woman of Baghdad” and a “Gipsy woman (Kaulia)”. (© Winifred Smeaton (1937))

other. To save us from the Turks, the Bedouins had tattooed our faces with green ink. We were altogether 12 Armenian girls. There was a pasha nearby. Every day he took one Armenian girl with him. He had made something like a harem.”<sup>38</sup> Because the faces of the Armenian girls were marked with green ink, the “Turks” would not want to kidnap them for their harem. Although it sounds like Antonian perceived the tattoos as a necessary precaution, one could argue that at the same time, by tattooing the girls and women, the “Bedouins” marked them as part of their community, as bodies that they controlled. Antonian’s statement implies that this involved claiming sexual ownership over the women’s bodies, since she later had to marry one of the Bedouins.

For the Armenian women who found their way to rescue homes, the tattoos were again given sexual connotations by their European and North American helpers. Jinks explains the strong rejection tattoos triggered in terms of the “contemporary cultural unease in Western society regarding tattoos”.<sup>39</sup> Europeans had tattooed convicts in their colonies, often on the face, and tattoos were seen as a sign of a “primitive” civilization. Europeans who were tat-

38 Svazlian 2011, 110.

39 Jinks 2018, 101.



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tooded were often those perceived as living at the margins of society: seafarers, soldiers, and, in the case of women, sex workers.<sup>40</sup>

The contemporary press echoes this sexualization of the tattoos. Figure 9 shows a page from the *Standard-Examiner* of 1920. In the upper right corner, an imagined scene involving the application of tattoos is drawn. A woman, nearly naked, is being pushed to the ground by three men. The choice of words in the headline is also striking: not only has a tattoo been removed, but the woman has been “cleansed” of the “cruel Turk’s brand of shame”.<sup>41</sup> In an article from 1919 that appeared in the *Prescott Journal Miner*, Dr Post of Princeton University is recorded as claiming that the tattoos indicate that a woman had been “an inmate of a harem”.<sup>42</sup>

This context makes clearer why many missionaries and volunteer workers were reluctant to acknowledge the initial purpose of the tattoos as decorative. Instead, many described them as a type of disfigurement, a stigma,<sup>43</sup> as marks of shame and slavery – what “delineated the rescued women as an outcast group”.<sup>44</sup> This exclusion was closely connected to moral and sexual concerns, since the tattoos were permanent reminders of the women’s relationships with Muslim men: “the image of sexual subjection evoked by the tattoos was intolerable, and also a symbol that the women’s innocence and purity had been corrupted.”<sup>45</sup> Jinks describes how, for this very reason, rescued women were regarded with suspicion and separated from the younger girls. Volunteers felt particular unease in the case of mothers whose children were seen as a product of “sexual impurity” or even “miscegenation”. Many women, aware of this stigma, did not dare to return to the Armenian community. Because of their stigmatization and rejection, some were left with prostitution as the only means of survival – aggravating the condemnation from their environment.<sup>46</sup>

The sexual stigmatization entailed by the tattoos also affected how the women were seen by other Armenians, as the eyewitness accounts illustrate.

40 Jinks 2018, 101–102; Oettermann 2000, 193, 205–209.

41 [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc\\_frenchbulldog\\_ver04/data/sn84026749/00280764711/1920090501/0636.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc_frenchbulldog_ver04/data/sn84026749/00280764711/1920090501/0636.pdf) [accessed 28 December 2020].

42 <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=906&dat=19191209&id=hncNAAAAIBA&sjid=D-FIDAAAAIBA&pg=3752,3372070> [accessed 28 December 2020].

43 Interestingly, classical Greek and Latin authors commonly used words derived from the noun *stigma* to refer to the practice of tattooing. See MacQuarrie 2000.

44 Jinks 2018, 106.

45 Jinks 2018, 105.

46 Jinks 2018, 105–106, 112–113.

In some cases, the tattoos regulated a central aspect of the women's sexuality, namely marriage. Sirena Aram Alajajian states that because of her tattoos she was unable to find a husband: "During my youth, a very polite Armenian youth met me. He admired my looks and knowledge of languages, but he said that without the blue tattoos on my pretty face, we might have gotten married. So, what the Arabs did with my face was the reason for me to remain all alone in my old age."<sup>47</sup> However, other accounts suggest that many Armenian women were married to Armenian men in spite of their tattoos. Karapet Tozlian recounts: "We came to Aleppo, but there was no place to live, they gathered the orphans from the Arabs and placed them in orphanages. The children used to speak Arabic. The Arabs had tattooed the Armenian girls' and women's faces with blue ink, but our Armenian youth said: Never mind, we'll marry our unfortunate girls. What then, if the Arabs have made them work."<sup>48</sup> Nouritsa Kyurkdjian recounts something similar: "Then, the English Protestants opened orphanages. The Armenian girls, who had been kidnapped, were brought back, as well as the children, and put to schools. The adult girls were married to Armenian boys, though many of them had been tattooed on their faces with blue ink."<sup>49</sup> These two statements show that the tattoos did not seem to be an insurmountable obstacle to finding a husband. However, they do indicate that the tattoos were seen as problematic, even if not always problematic enough to prevent the women from being considered "marriageable".

## Regulating Religion

The connection between tattooing and religion is evident in Smeaton's remarks, as she states that "probably most tattooing has an ultimate magico-religious purpose."<sup>50</sup> For example, tattoos were considered a remedy for healing injuries and curing diseases. The tattoo was applied directly to the body part in need of healing: for example to the forehead or the temple in the case of headaches. Smeaton also observed cases of tattooing aimed at bringing about a desired result. This practice included the sexually connoted tattoos described above, as well as tattoos applied to protect children from death or to ward off other magic. Tattooing could also be connected to reading the

47 Svazlian 2011, 412.

48 Svazlian 2011, 441.

49 Svazlian 2011, 453.

50 Smeaton 1937, 54.



Qur'an: Women tattooed dots on their hands to ensure (or repel) their husband's love; one of Smeaton's informants stated that the best results were achieved when the tattoo was applied on a Friday at noon, while a female mullah was reading the Qur'an.<sup>51</sup>

Though it is likely that some of the designs found on the Armenian women had an apotropaic purpose, the eyewitness accounts do not draw a direct connection between the tattoos and religion. Many speak of forced conversions to Islam,<sup>52</sup> but they do not document the victims as perceiving the tattoos to be a sign of such a conversion. Hakob Hovhannes Moutafian is the only witness who mentions religion and tattoos in the same context:

During the massacres many Armenian girls and boys were able to escape, in various ways, from the Turkish murderers and find refuge, naked and hungry, at the Arab desert Bedouins. The latter had tattooed with blue ink the faces of many Armenian girls according to their custom, had made them Moslems and had kept them for years. Most of those Armenians had grown up, had forgotten their mother tongue, had become Arabs, but there are those among them who still remember that their ancestors were Armenians.<sup>53</sup>

Even if the tattoos were not perceived as a physical manifestation of an alien religion, they were evidently perceived as a means of inscribing a new cultural identity onto the women's bodies. And this cultural identity included an alien religion.

For the American press of the time, by contrast, the connection between tattooing and religious conversion was evident. "The victims of the branding and tattooing, in every case, were Christians and their captors thus marked them as Mohammedans",<sup>54</sup> declares the *Prescott Journal Miner* article cited above. Similarly, an article in the *New York Times* from 1919 claims, "In the tents of the Arabs in the Syrian desert, many were bound and forcibly tattooed on the forehead, lips and chin, to mark them as Moslem women."<sup>55</sup> Finally, in the article from the *Standard-Examiner* cited above (fig. 9), the tattoos

51 Smeaton 1937, 54–55.

52 See Svazlian 2011, 200, 204, 222, 272, 287.

53 Svazlian 2011, 546.

54 <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=906&dat=19191209&id=hncNAAAAIABJ&sjid=D-FIDAAAAIABJ&pg=3752,3372070> [accessed 28 December 2020].

55 <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/06/01/97089721.pdf> [accessed 28 December 2020]

are called “Holy Arrows”, “a Living Symbol of Ownership and Religion”, and are described in the following terms:

Between the girl’s eyebrows the needle made a crude arrow of little dots. The arrow pointed upward – “to guide the girl’s future thoughts to Mohammed.” Below her lower lip a similar arrow, also pointed upward, was formed, that “her spoken words might be wafted above with reverence to the Prophet.” Around the edge of her lip five purple blotches were placed to represent the five daily prayers of Islam.<sup>56</sup>

The article describes the story of Nargig Abakiam, whose tattoos were removed by experts in New York. Their removal was supposed to restore her “beauty”, but because the tattoos were perceived as a physical manifestation of an alien religion, removing them also meant restoring her Christianity.

Religion was also an important topic among the missionaries and volunteer workers helping the Armenian women who had escaped. For them too, they were not just women who had lived among men, but Christian women who had lived among Muslim men. Especially among the missionaries, it was widely believed that the Armenian population had been “Islamized”. As their goal was to reconstruct the Armenian nation not only as a political group, but also as a religious group, the recoverability of the women, especially of the tattooed women (who wore permanent, visible reminders of their “defilement” by non-Christians on their skin), was questionable. Missionaries often preferred to concentrate on orphans, who were considered more malleable and easier to reintegrate.<sup>57</sup>

## Regulating Ethnicity

Neither Field nor Smeaton mention tattooing in general or specific designs as belonging to a particular group or ethnicity.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, some ethnic groups did tattoo, while others did not: the Armenians were among those

56 [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc\\_frenchbulldog\\_ver04/data/sn84026749/00280764711/1920090501/0636.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc_frenchbulldog_ver04/data/sn84026749/00280764711/1920090501/0636.pdf) [accessed 28 December 2020]. Interestingly, this direct connection between Islam and the symbolism of the tattoos cannot be found in Smeaton’s or Field’s research. The article in the *Standard-Examiner* does not reveal the source of these interpretations of the tattoos.

57 Jinks 2018, 91, 97, 112.

58 Çağlayandereli/Göker 2016, 2557.

who did not, as is evident from the eyewitness accounts. Most eyewitnesses connected the tattoos directly to ethnicity, for instance Gayané Adourian: “The Chechen took me to Telhafar – a town in Iraq – and sold me to my new Turkmen father. I remained with him for five years. [...] They tattooed my face with blue ink to give me the appearance of an Arab, and they gave me the name Nouriya.”<sup>59</sup> Sirena Aram Alajajian states that as a result of the tattoos, she not only looked like an “Arab”, but she also became an “Arab”: “But afraid of losing me, one day they seized me by my hands and feet and began to prick my face with blue ink down to my breast. I shouted from the pain but there was no one to hear me. In fact, this was their custom; they had made me into an Arab.”<sup>60</sup> And elsewhere she asks, “Do you see my face? The Arabs have tattooed my face, pricking with pins and pouring blue ink in order to make me a fellah Arab.”<sup>61</sup> Here she implies that for her kidnappers, the motivation for tattooing her face was to regulate her ethnicity. This regulatory function is even more obvious in Barouhi Chorekian’s statement: “Swimming across the Khabur River (river flowing near Der-Zor), we reached near the Arab Bedouins. They sheared off our lice-infested hair; they tattooed our face with ink in order to hide our Armenian origin.”<sup>62</sup> Barouhi Silian similarly recounts that the tattoos were a means to overwrite her Armenianness: “I fled with four other girls to the forest and then swam across a river. An Arab took me to his home and told me, ‘My daughter, I know you do not have the same custom, but let me tattoo your face with blue ink so that they will not take you for an Armenian.’ I cried. I had neither bed nor clothes. They tattooed my face; they sheared my thick braids.”<sup>63</sup>

The visual demarcation between the Armenian women and their Armenian community was not easy to overcome once the women had escaped their captors. For many missionaries, aides, and Armenians, the tattoos marked a border between themselves and the women. These processes of delineation were reinforced by the specific historical and political situation that the Armenian people was confronted with at the end of the First World War. Civil and religious aides, along with the Armenian elite, were driven by the idea of rebuilding the Armenian nation. For the Armenian elite in the Middle East,

59 Svazlian 2011, 445–446.

60 Svazlian 2011, 411.

61 Svazlian 2011, 410.

62 Svazlian 2011, 413.

63 Svazlian 2011, 414.

this idea implied a “pure” community, cleansed of “Turkification” – an ideal that the tattooed women carrying visible reminders of it on their faces hardly fit. Among the aides, Jinks states, a “national reconstructionist humanitarianism” prevailed that urged for a recreation of the Armenians as a people: “Women, as child-bearers and custodians of domesticity, had to epitomize Armenianness.”<sup>64</sup> In the context of this national reconstruction, not all women were perceived as equally recuperable. With the formation of a stable Armenian identity as a key goal in the process of nation-building, the tattooed women turned into a threat. Since their tattoos were perceived as “an extreme social transgression. [...] most rescuers shrank from the women – suspicious also that the tattoos indicated an individual’s transculturation, and thus divided national loyalties.”<sup>65</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

The regulation of the Armenian women’s bodies by means of tattoos was not a random occurrence. The tattoos were not simply the result of living together, that is, of adapting to a custom. Those who regulated the women’s bodies had an aim. But beneath all of the sexual, religious, and ethnic ideals, we find one main concern: making women’s bodies the same – the same as the tattooed bodies and the same as the non-tattooed bodies. For their captors, this involved *appropriating* the body, by reshaping it according to their own will. For their fellow Armenians and foreign volunteers, it involved *cleansing* the body of sexual evidence, of an alien religion and ethnicity. However, while the application of the tattoos was certainly coercive, it remains unclear how much agency the women had in the process of their removal.

Having been assimilated into a community they did not want to be a part of and excluded from the community to which they felt they belonged; the tattooed women did not fully belong to any group.<sup>66</sup> After their escape, delin-eating themselves from the perpetrators of the genocide would have been a logical step toward reinstating their belonging to the Armenian community. Because of their tattooed bodies, the women did not have the chance to re-

64 Jinks 2018, 94.

65 Jinks 2018, 91–94, 102, 105, 110.

66 Jinks similarly notes: “as “captives” held in “slavery” by these marks, they were not fully part of Bedouin society, but neither could they fully rejoin the Armenian community.” See Jinks 2018, 106.

alize this demarcation fully. To some degree they were seen as belonging to the group of the perpetrators. The tattoos not only preserved the violence of their origin, they also documented and perpetuated the women's expulsion.

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