**Scarification: Ancient Body Art Leaving New Marks**

**Cultural Scarification**

People around the globe have long used their bodies as canvases for the expression of cultural identity, community status, connection to ancestors or gods—and to mark rites of passage or to "wear" a permanent amulet.

The Maori and other western Pacific peoples have a long history of tattooing. The word "tattoo" is believed to have originated in Polynesia from *tatau,* which means "to mark." Some of the earliest tattoos were cuts with ash rubbed into them, which formed blackened scars.

Some tattooing and scarification rituals are extremely painful. Joseph Campbell noted in his book *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God* that throughout the world, the rituals of transformation from infancy to manhood are often excruciating ordeals. Many are deeply sacred rites.

"A tattoo is painful and bloody," said Vince Hemingson, a writer and filmmaker who has studied body-modification practices worldwide. "In almost all hunting and gathering cultures, shedding of blood summons the gods—and good and evil spirits."

**Initiation, Status, and Beauty**

In Papua New Guinea's Sepik region, scarification is an initiation rite for young men. There, it is believed that crocodiles created humans.

The initiate's chest, back, and buttocks are sliced with a bamboo sliver to test their strength and self-discipline. The resulting scars represent teeth marks of the crocodile that "swallowed" the young man during the ceremony.

In Australia, scarring was practiced widely among Aboriginal peoples but is now restricted almost entirely to parts of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. At the age of 16 or 17, cuts are made on the chests, shoulders, and bellies of both men and women.

Without these scars, "clean skin" tribe members were traditionally not permitted to trade, sing ceremonial songs, or participate in other tribal activities.

In Ethiopia's Karo tribe, men scar their chests to represent killing enemies from other tribes. Women with scarred torsos and chests are considered particularly sensual and attractive.

Scarification has been most used among dark-skinned equatorial peoples. "Scarification almost always happens in a culture where there is so much melanin in skin that it would be difficult to see a tattoo," Hemingson said.

**A Growing Practice**

There are several reasons for the growing popularity of scarification. Pitts feels that it's partly spurred by a nostalgia for a different type of society.

"Industrial consumerist cultures are becoming more interested in what they might call primitive societies," she said. "That's not wholly new—it's a fascination thats centuries old." The romantic idea of the exotic ethnic dates back to colonial times, she said.

"Someone stuck in L.A. traffic, wearing a tribal tattoo, has a cultural nostalgia for something we imagine we've lost," Pitts said. "The problem is that we're taking it upon ourselves to represent a whole range of indigenous cultures in ways that they may not agree with—or may violate sacred spiritual ritual."

She cited the example of an American who tattooed his face with a female Maori tattoo as a form of gender-bending—which the Maori would find extremely offensive.

**Cutting Edge**

Some scarify simply to be different. "Tattooing has become old hat," Hemingson said. "If you want to be on the cutting edge—and want to set yourself apart—you can do tongue splitting or scarification."

Pitts argues that body modification is not really so strange within a culture where identity is often expressed through appearance—which in mainstream society includes fashion consumption, cosmetic surgery, and botox.

On the fringes of society, it's tattooing, piercing, and scarification.

"Scarification definitely isn't as popular as tattooing, and I don't think it ever will be," said Ouellette. "It still carries a stigma as something really bizarre."