

**Ugly  
becomes  
beautiful**  
the tattooed women from Burma

Eric Lafforgue





The Chin tattooed women live in the Chin, Rakhine and Arakan states in northwestern Myanmar. They have different patterns of tattoos. This woman live 3 hours from Mrauk U town in Kirt Shoung village and can only be reached by boat. This one is called the spiderweb tattoo. The circle in the center of her forehead represents the sun.



The spiderweb tattoo pattern seen in profile. The lines under the nose symbolize tiger whiskers.



This one is the B pattern from the Mindat area. It is worn by the Muun tribe who inhabit the hills of the Arakan state. It is composed of dots, lines and occasionally circles. Women love to wear headdresses, which are sometimes simply a towel.



The Magan tribeswomen wear huge earrings made of beads and calabashes, featuring vertical and horizontal lines in addition to dots. They can also play the flute with their noses!



This is one of the most impressive styles: the entire face is inked up. Very few women with their tattoo from the U Pu tribe are still alive. In Kanpelet village, one died and another was very ill. Pa Late (pictured) says she is 85 years old. She is nearly deaf but still works hard.



The origin of facial tattoos in the region is unknown. Some believe that the practice began during the reigns of Kings long ago. The royalty used to come to the villages to capture young women. The men from the tribe may have tattooed their women to make them ugly, thereby saving them from a life of slavery.



For years, access to the tribal Mindat area was restricted by the government. It was opened just two years ago. Only about 700 tourists visit per year. Most of them only visit the bucolic Mount Victoria by bus, never meeting the tattooed women who remain isolated, hours away by foot.



In these steep hills, it takes hours to go from one village to another.



There are two ways to make the tattoo needle. The first consists of tying three pieces of bamboo together and the second uses thorns. The ink is a mixture of cow bile, soot, plants, and pig fat.



It usually took one day to complete the standard tattoo and a few more for the totally black one. The tattoo artist was a specialist or in some cases a parent. Infection was a common problem as the girls had blood all over their face.

Everything, including the eyelids, were tattooed. Many women say that the neck was the most sensitive area.

“I was 10 years old. The day before the tattoo ceremony, I only ate sugarcane and drank tea. It was forbidden to eat meat or peanuts. During the tattoo session, I cried a lot, but I could not move at all. After the session, my face bled for 3 days. It was very painful. My mother put fresh beans leaves on my face to alleviate the pain. I had no choice if I wanted to get married. Men wanted women with tattoos at this time. My mother told me that without a tattoo on my face, I would look like.. a man!”



The tattoos may look the same but little differences can be noticed as every village or clan adds its own unique touches.



“The web drawn on my face attracted the men like a spiderweb catches insects!” said this woman.



Many women say that they had no choice. They had to obey their parents and get the tattoos.



Long ago, when the girls refused to be tattooed, they were thrown into the pig sty kept under the family house until they changed their minds.



Pa Late said that a completely black face had become a symbol of beauty in the past. The few women who refused to do it looked ugly to the men.

The tattoo took three days but the pain lasted over a month.



This woman's teeth have turned black as a result of chewing too many betel nuts.



The military junta has forbidden the tattoos. If the government caught them doing a tattoo, they had to pay half a cow for a fine. That's way too much! But when you walk deep into the hills, you still can find some young women who have them. Many refused to be photographed, knowing the tattoos are illegal. Missionaries also fight against this tradition...



Only six tattooed women remain alive in Pan Baung village.



Yi Yi with with her grandmother Ma Aung Seim. The young girl did not get her face tattooed as she'd be mocked in school.



Every house hangs the skulls of buffaloes or pigs killed during ceremonies. These bones communicate the social status of the inhabitant. Every time a sacrifice is done, the meat of the animal is turned towards Mount Victoria.



The totems represent the different stages of a family's life. The more they are in number, the richer the family. Each totem represents the sacrifice of buffaloes.



Shamans have a lot of influence in the Chin community. Putting an egg in front of a house is said to bring good luck and happiness while chasing away bad spirits. It is forbidden for the husband to eat meat at his in-laws house. If he breaks this rule, his family will be ill...



When a woman is married, her husband calls her by her surname. As soon as she has a baby, her name changes: she will now be called “the mother of *-the name of the baby*”.

The women deliver babies in their homes. A rope is put across the house, and the woman hangs onto it, standing up!



In the Chin tradition, it is very important to have a son. If the family suffers a murder, he'll be the one to avenge the dead. Parents will keep on having babies until they have a boy. If they cannot have a boy, the man will marry a second woman. Polygamy is common.



Far from the modern world, many tattooed women live in the hills, without running water, electricity or a mobile network. Most of the commerce is based on barter as there is not very much money in these remote areas.



Tattooed-face women like Dwo Ma Htun (pictured) live a simple life, working in the fields, weaving, and taking care of the family. They live in bamboo and wood houses. Men never cook as it's the women's task.



A local proverb says, "if you stop walking, you die."  
Tattoos are sometimes made by shamans as a protection from bad spirits.



The circles on her neck are a symbol of a great courage as it hurts a lot to get them there. In their belief system, these also means that she will be welcomed with pure water once in the "Place of the Dead". Not all the women have the circles.



The Y shape of the totems are also represented in some women's forehead tattoos.



Graves are like little houses. They are built when people are alive and will welcome their bones once dead. Every Chin has one.



It's hard to find a woman without a clay pipe! Everybody smokes tobacco and yet it does not affect their ability to climb the steep mountain paths for hours while carrying wood or water. They are very strong, even if they look skinny!



Miss Heu, 67, from Kanpelet. Her grandmother forced her to get tattooed. She lives in a modern house and even has TV (when electricity is not out). Chin people have maintained their modesty and shyness: when a movie shows people kissing or making love, most of them still fast forward the scene.



As a leader in the local community, Miss Heu had the chance to meet Aung San Suu Kyi when she came in the area for a meeting.

She is very aware of the tattooed women and the ethnicities that are forgotten by the central government. She says she and Aung San Suu Kyi are friends now. Her daughter works in Singapore.



For many uneducated Chin women, foreigners are all English! Before Myanmar was a British colony, they thought white people had been boiled in water!



Chin women have a nice expression to tell someone who is annoying them: "Go away with the sun!". Most of the time the men will reply with, "I'll come back with him tomorrow morning!" Chin women have a great sense of humor. Many pretended to steal my clothes and old ladies asked me to marry them.



Malicious gossips are forbidden in the Chin culture. If a girl learns about a couple having sex, she must keep it a secret. If she tells the story, she'll have to pay a fine to the community and to the couple.



The Chin culture is threatened by the government as the teachers are usually not Chin. They fought for independence for a long time.



“I am old. Soon I will die,” says this Chin woman from Pan Baung village, while she does the gesture of drying tears from her eyes. In her village, only 6 tattooed woman remain alive. Those women are the last of their kind.

eric Tafforgue  
Tafforgue@mac.com  
www.ericTafforgue.com