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Beyond Subordination versus Emancipation: Caribbean *Godna* (Tattoos) as Means of Recreating Social Relations and Affective Bonds

1 Introduction

Aunty Daro and I sat in her bottomhouse[1] in Berbice, a region in Guyana bordering Suriname along the Corentyne / Corantijn River.[2] Daro had been living here for several decades together with her youngest daughter, son-in-law, and two grandsons. In our meeting in September 2017, during which our eleventh formal interview took place, Daro – born in 1933 – was 84 years old, had been a widow for almost thirty years, had retired from working in the cane fields and from selling greens at the local market, and explained to me – with pride and fatigue – that she was the mother of nine "living" children. Before I joined her in the bottomhouse, Daro had just finished praying to the different Hindu deities, whose *murtis* (statues; representations and manifestations of deities) were placed in the small *mandir* (temple) built in a sanctified area of the house lot. This form of prayer, as she explained, had been part of her daily routine for as long as she could remember. I often visited her during morning hours, when other members of the household had either left for work or school, and there was time to talk extensively about her life, the history of the villages, and (Hindu) spirituality and religion.

Aunty Daro had already introduced me to the topic of *godna* (tattoo, tattooing) in 2011 when I had conducted research for my PhD dissertation on the role of the materiality of clothing in the reconstruction of closeness and touch in transnational Guyanese migration.[3] Only in 2017, however, was I able to start my in-depth anthropological research about *godna* and the related themes of body modification, body politics, and oral history among senior Caribbean Hindu women. These women usually defined themselves as descendants of Indian indentured labourers who had arrived in the Caribbean between 1838 and the 1920s. Seeking a comparative approach that highlights the entangled, border-crossing networks of Surinamese and Guyanese people, especially

1 The bottomhouse is the open space under traditional-style Guyanese houses, built on stilts. Today, rear parts of the bottomhouse are commonly enclosed and incorporated into the house.

2 At the request of my interviewees, I have anonymized their names, but Daro consented to the publication of her name.

3 Sinah Theres Kloß, *Fabrics of Indianness*: *The Exchange and Consumption of Clothing in Transnational Guyanese Hindu Communities* (New York: Palgrave, 2016).

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in border regions such as Berbice in Guyana and Nickerie in Suriname, I included practices of *godna* among both senior Surinamese and Guyanese women in my research. So that I would not unreflectively reproduce historiography and anthropology, which are often framed within national borders, I sought to examine the movements and networks of people, for example, by reflecting on the roles of travelling tattooists who had also crossed the Surinamese-Guyanese border in the past. Unfortunately, my informants remembered little about the tattooists, and archival records were equally unhelpful in this endeavour.

During one of our first conversations in December 2011, Daro had explained that *godnas* were tattooed after a woman "had been married." When I asked about the meaning of *godnas*, the majority of my interlocutors either suggested that they did not know anything about *godna* (though some acknowledged that, as a child, they had noticed this specific kind of tattoo on a grandmother's arm) or they explained that in the past women had needed such a tattoo to serve the food they had prepared. Often, my interlocutors identified the people whom the women served as husbands and parents-in-law. I was often told: "If you did not have godna, your parents-in-law would not eat your food or take water from you." Most of my informants – male and female, tattooed or untattooed – related *godnas* to a girl's wedding and transformation into a (married) woman, hence to (Hindu) rites of passage.[4]

In the Caribbean, *godna* refers to the tattoos and tattooing practices of mostly senior Hindu women born before the 1960s.[5] The practice is disappearing, and, in the intervening decades from the 1960s to the present, most women with these kinds of tattoos have passed away. Oral history interviews and the remaining senior Hindu women with *godnas* in Nickerie and Berbice indicate that the tattoos had gained significance and popularity, especially among female Hindus in the first half of the twentieth century.[6] Contemporary discourse in Suriname and Guyana links these tattoos to the status of wifehood and the subordination and dependence of wives on their husbands and in-laws.[7] This dominant interpretation represents *godnas* as marks of oppression

4 Sinah Theres Kloß, "Embodying Dependency: Caribbean *Godna* (Tattoos) as Female Subordination and Resistance," *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2022): 601–12, https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12644; Sinah Theres Kloß, "Tattooed Dependencies: Sensory Memory, Structural Violence and Narratives of Suffering Among Caribbean Hindu Women," in *Narratives of Dependency*, eds. Elke Brüggen and Marion Gymnich (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024): 347–65.

5 The *godnas* to which Clare Anderson refers in her insightful research concern mostly penal tattooing practices and cannot be compared to the *godnas* to which I refer in this chapter (Clare Anderson, "Godna: Inscribing Indian Convicts in the Nineteenth Century," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan [London: Reaktion Books, 2000]: 102–17; Clare Anderson, *Legible Bodies*: *Race, Criminality and Colonialism in South Asia* [Oxford: Berg, 2004]).

6 Sinah Theres Kloß, "Serving Toward Release: Tattoos, Religious Work, and Coercion in Post-Indenture Communities," *Journal of Global Slavery* 9, no. 1–2 (2024): 17–42, https://doi.org/10.1163/2405836X-00901007.

7 For a more detailed analysis, see Kloß, "Embodying Dependency."

and possession. Therefore, I was surprised when, in our interview in September 2017, Daro stated that it had not been her husband or in-laws who had demanded the *godna*. Instead, in her case, it had been a *pandit* (priest) who had recommended the practice. The following is excerpted from the interview:

> DARO: [. . .] Then [after getting a *godna*] ee go take food from me.
>
> SINAH: You husband? Or de . . .
>
> DARO: Nuh me husband! De pandit *say*, dut duh is good.[8]

Daro interrupted me and exclaimed that it had not been her husband but the *pandit* himself who had suggested that a *godna* was good to have.

Her elaborations indicated that some *godnas*, or parts of them, were interpreted as marks of purification that could prevent (ritual) pollution. The markings thus possessed a specific religious meaning or meanings. Indeed, as I argue in the following pages, some *godnas*, at least those tattooed during the 1930s and 1940s, were also a potential means of actively challenging Hindu orthodoxy and the subordination of Hindu women, who were traditionally prohibited from administering ritual performances and restricted from certain forms of spiritual knowledge. The *godnas* allowed the tattooed women to create direct spiritual and devotional relations with a guru and deities. This chapter, therefore, highlights that a mere focus on the oppressive nature of *godna* would uncritically reproduce contemporary popular discourse, which represents Hindu women as suppressed victims without agency. Although I do not deny that in numerous cases and from the perspective of different social actors, *godnas* were understood as marks of female subordination, I still think it is necessary to consider the multiple and often overlapping interpretations of *godna*. Indeed, a discussion of tattoos' meanings and motifs along the lines of simplified juxtapositions, such as subordination versus emancipation, does not overcome the continuing stigmatization and victimization of Hindu women. Instead, it reproduces and perpetuates the trope of the "suffering coolie woman."[9]

The limited perspective offered by this trope and the persistent popular description of *godnas* as oppressive are also influenced by the biased framing of tattoos as

8 Daro, 84, Berbice, Guyana, September 2017; emphasis in original.

9 In the Caribbean, a recurring trope regarding female Indian indentured labourers in popular culture and historiography is that of them being only suppressed and victimized. An especially prominent framework in past analyses of this trope were the so-called "coolie wife murders"; Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002). According to Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, the notion of "coolie wife murders" contributed to 'European assumptions of the barbarism of Indian males and their treatment of women as their property' (Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*: 52). See also Margriet Fokken, "Beyond Stereotypes: Understanding the Identities of Hindustani Women and Girls in Suriname Between 1873 and 1921," *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 273–89, https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGN2015.3.FOKK.

predominantly visual objects and representations. Tattoos, however, can be interpreted via perspectives other than those that focus on their visual characteristics. The meanings of tattoos may not only be found in their designs and motifs but also in the processes and practices of tattooing that led to the creation of the mark. A tattoo may serve as a reminder or commemoration of specific social actors, in addition to or alongside those directly depicted or represented in the tattoo's image, for example, people present during the tattooing process. Therefore, this chapter also draws attention to senior women's narratives of the performative practice of tattooing *godnas*. It illustrates that the integration of tattooing practices into social analyses facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of tattoo(ing)'s capacity to (re-)create hierarchical relations as well as familial and devotional bonds.[10]

2 Becoming a Guru's Disciple: Capacitating Female Bodies for Religious Service

Most of my interlocutors and informants described *godna*s as signs or symbols that subjugated women to their in-laws and marked them as their husbands' possessions. As indicated in the introduction, in contemporary Suriname and Guyana, the dominant interpretation frames *godnas* as marks of wifehood, relates them to "housewifely devotion" and to the subordination and dependence of wives on their husbands and in-laws. At the time of my research, between 2017 and 2019, many senior Hindu women in Berbice and Nickerie had *godna*s on their inner arms. Often, one component of this kind of tattoo was a husband's initials and the tattooed words रामनाम or श्रीरामनाम (Rāmnām or Śrīrāmnām, the name of [Lord] Ram), the symbol ॐ (Aum, Oṃ), and symbols of fertility or good fortune (e.g., flowers). These *godna*s were usually placed near the crook of the right arm, and designs were occasionally complemented with a circular symbol on the left hand, usually interpreted as "sun" or "flower" by its wearer. Less often, a dot was added on the forehead. Unfortunately, by the time of my return visit

10 The text is based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in the Surinamese-Guyanese border region during various stays between 2017 and 2023, as well as in the Surinamese community of The Hague, Netherlands, in 2018. The research that gave rise to this chapter also included archival work in the "Indian Immigration Records" accessed in the Guyana National Archives and the Nationaal Archief Suriname. I thank my Surinamese and Guyanese friends and informants for their time, enthusiasm, and support of my research. I am especially indebted to Dharamdai "Daro" Bhowandin and the Bhowandin family for introducing me to the topic of *godna*. I thank Claudette Austin, Maurits Hassankhan, and Sebieren Hassenmahomed, who allowed me access to various institutions in Guyana, Suriname, and the Netherlands. I thank Aruna Mungra for her support of my research project, conducting archival research in the Nationaal Archief Suriname on my behalf, and for sharing her experiences, photographs, and information with me. I thank the KITLV at the University of Leiden, especially Rosemarijn Hoefte for hosting me as visiting researcher during my fieldwork in the Netherlands.

to Suriname in May and June 2023, delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the senior women with *godna* had passed away, or their health condition no longer allowed for ethical research.

Today, most women consider *godnas* "old-fashioned" or even "backward" signs of female subordination. During my fieldwork, I did not encounter women younger than 60 who had a traditional *godna* – although it is not uncommon for men and women to be tattooed. Indeed, my informants regularly differentiated the practice and marks of *godna* as "traditional" and something that "long-time people" did, while they defined "tattoo" as something "modern" and what "younger people do," indicating different designs and tattooing methods. Traditional *godnas* have vanished from contemporary body art and practice in Suriname and Guyana, although at "times we still see elder Hindustani women in Suriname who have tattoos on the inner side of their arms."[11]

When inquiring as to the reasons for this decline in the practice of taking a *godna*, my Surinamese and Guyanese interlocutors, regardless of their gender or age, usually pointed out that the knowledge needed to tattoo *godnas* has disappeared: some also added that this decline of knowledge is linked to the end of Indian indentured immigration in the 1920s.[12] I further suggest that the devaluation of *godnas* and their stereotypization as an "uncultured" practice in the (colonial) Christian societies of Suriname and Guyana have influenced this development. During much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christians and European colonizers labelled tattooing as a remnant of an "uncivilized" practice that was found among people defined as "savage" and "heathen."

Research on tattoos and tattooing practices, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts, has highlighted the influence of European colonization and Christian missionization on tattooing.[13] Part of this "civilizing mission" was the eradication of (traditional) tattooing, and failures to do so were, in some cases, regarded as signs of the

11 Hilde Neus, "Fu Moimoi: Body Art as Identity Marker," in *Social and Cultural Dimensions of Indian Indentured Labour and Its Diaspora: Past and Present*, eds. Maurits S. Hassankhan, Lomarsh Roopnarine, and Radica Mahase (New York: Routledge, 2017): 259.

12 Indian indentured labourers were shipped to the Caribbean to work on plantations during British and Dutch colonial rule between 1838 and the 1920s. In Guyana, approximately 240,000 indentured labourers arrived between 1838 and 1917 and more than 34,000 came to Suriname between 1873 and 1916. See, e.g., Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas: 1830–1920*, 2nd ed. (London: Hansib, 1993 [1974]).

13 Pauline Alvarez, "Indigenous (Re)Inscription: Transmission of Cultural Knowledge(s) Through Tattoos as Resistance," in *Tattoo Histories: Transcultural Perspectives on the Narratives, Practices, and Representations of Tattooing*, ed. Sinah Theres Kloß (New York: Routledge, 2020): 157–75; Anne D'Alleva, "Christian Skins: Tatau and the Evangelization of the Society Islands and Samoa," in *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, eds. Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005): 90–108; Heidi Gengenbach, "Boundaries of Beauty: Tattooed Secrets of Women's History in Magude District, Southern Mozambique," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 4 (2003): 106–41.

waning of colonial power.[14] Hinduism has always been a minority religion in the Caribbean, and especially during British and Dutch colonial rule, Hindu beliefs and practices in Suriname and Guyana were marginalized and commonly denoted as inferior to Christian values.[15] Especially from the 1920s and 1930s, Hindu leaders – usually *pandits* – actively sought to consolidate the Hindu community, creating and standardizing what is now commonly referred to as "official" or "Brahmanic" Hinduism in the Caribbean: the "Sanatan" tradition.[16] A Sanskritic orthodoxy was formed, constructing a religion that – in direct comparison to Christianity – could be legitimized as a "respectable" (book) religion, excluding and dissociating beliefs and practices considered morally suspect or "uncivilized."[17]

To clarify the direction of my argument in the coming pages, I also want to note that it was not only Hinduism's marginalization in a predominantly Christian environment which fostered these developments. Hindu reform movements, including the Arya Samaj, also contributed significantly to the standardization and transformation of specific ritual aspects and institutional organization. The Arya Samaj developed as a Hindu reform movement in colonial British India at the end of the nineteenth century and was brought to the Caribbean through Arya Samaj missionaries, especially from the 1920s onward.[18] The movement promoted reforms of Hindu ritual and a return to Vedic scripture, challenging the developing monopoly of Brahmans over

14 Jordanna Bailkin, "Making Faces: Tattooed Women and Colonial Regimes," *History Workshop Journal* 59, no. 1 (2005): 33–56, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbi004.

15 Sinah Theres Kloß, "Contesting 'Gifts from Jesus'," *Social Sciences and Missions* 30, no. 3–4 (2017): 346–65, https://doi.org/10.1163/18748945-03003003.

16 Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec, "Brahmanism Abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion," *Ethnology* 30, no. 2 (1991): 149–66.

17 Paul Younger, *New Homelands*: *Hindu Communities in Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa, Fiji and East Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Marcelo M. Mello, "Materiality, Affection, Personhood: On Sacrifice in the Worship of the Goddess Kali in Guyana," *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* 17 (2020): n.p., https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-43412020v17d506; Marcelo M. Mello, "Dutch Spirits, East Indians, and Hindu Deities in Guyana: Contests over Land," *American Anthropologist* 124, no. 2 (2022): 370–82, https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13723; Keith E. McNeal, "Doing the Mother's Caribbean Work: On Shakti and Society in Contemporary Trinidad," in *Encountering Kālī: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, eds. Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey John Kripal (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005): 223–48.

18 According to Hari Rambaran, the Arya Samaj arrived in Trinidad in 1904, in Guyana in 1910, and in Suriname in 1911 (Hari Rambaran, *Parivartan (Transformatie): Twee geloofslagen onder hindoes in de West door brahmanisering en sanskritisering van het volksgeloof: Een studie van antropologische en religieuze ontwikkelingen in de geschiedenis van hindoes in Suriname en van hen die daar vandaan naar Nederland kwamen* [Waddinxveen: HINFOR, 1995]: 48). I thank Ulrike Mühlschlegel and the "Fachinformationsdienst Lateinamerika, Karibik und Latino Studies" for making this reference available to me.

Hindu knowledge and practice.[19] Furthermore, like other Hindu reform movements, the Arya Samaj rejected the caste system and promoted the equality of women.[20]

The district of Nickerie received its first Arya Samaj *pandits* from British Guiana in the 1920s while remaining isolated from the Surinamese capital region until the second half of the twentieth century and oriented towards Guyana.[21] The movement of people and ideas in this border region is likely to have influenced the development and transformation of specific socio-cultural and religious practices, including *godnas.* The tattoos and their related practices may have developed differently here than in other regions. These dynamics, combined with the struggle for socio-religious leadership among Sanatan and Arya Samaj *pandits*, influenced the practice of *godna*, especially during the 1930s and 1940s.

My female informants understood and interpreted their own *godnas* in different ways, and although *godna*s were usually framed and interpreted, at least initially, as marks of marriage and / or subordination, some interviewees provided me with additional explanations of their meaning. For example, my two oldest female informants, born during the 1930s and tattooed in the 1940s in Berbice and Nickerie, further elaborated on the meaning of *godna* during sequential ethnographic interviews. They interpreted the tattoos as marks of ritual purification and emphasized the link between *godnas* and Hindu baptism. Both Daro in Berbice, whom I introduced earlier, and 81-year-old Soenita from Nickerie related *godna* to the tattooee's "baptism" by a *pandit* or guru. They explained that their *godna* signified and indicated to themselves and others that they had acquired the status of being the "godchild" (*chela*) of a *pandit* or guru (Daro) or of being *gurmukh* (Soenita), of "having a guru." According to them, a *godna* portrayed and (re-)created a relationship between a guru and his disciple(s): the mark also facilitated the condition of having become guru-oriented.[22]

From this perspective, in addition to serving her husband and in-laws, a woman with a *godna* could also conduct "service" (*sevā*) toward a guru and deities. Moreover, she could enter a relationship of direct exchange with a deity when making ritual offerings. This was revealed to me, for example, by Daro during the interview addressed in this chapter's introduction. After I had invited Daro to elaborate on who had encouraged her to get the *godna* and used the term husband (see quote in the introduction), she was reminded of a conversation with one of her daughters that had taken place the previous day. This daughter had converted to Christianity and has been a practising Christian for most of her life, an aspect to which Daro referred at the beginning of the following interview excerpt. Recalling the conversation with her daughter, Daro recounted:

19 Van der Veer and Vertovec, "Brahmanism Abroad."

20 Younger, *New Homelands*; Clem Seecharan, *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado*: *Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s–1930s* (Kingston, JM: Ian Randle, 2010).

21 Rambaran, *Parivartan*: 50.

22 Kloß, "Embodying Dependency": 607.

> This [that a husband requested a godna], I never heard. Well yesterday now, [. . .] my daughter, (anonymized), well she follows our [Hindu] people and things [despite being a Christian], like, and talks about religion, . . . argues (incompr.). I do not argue with anybody. What I know, that I know. Because, I do not know to read and I will not read from another body's thing. You understand. So she said, "Ma," said, "You alone are at home?" So I said, "Yes, I alone am at home." Said, "Didn't Sinah say she would come?" [I] Said, "She will go, she wants to check more people's godna," said, "She wants to know what is the *reason*." So, she said, "Ma, you know, what I heard?" Said, "When you came to your mother-in-law's house, you're supposed to take godna. Because, they will have to eat from you, right? You will have to do w . . . (incompr.) in the kitchen." I said, "Well I've never heard that!" And what I have heard, that I tell you. And furthermore I did not come from India. My grandparents came from India. And then I did not know about all this, till I grew *big* and I got my husband, and I got . . . umm . . . I got mother-in-law, but she too did not have godna on her hand / arm. So I did not talk about godna.[23]

Daro's explanation that I was looking for other people's *godnas* led her daughter to elaborate on what she had heard about the tattoos' meaning: the daughter recounted the popular discourse of parents-in-law and husbands who had requested *godnas* in the past. Explaining that she had never heard such an explanation before, Daro corrected her and then elaborated on her own experiences along with her reason for getting a *godna*. Shortly after providing the above quote, Daro narrated the following:

> So, didn't I come here? [rhetorical question] And then, she [an old lady] did her wuk [annual household ritual]. So I said, I want . . . I would like to do god wuk, I would like to do it, just because. Well, that's how, the pandit knew me, by *she*, [. . .] that was her godfather, the old lady's godfather. [. . .] So when, when *I* got . . ., I told him then that I wanted to do one wuk. He said, "Beti,[24] [. . .] I will do your wuk, but you must take one godna." (pause) You understand? So that's one blessing (pause) to take a god's name on your hand / arm. So I did not put it for style, I put it directly for one *reason*! [. . .] And so I did not take this godna for nothing. I took this godna, as he said, that's one blessing. I took it.[25]

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23 Daro, 84, Berbice, Guyana, September 2017; emphasis in original. Author's translation from Guyanese: "Suh, me nuh hear. Well yesterday now, [. . .] me daughta, (anonymized), well ee does follow our [Hindu] people an ting [despite being a Christian], like, and talk bout religion, . . . argue (incompr.) Me nuh argue wid nobody. Wuh me know, duh me know. Because, me nuh know fuh read and me nuh go read when from one nudda body ting. You understand. So ee say, 'Ma,' say, 'You alone deh home?' Suh me say, 'Yes, me alone deh home.' Say, 'Sinah been say ee nuh go come?' Say, 'Ee go go, ee want check more people godna,' say, 'Ee want to know wuh is de *reason*.' Suh, ee say, 'Ma, you know, wuh me hear?' Say, 'When you come by you mother-in-law house, you suppose to take godna. Because, dem ah have to eat from you, right? You go got to do w . . . (incompr.) in de kitchen.' Me say, "Well me never been hear duh!" And wuh me hear, duh me tell you. An fuddamore me nuh come from India. Me grandparents dem come from India. And den me nuh been know about all aduh, till me grow *big* and me get me husband, and me get . . . umm . . . me get mother-in-law, but she too nuh been get godna a she hand. Suh me nuh talk about godna."

24 "Daughter" in Hindi; affective.

25 Daro, 84, Berbice, Guyana, September 2017; emphasis in original. Author's translation from Guyanese: "Suh, me nuh come heh? And den, she [an old lady] ah do wuk. Suh me say, me want . . . me like do god wuk, me like do am, lil jus suh. Well, suh come by duh, de pandit know me, by *she*, [. . .]

According to Daro, after her mother had died, she moved to another village, where an "old lady" had conducted a "wuk" – in the Guyanese Hindu context, this usually referred to the household's annual religious ritual. *Wuk* implied the concept of *sevā* and related ritual performances.[26] Daro explained how the *pandit* had asked her to get a *godna* so that she could act as a ritual's *jajman* – the person who makes the relevant offerings to a deity during *wuk* (in her words, to 'do god wuk'), based on the instructions and with the support of the *pandit*.

This is a surprising revelation: while today, these rituals are commonly planned and conducted by women (unless their husbands join them as the household's head), in the past, women were restricted from actively partaking in the ritual and acting as *jajman.* Both Daro's request to conduct *wuk* and the fact that the *pandit* did not reject her claim outright but instead suggested a means by which she could do so must be understood as highly subversive in the context of early twentieth-century Caribbean Hindu orthodoxy. It is indicative of the dynamic changes that Hindu traditions underwent at the time and illustrates the creative means of Sanatan and Arya Samaj *pandits*, who, due to contestations over leadership in various communities, actively challenged the orthopraxy and philosophy of "other" Hindus.[27] Indeed, as discussed above, during the first half of the twentieth century, annual household rites developed and were increasingly standardized as part of the consolidation of Hindu traditions in Guyana and Suriname.[28]

I further suggest that the question of who was allowed to act as *jajman* became a site of contestation for the competing Hindu *pandits* of the various religious groups,

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duh ee godfather, de ole lady godfather. [. . .] Suh when, when *me* get . . ., me tell am now fuh do wan wuk. Ee say, 'Beti (daughter), [. . .] Me go do you wuk, but must take one godna.' (pause) You understand? Suh duh one blessin (pause) fi take one god name pon you hand. Suh me nuh put am fuh style, me put am directly wan *reason*! [. . .] And suh me nuh take dis godna fuh nothing. Me take dis godna, as ee say, duh one blessin. Me take am."

26 According to the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, the Guyanese *wuk* refers to a job, profession, and skill, as well as to a "domestic or private rite held either to honour (esp[.] in Indic belief systems) or propitiate (esp[.] in African belief systems) one or more deities." (Richard Allsopp and Jeannette Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* [Kingston, JM: University of the West Indies Press, 2003]: 610).

27 Other (Hindu) reformist movements and groups very likely also influenced this development, for example the Kabir Panth and Satnamis. For 1930s Suriname, Rudolf Karsten mentions that there were around 4,000 Kabirpanthis in Suriname (Rudolf Karsten, *De Britsch-Indiërs in Suriname*: *Een Korte Schets Benevens Een Handleiding Voor De Beginselen van Het Hindi* ['s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1930]: 9). That *Rāmnām* became a prominent part of *godna* styles supports this hypothesis, as the spiritual recitation and repetition of the name Ram (a practice referred to as *Ramnam*) was popular among lower-caste groups and in Hindu reform movements in British India at the beginning of the twentieth century. (Ramdas Lamb, *Rapt in the Name*: *The Ramnamis, Ramnam, and Untouchable Religion in Central India* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002]). However, an in-depth analysis of this aspect goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

28 Rambaran, *Parivartan*: 63.

including Sanatan and Arya Samaj *pandits*. Challenging Brahmanic leadership and seeking followers, Arya Samaj *pandits* allowed people to act as *jajman*, who were otherwise denied this role. Consequently, they also won supporters from groups that were traditionally and, by comparison, subordinate, such as lower-caste people and women in general.[29] According to Hari Rambaran, one of his informants, who was born in the 1930s, remembered the following from 1940s Nickerie:

> We are Brahmin, my father had the *janev-sanskâra* (initiation) performed for us. Our neighbors wished to have the same done for their children and had a pandit come. However, the latter refused to perform the ritual for their children because they were not brahmin or chattri.[30] Those people became angry. They had an *Arya Samâja pandit* come. This one did perform the required *sanskâra*. My neighbors then proceeded to the *Arya Samâja* with the whole family. Shortly thereafter a *Veda-yajnã* was held in his yard by a preacher and his wife, both from India. The fact that a woman was allowed to recite *veda mantras*, perform the havana ritual and also give interesting lectures, like her husband, made a great impression on many in the Hamtoncourtpolder (Nickerie). Several people on that occasion (and also afterwards) converted to the *Arya Samâja*.[31]

Daro did not specify whether the *pandit* to whom she referred or her later godfather was affiliated with the Arya Samaj. Therefore, his motivation for allowing her and other women to act as *jajman* cannot ultimately be determined. Nevertheless, the *pandit* may have challenged conservative ideologies by conceiving of or resorting to *godnas* to include and as part of his spiritual guidance of women. In the process, he may have resorted to *godnas* as a means of capacitating female bodies for ritual and discipleship.

Such ritual innovation may have been part of Arya Samaj reformism, or it may have been linked with the *gurmukh* ritual, commonly associated with (orthodox) Sanatan Hindu practices. According to Cornelis Johannes Maria de Klerk, in 1930s and 1940s Suriname, there existed a ritual referred to as the *gurmukh* – the same term used by Soenita when asked about the meaning of her *godna*. De Klerk refers to the ritual of

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29 It must be noted that the Arya Samaj was successful in winning members of all strata and groups of Hindustani society, not only the subordinate groups (Cornelis Johannes Maria de Klerk, "De Britisch-Indiërs in Suriname," *De West-Indische Gids* 24 [1942]: 114).

30 *Chattri* is the common spelling of *Kshatriya* (social order of warriors) in the context of Caribbean Hinduism.

31 Emphasis in original. Author's translation from Dutch: "Wij zijn brahmaan, mijn vader liet voor ons de *janev-sanskâra* (initiatie) verrichten. Onze buren wensten dat ook voor hun kinderen te laten doen en lieten een *pandit* komen. Deze weigerde echter het ritueel voor hun kinderen te verrichten, omdat zij geen brahmaan of chattri waren. Die mensen werden boos. Zij lieten een *Arya Samâja pandit* komen. Deze voerde de verlangde *sanskâra* wel. Mijn buren zijn daarop met de hele familie overgegaan tot de *Arya Samâja*. Kort daarop werd op zijn erf een *Veda-yajnã* gehouden door een prediker en diens vrouw, beiden uit India. Het feit dat een vrouw *veda-mantra's* mocht uitspreken, het *havana*-ritueel mocht verrichten en eveneens interessante lezingen gaf, net als haar man, maakte op velen in de Hamtoncourtpolder (Nickerie) grote indruk. Verschillende mensen zijn bij die gelegenheid (en ook daarna) overgegaan tot de *Arya Samâja*" (Rambaran, *Parivartan*: 53).

gurmukh in his doctoral thesis, published in 1951 at the University of Leiden and titled *Cultus en ritueel van het orthodoxe Hindoeïsme in Suriname (Cult and Ritual of Orthodox Hinduism in Suriname)*. For his dissertation, de Klerk conducted research in Suriname between 1946 and 1948 while also drawing on his experience as a Christian priest during a seven-year stay in Nickerie in the 1930s.[32] He relates the *gurmukh* to the *upanayana*, describing the *gurmukh* as having a "complementary and substitute function" relative to the *upanayana*,[33] or, as it is popularly referred to, the *janeu* or *janneuw*, as was also the case in the above quote. De Klerk further elaborates that the *gurmukh* ritual became relevant, especially to groups traditionally restricted from conducting the *upanayana*: women and lower-caste Hindus. According to him, these groups were allowed to conduct the *gurmukh* as a "substitute" ritual, enabling them to gain spiritual education and possibly to achieve liberation from the cycle of reincarnation.

From this perspective, *godna*s must be understood as a means of capacitating bodies. They allowed women to act as *jajman* and thus to conduct "service" (*sevā*) toward a guru and deities, a role and religious task traditionally denied to them. They prepared and enabled bodies to enter a relationship of direct exchange with the divine, creating a bodily condition that was not "natural" even for men: upper-caste Hindu boys had to undergo *upanayana*, the Hindu rite of passage, also addressed in Rambaran's quote, to achieve "twice-born" status after having performed the ritual.[34] A twice-born boy then became the disciple of the guru who officiated at the ritual and was thenceforth responsible for the boy's spiritual education.

The emancipatory interpretation of *godnas* seems to have been specific to the historical context introduced here; Thus, it cannot be generalized. Even among those women who were tattooed in the 1930s and 1940s, interpretations may have varied. Daro and Soenita may have been especially self-conscious and strong-minded women. Indeed, the way they recounted their lives in ethnographic interviews left me with such an impression. For example, while discussing *godna* with me, Daro also elaborated on how she challenged a *pandit* during the 1980s on the question of who may or may not act as *jajman*. This incident occurred after her husband died, and the *pandit* wanted to discourage her from conducting her husband's "dead wuk" (funerary rites). The religious leader suggested that "a boy" (her son) should do it instead. The following quote highlights how she directly challenged gendered hierarchies:

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32 Foreword by Sandew Hira in Cornelis Johannes Maria de Klerk, *Cultus en ritueel van het orthodoxe Hindoeïsme in Suriname*, vol. 1, *De immigratie der Hindostanen in Suriname*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Amrit, 1951; repr. 1998): 10.

33 De Klerk, *Cultus en ritueel*: 116, author's translation from Dutch. In original: "Ten opzichte van de upanayana (en de daarbij aansluitende vedārambha) heeft de gurmukh een *aanvullende* en *vervangende* functie."

34 Christopher John Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*: *Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, rev. and exp. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Axel Michaels, *Hinduism*: *Past and Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

> When my husband died, well you know, everybody does the wuk differently. But *I* desired (to do it), as I know a little bit. I told this pandit this thing then. Well, I did not know the pandit who came and asked me this. He said, how I could conduct the dead wuk (funerary rites) (of my husband). If not a boy should instead sit down (to do them). So I said, "No! Why would a boy come and sit down? At least . . . if my husband came first, then I come second, right? And then, my son came *third*." So he said, "What do you mean? / What are you saying?" I said: "Yes, when my husband passes away, it is *me* who has to do this wuk. Really!" And so the branch / subordinate, is my son. And not *one* (boy) has to sit down, I have *four* sons, but girls do not sit down. But all four (sons) have to sit down with *me*. That makes *five*. But I am the head! Of the group. [. . .] So, he said, "Alright." So that was when my husband died. I became the head, and my sons came after me. [. . .][35]

Statements like these support my argument that the stereotype of the suffering and helpless Indian woman did not inevitably apply to women, especially not to women with *godna*. Even if *godnas* were not considered to have been a means of subversion by all women and gurus at the time, at least some interpreted the tattoos in the way outlined here, challenging (conservative) Hindu orthodoxy and paving the way for more and more women to act as *jajman*.

The *gurmukh* ritual, therefore, was emancipatory or even subversive in relation to Hindu orthodoxy, for it enabled women's spiritual birth and education and allowed them to act as *jajman*. Although my senior informants explained that their *godna* was not tattooed as part of any (*gurmukh*) ritual, they still linked their tattoo to the *gurmukh* ritual and the process of being accepted as a guru's disciple, creating direct exchange relationships with deities. In this context, *godnas* further created a (devotional) bond between godfather and disciple. This interpretation of *godnas* already indicates their relevance in creating and recreating social relationships, an aspect which I emphasize in the last section of this chapter.

35 Daro, 84, Berbice, Guyana, September 2017; emphasis in original. Author's translation from Guyanese: "When me husband dead, well you know allbody do de wuk different. But *me* desire, as me know lil bit. Me go tell dis pandit dis ting now. Well, me nuh know de pandit duh go come aks me duh. Ee say, how me go keep dis dead wuk. If-a one boy go sit dong. Suh me say, 'No! How one boy go come sit dong? At least, me husband come first, me come second, right? And then, me son come *third*.' Suh ee say, 'How yuh mean?' Me say, 'Yes, if me husband pass away, is *me* got to do dis wuk. Really!' And suh di branch, is me son. Suh nuh *one* got to sit dong, me get *four* son, but gyal nuh sit dong. But all four got to sit dong wid *me*. Make *five*. But me a de head! Fuh de group. [. . .] Suh, ee say, 'Alright.' Suh duh when me husband dead. Me come de head, and me son dem come after me. [. . .]"

3 Practices of Tattooing: (Re-)Creating Social Relations and Affective Bonds

As discussed above, *godna*s can be interpreted as marks of female subordination and of emancipation and subversion. Both perspectives are valid and legitimate. Assessment of which interpretation is more "authentic" would be a misleading endeavour and reproduce an overly narrow analysis of the subordination versus emancipation conflict, which is not only evidenced in (Caribbean) historiography but also in much tattoo research.[36] Indeed, interpreting tattoos as marks of resistance is a common theme in much contemporary anthropological tattoo research, prompting us to reflect on potential bias.[37]

Moving beyond *godna* as either oppressive or subversive, in the following pages, I argue that it is also necessary to approach tattoos and tattooing through a performative lens. In contemporary tattoo research, the tattooing process and the social actors involved are seldom considered central. However, every act of tattooing involves a range of social, temporal, and spatial contexts and relations. Tattooing practices may become relevant in, for example, rites of passage and the construction of specific social statuses during the tattooing process. In *Wrapping in Images*, Alfred Gell suggests that sometimes "the making of visible marks on the skin" can be "quite secondary" to a tattoo's relevance: indeed, in some Polynesian contexts, "tattooing was not a form of graphic art, but only an abiding trace which testified to the occurrence of socially salient blood-letting transactions."[38] The important aspect was not the tattoo itself but the *process* of tattooing that eventually led to the mark's creation. Gell suggests that tattooing must be understood as consisting of various moments or phases in a process "occurring over time," including 1) wounding, bleeding, and insertion of pigments, 2) scarring and healing, and 3) acquiring a 'permanent indelible mark.'[39] In different cul-

36 Fokken, "Beyond Stereotypes."

37 Tattoos and tattooing as resistance is a prominent topic of tattoo research, particularly in social and cultural anthropology. For example, tattoos in colonial contexts and the related tattoo revitalization movements have received much scholarly attention (Alvarez, "Indigenous (Re)Inscription"; Peter Brunt, "The Temptation of Brother Anthony: Decolonization and the Tattooing of Tony Fomison," in *Tattoo: Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, eds. Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, and Bronwen Douglas [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005]: 123–44; Lars Krutak, "Sacred Skin: Tattooing, Memory, and Identity Among the Naga of India," in *Tattoo Histories: Transcultural Perspectives on the Narratives, Practices, and Representations of Tattooing*, ed. Sinah Theres Kloß [New York: Routledge, 2020]: 191–217). Also, female tattooing practices in Euro-American contexts have been discussed as practices of female resistance (Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*: *A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000]; Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*: *A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* [New York: pH powerHouse Books, 2013]).

38 Alfred Gell, *Wrapping in Images*: *Tattooing in Polynesia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, repr., 2004): 306.

39 Gell, *Wrapping in Images*: 304.

tural contexts, these phases may vary in importance. Focusing only on Gell's third tattooing phase – the mark itself – would obscure other relevant aspects of the process.

The significance of the tattooing *process* in the construction of a tattoo's multiple meanings can be illustrated via reference to the process involved in creating a *godna*. My informants unequivocally stated that *godnas* were not part of an auspicious ritual but inscribed during interruptions of everyday life, requiring rare occasions when a tattooist passed through the village. For example, Soenita – while confirming husbands, in-laws, and guru's relevance regarding *godna*s – referred to other social actors involved in the tattooing process and, furthermore, to people of whom the *godna* reminded her today. The following is excerpted from an ethnographic interview that took place in September 2018:

> SINAH: I've seen the godna that you have. [. . .] What does it mean?
>
> SOENITA: This, this. [*looks at godna*] From my mother. That Guyanese man came. Walked down the street. Said, "Godna godaile, godna godaile!" [Sarnami: Do you want to tattoo?!] And my bowjee [sister-in-law] said, my mother said, "Godaile!" [Sarnami: Tattoo! – *points at her godna*] The Sri-Ram-Nam, J. M. [*points at the inscription of Sriramnam, then her husband's initials and says her husband's name*]. My husband's name. J. M. [*repeats name*].[40]
>
> SINAH: Okay. So, there was a Guyanese man, who did that godna?
>
> SOENITA: Yeah, [he] did, yeah. In the old days.
>
> SINAH: And he came . . . he came from Guyana with . . .
>
> SOENITA: Yes, he came from Guyana, and he walked in the street. He yelled, with bicycle. He walked with bicycle. Said, "Mooi mooi [Dutch: Beautiful beautiful], Sita ki rasoi! Godna godaile." He said so, and he rode [by] bike. If you wanted, *then* you called him.
>
> SINAH: Okay! And then you said, "Yes, come on!"?
>
> SOENITA: Yes, "Come on, come on!" Then he would come.
>
> SINAH: Ao! [Sarnami: Come!] (laughs)
>
> SOENITA: Ao ao ao (laughs). He would come. And my mother . . . you didn't pay much! Maybe . . . two fifty, my mother paid.[41]

40 I thank Radjnie Mungra-Mahabir, Bhulai Ramkaran, and Elsje Bhulai Harpal for their translations of these Sarnami expressions into Dutch.

41 Soenita, 81, Nickerie, Suriname, September 2018; emphasis in original. Author's translation from Dutch: SINAH: Ik heb die godna gezien, dat je hebt. [. . .] Wat betekent dat? / SOENITA: Dit, dit. Van mijn moeder. Die Guyanees man kom. Loop op straat. Zeg, "Godna godaile, godna godaile!" En me bowjee heeft gezegd, mijn moeder heeft gezegd, "Godaile." De Sri-Ram-Nam, J. M. Mijn man naam. J. M. / SINAH: Oké. Zo er was een Guyanees man, die die godna doet? / SOENITA: Ja, doet, ja. Vroeger. /

During the tattooing process, the first person whom Soenita recalled was her mother. Immediately and seemingly intuitively, she stated that the *godna* was "from my mother." Only after referring to the Guyanese tattooist and briefly mentioning her *bowjee* (sister-in-law) did she reference her husband and explain his tattooed initials. Subsequently, in the interview, her *godna* seemed to remind her of her mother, whom she mentioned several times while speaking about it, pointing to and gently touching it during our conversation. Her recall reveals tattoos' potential to remind one of others, possibly those present during the tattooing if not part of its design.[42] This commemorative aspect is particularly relevant because newly married women had few occasions to see their families of origin due to their manifold chores in their new homes. Moreover, *godna*s were often tattooed after a wedding, during the time when a bride returned to her parental home prior to leaving for her husband's residence a second and final time, making these tattoos – among other things – potential reminders of home. Usharbudh Arya attests to this phase, stating:

> After the marriage, the bride accompanies her husband only for a few days and then returns to the parental home. It is then that the bride's mother took her on to her lap and had a design tattooed on her right arm; on her return to the husband's home the tattoo was done on the left arm. It was believed that if the mother has her daughter thus tattooed in her lap they would meet again in heaven.[43]

Although my two senior informants did not recall a divided tattooing process as described by Arya, that the *godna* was tattooed in their mothers' presence seemed to matter the most to them. For example, Soenita highlighted that the tattooing was conducted not only in the presence of her mother but *together* with her. On the same occasion, her mother also chose to have additional motifs added to her old designs, making it a shared tattooing experience. To my question of whether Soenita had been obliged to get a *godna*, she responded:

> SOENITA: No, you did not need to have it. You didn't have to. If you *wanted to*.
>
> SINAH: Ah.
>
> SOENITA: If you wanted to. Then you did.

SINAH: En hij kwam . . . hij was van Guyana met . . . / SOENITA: Ja, hij kom Guyana, en hij loop op straat. Ze schreeuw, met fiets. Ze loopt met fiets. Zeg, "Mooi mooi, Sita ki rasoi! Godna godaile." Zeg, hij zeg, zo, en ze rijd fiets. Als je wil, *dan* je gaat he roepen. / SINAH: Oké! En dan zeg je . . . "Ja, kom maar!"? / SOENITA: Ja, kom maar, kom maar. Ze gaat komen. / SINAH: Ao! / SOENITA: Ao ao ao. Ze gaat komen. En mijn moeder . . . je betaalt niet veel! Misschien . . . twee vijftig, mijn moeder heeft betaalt.

42 Deborah Davidson, ed., *The Tattoo Project*: *Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars, 2016).

43 Usharbudh Arya, *Ritual Songs and Folksongs of the Hindus of Surinam* (Boston: Brill, 1968): 26.

SINAH Then you did.

SOENITA: Yes. If you didn't want to, you didn't have to do it.

SINAH: And did you say, "I want this [design]!" Or could you have another . . .

SOENITA: No, I said / chose. My mother was going to . . . have . . . flowers. She was going to make a lot of flowers.

SINAH: Uh-huh?

SOENITA: Big flowers.

SINAH: Big flowers?

SOENITA: I said I don't want much.

SINAH: No. [confirmative]

SOENITA: I want to have a little.

SINAH: Hmm [affirmative]. [Pause] Oh, that's how you did it, with your mother?

SOENITA: Yes.

SINAH: And . . .

SOENITA: My mother paid. My mother had it made for me.[44]

She explained several times that her mother had paid for the tattoo, framing it as a motherly gift and suggesting that her mother had "made" the *godna* for her. Similarly, Daro's daughter explained to me during an informal conversation that she had also gotten her *godna* in the presence of and together with her mother, who had gotten an additional design.[45]

44 Soenita, 81, September 2018, Nieuw Nickerie, Suriname; emphasis in original. Author's translation from Dutch: 'SOENITA: Nee, moet je niet hebben. Moet je niet. Als je *wil*. / SINAH: Ah. / SOENITA: Als je wil. Dan doe je. / SINAH: Dan doe je dat. / SOENITA: Ja. Als niet wil, je moet niet doen. / SINAH: En heb je gezegd, 'Ik wil dit hebben!' Of kan je ook een andere . . . / SOENITA: Nee, ik zeg, mijn moeder ging, hebben, bloemen. Ze ging veel bloemen maken. / SINAH: Eh-heh? / SOENITA: Grote bloemen. / SINAH: Grote bloemen? / SOENITA: Ik zei ik wil niet veel. / SINAH: Nee. / SOENITA: Ik wil een beetje hebben. / SINAH: Hmm. (Pause) Oh, zo heb je het samen met jouw moeder gedaan? / SOENITA: Ja. / SINAH: En . . . / SOENITA: Mijn moeder heeft ge . . . betaalt. Mijn moeder heeft voor me laten maken.'

45 Unfortunately, her daughter could not recall the design added to her mother's already existing *godna*. On the contrary, Daro considered this to have been a false statement in our interview in September 2017.

While these examples reveal that tattoos "are a sort of visual archive of personal connections and achievements,"[46] tattooing can, on the one hand, be understood as an individual embodied act, but on the other, as an event that includes several people, (re-)creating interpersonal relationships and group identities in the process.[47] Getting a tattoo is often linked with visualizing and recreating bonds in social relations, especially in female friendships.[48] By being tattooed in others' presence or by undergoing a shared pain experience, communities, social relationships, and networks may be (re-)created.[49] This has also been the case in colonial Mozambique, where tattoos and tattooing created "bonds of intragenerational female community" and a kind of "blood sisterhood."[50] I thus conclude that modes of (female) bonding are also significant in the context of *godna*s.

4 Conclusion

*Godna*s relate to the notion and multiple levels of service (*sevā*). They are marks which represent and recreate women's subalternized positionalities and experiences of dependency, especially in relation to husbands and in-laws. At the same time, however, they also subvert patriarchal hierarchy and orthodox Hindu structures: in the past, they provided female tattooees with the capacity to acquire spiritual knowledge, act as *jajman*, become a guru's disciple, and enter a direct exchange relation with deities. Depending on when, where, how, in the company of whom, and by whom the tattoo was made, tattoos may (re-)create intimate and affective bonds with those who may or may not be represented in the tattoo's image itself. As discussed in the second part of this chapter, additional interpretations and understandings may emerge from consideration of tattooing's specific contexts and practices. Such reflection also allows us to consider *godnas* as means of female bonding and of (re-)constructing social relationships.

Godnas entail a multiplicity of understandings and can be interpreted in various ways. Both the marks and the tattooing processes facilitate a variety of sensory experiences, which may also influence their interpretation. To overcome an exclusive focus on tattoos' visual characteristics, I suggest integrating tattooing practices and narratives

46 Alessandra Castellani, "Identity, Gender Roles, and Tattooing Among Italian Lesbian Women," in *Tattoo Histories: Transcultural Perspectives on the Narratives, Practices, and Representations of Tattooing*, ed. Sinah Theres Kloß (New York: Routledge, 2020): 61.

47 Beverly Y. Thompson, "*Mi Familia*: Latina Women in the US Negotiate Identity and Social Sanctions Through Tattooing," in *Tattoo Histories: Transcultural Perspectives on the Narratives, Practices, and Representations of Tattooing*, ed. Sinah Theres Kloß (New York: Routledge, 2020): 75.

48 Castellani, "Identity, Gender Roles, and Tattooing among Italian Lesbian Women."

49 Gell, *Wrapping in Images*: 308.

50 Gengenbach, "Boundaries of Beauty": 119.

of the tattooing process into social analyses and future research. Such approaches would highlight tattooing as an event or practice, drawing further attention to the under-researched area of tattooing's material culture and sensory approaches to tattooing. Inclusive approaches that address tattooing's performativity may reveal multiple layers within specific tattooing traditions, in which meaning is constructed not only through the tattoo's visual image but also through social relations, experiences, and memories of the tattooing process. This case study of *godnas* has already illustrated how diversified approaches can overcome simplified juxtapositions of tattoos' meanings and motifs, such as subordination versus emancipation and oppression versus resistance.

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