

**Modern Primitives:
The Recurrent Ritual
of Adornment**

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MODERN PRIMITIVES

The Recurrent Ritual of Adornment

‘In all ages, far back into pre-history, we find human beings have painted and adorned themselves.’

H.G. Wells, *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*

Self-ornament and skin decoration are probably among the oldest examples of enduring human ritual. In prehistoric times they served various ends: promoting hunting magic, storing and transmitting mythological lore and forging tribal identity.

Today, we have moved beyond the hunter-gatherer society, but the urge for skin ornamentation is undergoing a revival. Today’s ‘modern primitives’ use tattoos, piercings and other forms of skin design to perform almost exactly the same functions as that of our ancestors: they use them to forge ‘tribal’ affiliations – and within that circle they have come to represent a collective common language and set of aesthetic values. They may even represent superstitious or magical belief. More curious still, they do so not in the rain forest, but in the concrete jungles of our inner cities.

So, what are the reasons behind this revival? Why should there be a need to return to such an archaic-seeming, and to many people distasteful ritual? What do its proponents get out of it? Examining the structure of this extraordinary phenomenon may help us to understand more about the reasons behind our seemingly baffling need for ritual.

At the same time that the ‘modern primitives’ in our cities adorn themselves, we can also see the unbroken continuation of body modifying ritual in traditional tribal groupings around the world. For these groups it often serves to bond the individual to the majority culture. In industrialised societies, on the other hand, such body ornament – often seen as mutilation – has come to represent a rebellion against, rather than an embodiment of, dominant cultural values. Ritual body modifications – such as piercing, scarification, branding and multiple tattoos – are often used by the ‘modern primitives’ to repudiate the mainstream culture of industrialised society they feel powerless to control.

Body modification has, over the centuries, been discovered and rediscovered by a wide range of societies. The Romans, for example, engaged in piercing, with many centurions wearing nipple rings as a sign of courage and virility. The Ancient Egyptians wore navel jewellery to denote

nobility. In addition to appropriating ritual piercing from past ages for their own use, Modern Primitives have been indirectly responsible for the ritual's rising popularity in mainstream culture.

Since the birth of Modern Primitivism in the late 1970s, piercing has become increasingly evident in the Western world, with pierced navels and nostrils on show in mainstream fashion magazines and on the catwalks in Europe and the United States. This mainstream adoption of body jewellery, which was originally intended as a form of rebellion and forging a distinctive identity, has pushed Modern Primitives towards increasingly extreme forms of piercing.

Another decorative technique that the Modern Primitives favour tattooing – has also been used since early times. For example, archaeologists have found tattoos on Egyptian mummies, and recently discovered the remains of a 5,300-year-old man in Austria with a line tattooed on his back and a cross tattooed behind one knee.

Throughout the ages, skin decorations – which get their name from the Tahitian root 'tattoo', meaning to inflict wounds – have been favoured by royalty and warriors alike. King Harold, killed at the Battle of Hastings, had 'Edith' tattooed over his heart, and tattoos have been inscribed on monarchs from Denmark's Frederick IX to Russia's Tsar Nicholas II. In the Far East, people continue to use tattoos as magical tokens to ward off evil and to denote allegiance.

The art fell into disrepute in the West when it began to be used to mark criminals, slaves and misfits, only to become fashionable once again in the late 1800s, when high-society ladies were seized by a passion for dainty skin art. Among them was Winston Churchill's mother, Lady Randolph Churchill, who had a small coiled snake tattooed around one wrist.

Like piercing, tattoos are now becoming commonplace. Today, they decorate the skins of stars of the music world, catwalks and silver screen, and tattoo artists have their own trade fairs and vie for first place in international competitions. Like piercing, the small, aesthetic designs appropriated by the mainstream are no longer sufficient for Modern Primitivism. Instead, the movement has swept away concealed or intimate designs, replacing them with a patchwork of images. In the drive to remain socially unacceptable, the whole body becomes a picture gallery, and the idea of the tattoo turns away from a badge or sticker on one small site, towards what Modern Primitives call 'a full body concept'.

The modish use of piercing and tattoos has also encouraged Modern Primitives to look for alternative forms of body art, like scarification and branding. In scarification, the pain of the process (it involves the cutting of the skin with a scalpel) is part of the attraction. Very like the initiation

ceremonies in tribal societies, the aim is to create a common bond, within an exclusive society. To mark the rite of passage, blood-prints are often taken from the cuts. The scars, as the trophies of the pain endured – and hence a badge of admittance to a select club – are often deliberately intensified.

The parallels with tribal cultures are plain. In these societies, scarification is often closely associated with rites of passage and with magic. The Aborigines used the markings to show that youngsters had learned the tribal magic lore. Indian Sadhu males use ritual cutting as one of a variety of techniques to induce a trance state.

Reasons for body modification

The reasons given by Modern Primitives for permanently altering their bodies through piercing, scarification, branding and tattooing appear to fall into twelve principal categories. These are:

1. Rituals associated with rites of passage
2. The creation of a lifelong bond with others
3. As a sign of respect for elders
4. As a symbol of status or courage
5. Mysticism or magic
6. Protection against evil spirits
7. The opening of channels between an individual and spirits or energies
8. Rebalancing the body
9. Physical healing
10. Emotional healing
11. Group or tribal healing
12. Tribal or group connection to greater forces, especially during times of disaster

These are reasons they appear to share with many tribal peoples around the world.

Rites of passage

In New Guinea, for example, the Roro people are extensively tattooed. The skin decorations are so widely practised that they describe the un-tattooed person as 'raw', comparing him to uncooked meat.

‘The Roro see the tattooed man as ‘cooked meat’, transformed by a human process, and thus given a social identity. Therein lies the distinction between a social being and a biological entity.’

Victoria Ebin, *The Body Decorated*

Modern Primitives claim to use body modification in or to achieve a similar goal. Jane, for example, started stretching the holes in her earlobes when she was seventeen. The stretching coincided with her leaving her birthplace, Manchester, and moving to London. Several years later, the holes are sufficiently enlarged for her to insert a bottle cork through her lobes. She judges her personal progress, and the development of her life in London, according to the extended holes, saying they remind her just how far she has come.

In tribal cultures the world over, each stage of a person’s life is recorded by body decoration of one kind or another. In many African societies, life development has traditionally been etched out on the body in a complex and ever updated pattern of delicate scars. For girls, life achievements such as the first menstruation, marriage and first childbirth were most often recorded. For boys puberty and the first kill in battle or the hunt were important milestones.

The fact that tribal markings continue to be practised despite having been banned by most governments testifies to the enormous importance placed in permanently recording rites of passage.

Ga’anda women of Nigeria undergo scarring from around the age of five. Over several years, an intricate pattern is made up according to traditional lines. The first scars are made on the stomach, followed by those on the forehead, then the forearms, next come the back of the neck, waist, buttocks, hips, finally the forearms. Only when the complex design, known as ‘hleeta’, is complete is the girl considered sufficiently mature to be married. It is a practice the Ga’anda share with the Kutch women, from India’s North West coast. They are tattooed with traditional patterns at various stages of their lives, especially soon after marriage.

The women of East Africa’s Nuba use scarring to display responsibilities and roles within the tribe. As with Ga’anda and Kutch women, the programme of marking follows a traditionally prescribed order. The first phase concentrates on the torso, at the age of about ten. The second phase is carried out under the breasts after menstruation, and on the back, arms and legs after the birth and weaning of the first child.

The practice of some Modern Primitives of keeping a scar or tattoo ‘diary’ is notably similar to the ritual markings of the Ga’anda, Kutch and Nuba. The record, which is used to register peak moments in a person’s life,

is most often restricted to one area of skin, such as the ankle or wrist, and is constantly updated. A symbol may be added to record the meeting of a future spouse, for example, another may be added upon marriage, a third to mark the birth of a child – events similar to those of rites of passage considered worthy of permanent marking among tribal societies.

Scarification and tattooing are not the only body modifications used to denote rites of passage. The Ndebeli women of South Africa wear collars that stretch their necks for life. Akin to this is the custom of wearing braided weights around the neck and waist for a thirty day period as part of the Ndebeli boy's rite of passage and initiation ceremony that celebrates his admission into adulthood within the tribe.

Among the practices initiating a young man into New Guinea's Ibitoe tribe is the wearing of tight bands, usually made of cloth or bark, around the limbs and waist to reshape the body. The pain caused as the band restricts growth bears witness to his acceptance of his new role within the tribe. Anyone refusing to undertake the rite of passage was once certain to be ostracised from the group.

Modern Primitives also use constrictive devices to alter the shape of their bodies. The man to whom the Modern Primitive movement is attributed, Fakir Musafar, who has worn the waist band, known as an 'Itiburi' since his youth, has a permanently narrowed waist and a permanently expanded chest. He believes the power of constriction is akin to that of any other painful modification. By causing discomfort, and by becoming acclimatised to that discomfort, the wearer of the Itiburi comes to believe that he is not his body, his body is just a shell in which he lives.

Closely related to the Itiburi is the western-style corset, often used by Modern Primitives. The most famous corseted lady of all time was Ethel Granger, perhaps an early Modern Primitive. Corseted, she had a 13 inch waist. When she died of natural causes in 1974, aged 83, and her corset was removed, her body had been permanently modified. Even without the constriction her waist measured just 17 inches.

Creation of a bond

'Nearly everywhere the missionaries went they tried to impose their own conceptions of the physical body on the people they encountered. They discovered that to prohibit the 'natives' from carrying out their ritual practices, such as body decoration, was a necessary step in demolishing the structure of their traditional beliefs.'

Victoria Ebin, *the Body Decorated*

Another important reason for decoration of the skin or for the modification of body shape among tribal societies and Modern Primitives alike is to create a lifelong bond with others.

Marriage is just one of the bonds displayed through ritual marking. Other imprints are made as badges of admission to a tribe or group, a practice evident among Modern Primitives, or initiation into a brotherhood, as in the case of many street gangs and certain college fraternities in the United States.

In branding, the least common and most extreme of the decorative techniques used by Modern Primitives, an image is seared onto the skin with a red-hot iron. In western cultures, branding has over the ages been used to mark people in order to separate them from the rank and file. The French used to sear a *fleur de lis* onto the shoulder of an offender, the English branded people with marks, in different locations, depending on the crime for which they had been accused. Thieves were marked with the letter 's' on the cheek to denote 'slave' and were sentenced to a life of servitude. Slaves, like cattle, were branded with their owner's name, symbol or initials. Today, many African-American fraternities have a long tradition of branding as an initiation rite. The brand is usually in the shape of one of the fraternity's Greek letters, and is meant to be visible for life.

The Shilluk of southern Sudan communicate their membership of the tribe with a row of pearl-shaped scars across their foreheads, made during childhood by pulling up the skin with a fish hook and then cutting it with a sharp knife. Equally vivid tribal marks can be found on men in Chad and Zaire, despite the banning of such obvious symbols of kinship. Tribal markings which attach one to the group are most often designed to be highly visible and indelible, used as they are for identification.

'In the West, self marking symbolises a rebellion against, rather than an embodiment of, dominant cultural values.'

James Myers, *Non-mainstream Body Modification*

Before the birth of the high-tech media age, a person from a community little more than a few miles away could be instantly recognised as an 'outsider' by his clothes, speech or mannerisms. In the industrialised western world, however, where travel has linked regions, and where the media is capable of beaming likeness of others across the globe, irrespective of national borders, people are deluged with images of outsiders. Accordingly, those wishing to set themselves apart are now faced with the formidable task of appearing sufficiently different to accomplish this aim. The progression of body modification from mild forms such as multiple ear-piercing to say, multiple branding, has much to do with the wish to appear

consistently different from a majority which is embracing similar modifications in the name of beautification or fashion.

Furthermore, pain is a powerful connector of people. By braving a ritual which might well be prolonged and agonising, an individual is bound to those with whom he or she shares that experience. The process of becoming blood brothers, for example, a bonding experience shared by teenagers in many lands, is meaningful because of the mutual discomfort. Giving birth, another painful experience, often bonds women irrespective of their ethnic or social backgrounds. Likewise, ritual injury ties an individual to others within a group.

‘The badge of admission may carry personal meaning as well as a message of affiliation with a religion, one other person, a community, a youth gang, a fraternity, a military organisation, or any specific group.’

Kim Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink*

The complexity of the ritual of body marking, then, lies in the fact that the confirmation of identity is based on distancing the self from a large non-marked portion of the population and attaching it to an alternative group bearing similar marks.

Annie, who works in a piercing studio in London, has a face studded with stainless steel, several genital piercings and a host of highly visible tattoos. These are not only her ticket out of the mainstream, but are her badges of admission into Modern Primitivism. As such, they are important factors to her sense of belonging. She describes her life as one played out in a small community. This community is intimate, in stark contrast to the rest of the sprawling metropolis.

John, whose upper torso is extensively tattooed, says he would feel only ‘half himself’ without the decorations. He would also feel displaced from his chosen ‘tribe’.

Cultural theory

‘It seems that our own world is condemned to mass-produced cosmetics, wigs and other beauty aids, and that our body decoration will never again be dictated to by social needs, aesthetic ideals or religious beliefs, but by fashion.’

Robert Brain, *The Decorated Body*

The body as the physical link between ourselves and the outside world deserves greater consideration in an analysis of this kind. In western industrialised cultures, certain modes of body modification, such as nail clipping, hair styling and eyebrow tweezing are considered advisable if one

is to fulfil one's social role and settle comfortably into social interactions. Even permanent forms of modification, such as nose reshaping, breast enlargement or reduction and face-lifts are, in varying degrees, acceptable or even desirable.

However, the physical modifications deemed acceptable by the dominant culture are rigidly controlled. Therefore, by fashioning oneself outside the norms, perhaps by using plastic surgery to enlarge the bust to a size considered abnormal, or even by wearing clothes considered to be outlandish, a person can instantly attract the label of deviant and will subsequently encounter a negative social reaction.

Unlike temporary forms of body alteration (for example using clothing, posture, or hair styling) permanent forms are typically associated with lifelong allegiances such as clan, tribe or sexual preference.

By failing to adhere to the rules of presentation of society, or by deliberately rejecting the decorative norms of the majority or dominant culture, an individual can demonstrate a rejection of conventional values merely by changing his or her outward appearance. At the same time, by altering his or her body in a permanent way, a person can express a lasting allegiance to his chosen group, rather than risking the label of merely 'going through a rebellious phase'.

The body may be a natural, biological fact, but the way various societies choose to adorn it is a social construct. According to Pierre Bourdieu, a leading figure in French sociology since the 1950's, those in power are able to decide the ideology which will be accepted as legitimate and followed by the rest of the population. These social norms, traditions, beliefs and values operate below the surface of everyday life. They are standards and impressions by which we unconsciously classify others. These elements directly reflect the divisions between class, gender, age and ethnic group: the divisions between dominant and dominated.

Classifications of these kinds are both explicit (as in grading at school) and hidden (such as how someone matches up to an ideal model or perception). We are not born with culture: it is learnt – from the way we drink our tea to the way we adorn our bodies. Bourdieu sees cultural legitimacy as being selected by the elite in order to reproduce and maintain their own status, power and preferences. Under the banner of 'symbolic violence' he accuses the elite of imposing symbols on dominated groups of the society in such a way that they come to believe that these impositions are genuine.

In the words of theorist Raymond Williams:

‘It is inherent in the concept of culture that it is capable of being reproduced and further that by many of its features it is indeed a mode of reproduction.’

Raymond Williams, *Reproduction in Culture*

The author, Stuart Hall, who has conducted extensive research into the relationship between the dominant culture and groups seen as deviant by the majority, points out that subcultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their parent culture.

Differentiation for the Modern Primitive is easy enough. By embracing practices considered by the majority as less advanced or less civilised than they, he instantly separates himself from western industrialisation, which he considers stifling and manipulative. By this means he claims to be able to free himself from social constraints, to unchain his imagination, end the sense that he is powerless to change the world, and express himself on this living canvas.

Symbol of bravery, status or courage

The term ‘Redskin’, once used to describe the native Americans, is derived from the widespread practice of body painting among North American societies. War-paint earned a warrior public respect by testifying to his achievements. For most tribes the colour red was sacred, denoting victory. For a man, an undecorated face was a disgrace, a permanent reminder that he had shone neither in battle nor hunting.

In many cultures tattooing is a sign of prestige due to the high fees charged by leading artists. These grand masters of decoration are highly regarded. On the Marquesas Islands in eastern Polynesia, for example, the art of tattooing is seen as a gift from the gods and the upper classes seek only the most revered masters. As every expert tattoo artist has his own sequence for applying patterns, the decoration takes on an appeal similar to that of designer clothes in the West, with the adornments clearly recognisable as a certain artist’s work. Members of the élite on the Marquesas Islands are often extensively tattooed, with both men and women having the backs of their hands covered in intricate motifs.

For Maories of New Zealand tattoos are the prerogatives of nobility and the markings thus indicate status and wealth. The complex spirals tattooed onto a man’s face are his ‘moko’ or identity, a permanently emblazoned coat of arms.

The Bafia people of Cameroon believe that their tribal markings indicate their elevated status in comparison to the animals with which they share their homeland. Without their scars they feel they would too closely

resemble common creatures such as chimpanzees or pigs. It is a sentiment echoed by Maori women of New Zealand for whom red lips are a symbol of ugliness. Without their lips tattooed black they believe they would look like dogs; with a red mouth and white teeth.

Among the Mursi and the Bumi of the Omo valley of south-west Ethiopia, decorative scars, arranged in complex patterns, are marks of prestige, being most often associated with feats of bravery in battle or hunting. The severe droughts in the region have caused a shortage of grazing land for the tribes which survive primarily through farming and cattle-rearing. That lack has, in turn, led to increasingly serious conflict in the Omo valley. Never before have the prestigious scars adorning a man's face been a more important badge of his physical prowess in defeating his enemies or killing his prey.

Just so the scars of the Dinka in southern Sudan, who have suffered greatly from civil war and attacks from modern-day slave traders. The deep horn-shaped parallel lines gouged on a boy's forehead denote his ability to withstand pain and show that he is sufficiently mature to fight.

In the West, tattooing can carry a similar message of bravery, identity or maturity. A young man may visit a tattoo parlour for his first tattoo in order to indicate that he is old enough to disregard parental wishes. If a person's physical appearance truly does affect his or her self-definition, identity and interaction with others, by customising the body with a tattoo a young person could be seen to be reclaiming his or her body from previous 'owners' such as school, or parents. By displaying strength enough to survive the reclamation process, he or she may also gain in terms of self-worth.

Iefata Moe, quoted in Lyle and Judy Tuttle's *Tattoo Historian*, describes the shame of displaying a 'pe'a mutu', the Samoan word for an unfinished or incomplete body tattoo, which could forever act as a reminder that he had not been brave enough to withstand the pain of a complete design.

A man with a scar or a strong, damaged face may often be judged more attractive than one with unmarked features... German university students slashed their faces in Der Mensur (students' duel) and poured wine into the wounds to provoke exaggerated scarring – evidence of their strength and manliness.

Robert Brain, *The Decorated Body*

Magic and mysticism

Archaeological discoveries suggest that body decoration was a significant mystical form in ancient American civilisations. For the Mayas and Aztecs

decorated skin was closely related to religion, as it was through this medium that the gods were thought to reveal themselves.

There is a view that pain can alter the state of consciousness in such a way that mystical or magical powers are obtained: Making use of pain was an ancient and widespread practice in both shamanic and sorcery practices. Even today, many of the markings made on the body in tribal societies have a mystical or magical aim: often they are aimed at warding off malevolent spirits or at encouraging the powers that be to deal kindly with the tribe.

Aborigines, who believe that it is only with the help of primeval forces that the group can exist in infertile tracts of land, initiate their children into adulthood by ritual acts signifying the passing on of sacred knowledge. Only the initiated can fully know the meaning of the body paintings and dance costumes, which play such an important part in traditional views on survival.

The initiation ceremonies honour ancestors with song, dance and the wounding of the young with ornamental scars. These are closely linked to the mythological heroes, whom aborigines believe once inhabited the Australian continent in 'The Dream Time' when they created all life and shaped the land.

In many North African groups, children are tattooed at times during which they are thought to be in a weakened physical or spiritual state, such as during puberty, upon marriage or during childbirth.

Among Berber women, the primary cause of this to ward off spirits which may wish to cause harm. Because the spirits, most notable The Evil Eye, are believed to enter a person through the orifices, these entry points are particularly heavily protected. The women pay special attention to tattooing their faces, with small Evil Eye averters, most often placed under the mouth, beside the eyes and on the nose.

The people of Mentawai, an archipelago in the far west of Indonesia, adorn their skin with tattoos because they believe the soul would feel uncomfortable in an unattractive body. Fearing that the soul will tire of a certain body, they dedicate much time to becoming ever more beautiful, updating their tattoos at regular intervals and supplementing the permanent markings with other brightly coloured decorations such as flowers and leaves.

Mayan and Aztec sorcerers once practised a host of rituals involving torture as part of their offering to the gods. The rituals included piercing the penis and seeking visions by running a rope stuck with thorns through a piercing in the tongue.

Throughout the ages, the western world has both flirted with and condemned ritual marking of the body. Tattoos were, centuries ago, enough

to convict a woman of collusion with the devil. Many women displaying either tattoos or natural body marks, such as birthmarks or warts were accused of having turned their backs on society and were accused of being witches.

Healing

In some tribal societies, scars bear no symbolic or social meaning and are simply the result of medical treatment. A person may, for example, be burned in order to stimulate the immune system, have a medicine implanted under the skin, or be bled in order to allow poisonous substances to leave the body.

The Nuba make incisions on the temples to relieve headaches and around the eyes to improve eyesight – an example of how the healing and magical elements of scarring are closely linked.

For the Luluwa of Zaire scars not only represent beauty and status but reveal the state of mind of the wearer, such as pain, grief, or hope. Luluwa women are often scarred during pregnancy, especially in cases where they have previously miscarried or have given birth to a sickly baby. Each symbol etched onto the body or face denotes a different meaning or quality. Circles, for example, symbolise the sun and moon and depict health and vitality, as do spirals. Scars on the navel signify the development of the child in the womb.

The Berbers also use scarification to promote fertility and to protect the foetus from unwelcome spirits. Berber women believe the intricate ‘siyala’ designs, tattooed or painted onto the skin, are most effective in destroying negative influences preying on the unborn child.

The Ivory coast’s Abdidji tribe holds an annual festival in which members enter a trance-like state and are guided by spirits that enter their bodies (known as ‘sekes’) to plunge a knife into their bellies. The wounds are then treated with a poultice of kaolin, raw eggs and herbs, which is said to promote healing. The Abdidji believe that it is the sekés which prescribe both the injury and the cure, a cycle of pain and healing, which anthropologists believe is used to tackle personal problems, or to solve a problem faced by the tribe as a whole.

Birth, rebirth and creation

Classic texts show that body decoration or body modification has long been associated with rebirth and creation. Often linked with violence and suffering, ritual self-mutilation is closely tied to sacrifice to higher beings.

The Indian classic text, the Rigveda, relates how the gods sacrificed Purusa and sectioned his body into portions from which the world was created. The sun has been fashioned from his eye, the moon from his mind, the sky from his head, the mid-air from his navel, the earth from his feet and the regions of the earth from his ear.

The Scandinavian classic text, *Prose Edda*, states that a cow and the giant Ymir were cut up by the gods – Ymir's body supplied the world: his blood became the seas, his flesh the earth, his bones the mountains, his teeth rocks and his skull the sky.

Many centuries later, the notion that the sacrifice of a physical part of the body somehow leads to rebirth remains apparent in many tribal societies. In South America, for example, Araucanian shamans claim to exchange their eyes and tongues with other shamans; they also pierce their bodies through the stomach with rods and walk on burning coals.

In Siberia, Yakut shamans 'die' and lie silently for several days: a period of isolation during which they supposedly meet demons. The demons are said to drain the shamans of their bodily fluids, peel the flesh off their bones, and tear out their eyeballs. In this mutilated state the shamans are said to be transported to hell where they remain for three years. During this time, they are further mutilated, having their heads removed from their bodies and their remaining pieces chopped up. After the spell in hell, which is meant to give them special powers, they are put back together and reborn.

Aboriginal shamans also claim to have their internal organs removed and replaced before journeying back to the real world. In Borneo, Dayak shamans claim to have their heads removed and their brains washed and replaced, as well as having their hearts pierced in order to teach them of illness and pain.

Perhaps, these tales of suffering and sacrifice are more to do with empowerment than weakening – a journey from darkness to enlightenment. For those feeling dispossessed, out of step or powerless in the western world, the lure of being able to sacrifice a small part of themselves to achieve healing, or to reach a higher level of existence or greater understanding, is an attractive prospect.

Similarly, in Modern Primitivism, for example, many women have their bodies decorated or pierced in order to feel that they are reclaiming themselves after physical or psychological abuse. The process has two main objectives. Firstly, by decorating or modifying a body part, the individual places her mark on an area another person has 'seized' without her consent. Secondly, by marking the body through ritual, an individual is lifted out of a culture he or she finds intolerable and is transported into a new clan which mirrors his or her sentiments.

Need for ritual in modern life

In western industrialised society rituals are enacted from the cradle to the grave. They take many forms: there are social rituals such as watching a football match or sharing a drink with a friend in the pub; there are religious rituals, such as christenings, confession, holy communion or marriage; there are national rituals, such as street parades on public holidays; there are initiations, such as the first day at a new school or place of work. There are rituals marking rites of passage, the first kiss, moving out of the parental home, the hen or stag night, the honeymoon, the baby shower. Each day, millions of people in industrial societies play out their roles within a framework of rituals that introduces them to, and keeps them locked into, the workings of the dominant culture.

For some people, however, the established order supplies either insufficient or unacceptable daily rituals. This may lead to a search for a new society which has its own set of practices, thought more suited to marking life's milestones.

Erikson states that after birth, a child has the potential to belong to any culture. Moreover, he points out that humans are unique in that they are able to see what they have been in the past, or what they are now, whilst at the same time imagining what they would like to become, or could become, in the future.

It is during adolescence, when a person is moving away from childhood (a time in which he is dependent) towards adulthood (a time in which he will become independent) that these two visions of self are most likely to clash. Musafar, who started modifying his body at the age of thirteen, feels his transition from childhood to adult was governed by a need to express his true self through changing the shape of his body. He is convinced it was through ritual body modification that he forged his true identity, one far removed from the dominant culture of the time.

While many modern primitives despise the mass-media society they feel has marginalized them it is, ironically, the information age which allows them to connect easily with one another. The Internet provides the ultimate forum for communication, across national and cultural boundaries. It is anonymous, a person is invisible, it is largely uncensored and it is immediate.

It is no coincidence that the Net has become the communication tool for a variety of subcultures, all swapping their experiences, and communicating their values and beliefs. There are numerous electronic magazines devoted to body modification, in which facts and pictures are supplied. There are just as many Home Pages, sites on which as Net user can display his or her

‘scrapbook’ of thoughts, cuttings, and contacts. There are forums – or conversations – which allow people to connect cheaply and efficiently.

This is the alternative domain of those who are disgusted by a world which they feel has been poisoned by the manipulation of information.

Concluding remarks

In 1975 Musafar knew a total of seven people with body piercings. Now piercing, along with tattooing and scarification and branding, has become so widespread that a movement of ‘Modern Primitives’ may perhaps be spoken of with some justice.

In the twenty-first century, more people are joining in. They often blame what they consider a homogeneity and lack of individualism in our culture. This, of course, poses its own problems. If so many people join in that the marginalized becomes the mainstream, this form of expression will not longer provide the rebellion that they crave.

In the meantime, for many of these individuals, this form of visible rebellion will inevitably cause some measure of dissociation from the culture they were born into.

For a Modern Primitive, a nose piercing or facial tattoo may be a badge of admission into a new tribal group, but he has little choice but to continue to engage in activities linked to the dominant culture.

Short of travelling to Kenya to be with the Masai, to the Philippines to live with the Tasaday or to Borneo to join the Dayaks, the Modern Primitive cannot hope to replace Western industrialisation with a ‘primitive’ society. Even if he were to do so, that society is almost certain to already have been irrevocably contaminated by ‘civilisation’.

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