Almir Ibrić

Are tattoos prohibited in Islam?

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„Do not tattoo,
and do not have yourselves tattooed.
“(لاَ تَشِمْنَ وَلاَ تَسْتَوْشِمْنَ)
Muhammad ﷺ

My first conscious encounter with a tattoo occurred in the late 1980s. While some individuals in my environment bore tattoos, these were generally simple designs, such as military insignia or family-related inscriptions featuring names and dates. More intricate or elaborate tattoos were exceedingly rare, as such practices were largely uncommon in my residential area at that time.

Upon first seeing a photograph of the band Iron Maiden, I became aware of the members' tattoos, which prompted me to investigate their motifs and underlying meanings. I was particularly struck by the depiction of *The Trooper* on bassist Steve Harris, which conveyed a powerful combination of music, imagery, and emotion. This experience made me realize that tattoos can extend far beyond names or dates: they can narrate stories, express passions, and reveal aspects of individual identity.

Arabian Peninsula

The art of tattooing has long been characterized by a certain ambivalence. Thousands of years ago, tattoos in many societies were often regarded with great reverence and were sometimes associated with supernatural powers or even deities. Over the past two centuries, however, this perception has gradually shifted, and tattoos have increasingly come to be viewed as decorative elements of everyday life. Tattooing appears to have accompanied human societies for millennia, yet its precise origins and the motivations behind this practice remain uncertain. Historical sources do reveal recurring patterns in the reasons for tattooing. As in many other cultural and religious contexts, traditions of tattooing also developed on the Arabian Peninsula, where they were closely intertwined with the social and cultural practices of local communities. Long before the emergence of Islam, tattooing was both known and widely practiced across the Arabian Peninsula. The motifs and techniques used served a variety of social and cultural functions within these communities. Many of these traditions were shaped by animistic and dynamistic beliefs as well as polytheistic symbolism. Tattoos were frequently associated with protective and healing functions, serving to ward off the so-called “evil eye” or to symbolize restorative powers. They also featured traditional patterns associated with different stages of life and were sometimes linked to transitional or initiation rites. Beyond these ritual and

[1] The present article is based on the book „Tätowierungen und Tätowierungsverbot im Islam“, published in 2026 in Vienna (Lit Verlag; 372 pages, 8 figures). It provides a heavily abridged summary of selected findings and omits a detailed presentation of key Qur’anic and Hadith passages as well as a comprehensive historical analysis of tattooing traditions in Islam.

religious functions, tattoos also served aesthetic purposes and functioned as visible markers of social affiliation, signaling tribal or group identity.[2]

Arabian Girl, 1920, Fig.1.

Accounts from the centuries following the establishment of Islam indicate that the practice of tattooing initially did not differ significantly from the traditions of neighboring regions. Rather, these tattoos reflected developments that were common both within the immediate cultural and religious context and across a broader regional and global framework. In the period immediately preceding the emergence of Islam, no major divergence from the tattooing practices of surrounding cultures can be observed; instead, the Arab tradition in this respect appears to have been largely embedded within regional cultural patterns. It was only with the gradual consolidation of religious norms and the establishment of Islamic legal provisions—particularly during the period from 610 to 632—that attitudes toward tattooing began to change significantly. What had previously been an accepted part of everyday and ritual life was now viewed critically and reconsidered in terms of its religious permissibility. Within this context, and under the guidance of the principles, rules, and prohibitions of the new religion, the prohibition of tattooing in Islam was already being articulated.

Categories of Tattooing

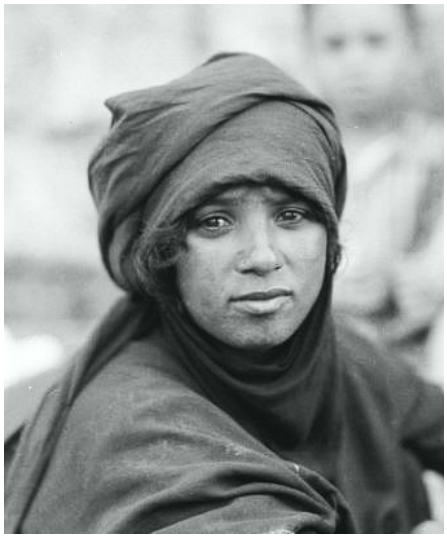
All documented tattoos, including those found in contemporary practice, can be grouped into four primary categories: *belief*, *healing*, *identity*, and *decoration*. Numerous subcategories and hybrid forms combining these main types are also evident. Every tattoo in human history can be assigned to at least one of these categories, with *identity* being the most prominent. Each tattoo influences the wearer's sense of self and social perception; from the moment it is applied, a person's appearance and individual identity are inherently altered. This category also includes characteristic identity tattoos, such as those signaling affiliation with an ethnic or cultural community, social group, or specific movement. Systematically categorizing tattoos is crucial for understanding the legal and normative assessments in Islam, particularly regarding the prohibition of tattooing. Such a classification highlights the functions and social meanings attributed to tattoos and helps explain why certain practices were viewed critically from a

[2] Cf. Fig.1.: Library of Congress, T.T. & C. Jr. May 1920, Online: https://lccn.loc.gov/2017684904, 9.3.32026; Fig.2.: American Colony . Photo Department, photographer. Bedouin girl in Tiberias with tatoo i.e., tattoo face. Tiberias Israel, 1935. July. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2019707300/, 9.3.2026; Fig.3.: Postcard, Bédouine tunisienne en 1907, Online: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:B%C3%A9douine_tunisienne.jpg, 9.3.2026; Fig.4.: Abb.2: American Colony . Photo Department, photographer. Various types, etc. Tattooing a pilgrim. Jerusalem, 1900. [Approximately to 1911] Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2019691942/, 9.3.20206.

religious perspective. The earliest documented tattoos are primarily associated with *belief* and *healing*—functions that were also highly significant in the context of early Islam. Tattoos often served amulet-like protective and healing roles, intended to ward off harmful influences or support ritual practices. Their symbols and patterns carried not only decorative value but also specific functional and symbolic meanings within religious and cultural frameworks. Even protection against death played a role in early tattooing traditions, with certain symbols applied to influence fate or "outwit" death through magical means. Evidence of healing tattoos spans millennia, including prehistoric examples such as those found on the Ötzi mummy discovered in an Austrian glacier. His tattoos, over 5,300 years old, provide compelling evidence of the long-standing tradition of healing and symbolic body markings.

The Qur'an as a Source for the Prohibition of Tattooing in Islam

With few exceptions, the prohibition of tattooing in Islam is most commonly grounded in the Hadiths. When the Qur'an is cited, it is usually passages that are also referenced in the Hadiths. The Qur'an does not explicitly mention tattooing; however, it is interpreted as indirectly prohibiting the practice by outlining the fundamental principles of the religion. These guiding principles—considered alongside the categorization of tattoos—provide a clear framework and form the basis for the Islamic prohibition of tattooing. This prohibition can only be fully understood within the historical context in which it emerged. From this perspective, five justifications for the prohibition in the Qur'an can be identified: *the prohibition of polytheism and sorcery*, *the alteration of God's creation and the prohibition of forms and images*, *the prohibition of imitating pre-Islamic customs*, *the Prophet as a model and the moral principles of Islam*, as well as considerations of *hygiene and the risk of infection*.



Bedouin, 1935, *Ṭabariyā*, Palestine
Fig.2.

The daily observance of Islamic principles profoundly shaped the life of the Prophet Muhammad between 610 and 632. Living in accordance with monotheism required constant and conscious distancing from polytheistic practices. The central tenet of Islam is the prohibition of polytheism: associating partners with, or worshipping anything other than, Allah is considered a grave sin, which, according to Qur'an 4:116, is unforgivable. Consequently, all practices, traditions, or actions that could be interpreted in a polytheistic context are viewed as violations of this principle and are therefore forbidden. This includes, in particular, the worship of other deities, seeking supernatural intervention, and attributing powers through magical or supernatural acts. Such practices are strictly prohibited in Islam. The same applies to tattoos, which at that time were often associated with *healing* or *belief* in supernatural forces, such as magic or sorcery. Consequently, all objects (amulets, clothing, symbols, artworks, or other items), practices (rituals, ceremonies, traditions), and actions (tattooing, music, painting,

consumption)—including tattoos themselves, both as acts and as worn or displayed products—used for these purposes are considered forbidden. Any other stance would constitute a clear violation of the Islamic principle of anti-polytheism. The same applies to questions of *form and creation*. Allah is regarded as the sole creator of space and time and the only giver of form and shape. Of particular relevance to the prohibition of tattooing is its connection to *altering creation*, as well as the broader prohibition of images in Islam. The term *al-Muṣawwir* (المُصَوِّر), one of Allah's names, plays a key role in this context, encompassing not only the concept of the "divine creator" but also human activities such as painting, photography, or other creative acts. According to the Hadiths, these human creative endeavors are precisely those considered to challenge Allah's creative authority. This challenge—understood as the "creation of the living"—is explicitly regarded as problematic or prohibited in both the Qur'an and the Hadiths. Humans are not considered *capable of animating* their creations, and any attempt to do so constitutes presumption in assuming God's role. In this sense, all tattoos depicting living beings fall within this prohibition. Moreover, Allah's creation *must not be altered* arbitrarily, as such actions are seen as fulfilling Satan's intentions (cf. Qur'an 4:117–119). The human body is regarded as *Allah's creation*, a "borrowed possession" to be preserved; consequently, no alteration of creation is permitted. With the establishment of Islam in the 7th century, it became essential to eliminate pre-Islamic polytheistic practices from daily life. Many of these ancient practices are addressed in the Qur'an and explicitly prohibited within the context of polytheistic rites. While tattooing is not mentioned directly in the Qur'an, it is referenced in the Hadiths. Nevertheless, the Qur'anic examples provide a sufficient basis for the Prophet's decision to classify tattooing as a pre-Islamic, polytheistic practice and to prohibit it—particularly when considered alongside the other Qur'anic justifications previously discussed. A particularly significant event in this context is the iconoclasm in Mecca in 630, which vividly illustrates how the Prophet served as a *model for the community* through his own conduct. Muhammad is regarded in Islam as the central exemplar for the actions and way of life of the faithful (cf. Qur'an 33:21). The revelation he transmitted—the Qur'an—constitutes the fundamental religious authority, while his recorded words and deeds provide normative guidance on ethical and social matters. Descriptions of his appearance and conduct have also gained significance within the religious tradition. Despite this high normative status, no personal cult developed in the strict sense, since in Islam only God is to be worshipped. Another consideration concerns *hygiene and the risk of infection.* Early tattooing involved piercing the skin with sharp objects such as bones, thorns, knives, or nails, while applying pigments made from various substances, often mixed with breast milk. Beyond the magical practices that frequently influenced these techniques and were considered prohibited, the procedure carried a significant risk of infection. Furthermore, self-harm is prohibited in Islam (cf. Qur'an 4:29). The risk of infection, along with the handling of blood—which is considered ritually "impure" under Islamic law—also renders the practice forbidden. A fundamental principle of Islam is the minimization of harm to the body: anything detrimental to health must be avoided. This pragmatic, Islamically rooted principle provides an additional rationale against tattooing, especially when considered alongside the four justifications discussed earlier.

Hadith as a Source for the Prohibition of Tattooing in Islam

> "It was narrated to us by Zuhayr ibn Ḥarb, who reported that Ǧarīr told him, who in turn heard it from ʿUmara, who heard it from Abū Zurʿa, that Abū Hurayra (رضي الله عنه , may Allah be pleased with him) reported how ʿUmar stood up when a tattooed woman was brought before him. He said: 'I ask you by Allah, tell me if any of you has heard anything from the Prophet ﷺ—peace and blessings be upon him—regarding tattoos?' Abū Hurayra replied: 'I stood up and said: "O Commander of the Faithful, I have heard something." He asked: "What did you hear?" I replied: "I heard the Prophet ﷺ—peace and blessings be upon him—say to the women:
> 'Do not tattoo yourselves, and do not have yourselves tattooed (لاَ تَشِمْنَ وَلاَ تَسْتَوْشِمْنَ)!'"[3]"[4]

As a second authoritative source for the prohibition of tattooing, hadiths are most frequently cited in Islamic legal and traditional literature. Within the six canonical Sunni hadith collections, known collectively as *al-Kutub al-Sitta* (الكتب الستة, "the six books"), numerous narrations can be found that deal directly or indirectly with the practice of tattooing. These collections are regarded in the Sunni tradition as particularly authoritative and constitute a central basis for deriving normative religious positions. A systematic review of these six canonical collections identifies at least 58 hadiths referring to tattoos or related practices, which in turn form nine thematic clusters (cf. footnote 1). These narrations form an essential part of the argumentative foundation for the prohibition of tattooing upheld in many schools of Islamic law. In the study mentioned in footnote 1, these hadiths were fully considered and examined through historical, theological, and philosophical approaches. The total corpus examined, however, comprises 80 hadiths, since, in addition to the narrations from the canonical collections, corresponding traditions from other hadith compilations were also included in the analysis. One of the most frequently cited references to the prohibition of

Bedouin, Tunisia, 1907. Fig.3.

[3] Sahih al-Bukhari. 5946. 77 Dress, (87) Chapter: The woman who gets herself tattooed, Sahih al-Bukhari 5946, Book 77, Hadith 162 (Vol. 7, Book 72, Hadith 830), Sunnah.com, Online: https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5946, 5.4.2021.

[4] Sahihu-l-Buhari. 5946. Buharijeva zbirka Hadisa (klassische Hadithsammlung al-Buchārī`s in bosnisch-arabisch mit zusätzlichen Kommentaren), Bücher 1-4, islamska-biblioteka.net, Sarajevo 2009. Buch 4., Untertitel: Die Frauen die nach Tätowierung verlangen (die Frauen die sich tätowieren lassen wollen), S.314.

Pilgrim tattoo, Jerusalem, 1900. Fig.4.

tattooing in Islam occurs in a transmitted dialogue between Umm Yaʿqūb and ʿAbdallāh ibn Masʿūd. In this narration, tattooing is addressed within the broader context of a discussion on various prohibited practices. The passage is particularly significant because ʿAbdallāh ibn Masʿūd explicitly grounds his argument in the authority and exemplary role of the Prophet Muhammad, citing a transmitted statement in which both those who apply tattoos and those who receive them are subjected to a curse. In later Islamic legal and traditional literature, this formulation is regarded as particularly strong evidence of the religious disapproval—or outright prohibition—of tattooing in Islam. At the same time, the dialogue serves as a clear example of how normative positions in early Islamic discourse were justified by reference to prophetic authority, and how individual hadiths were employed within theological and legal reasoning to derive concrete rules of conduct. Nevertheless, an analysis of the relevant hadiths indicates that the prohibition of tattooing can only be fully understood within the historical context of the society in which it emerged. The narrations reveal a broader tendency to abolish or regulate certain customs and practices associated with the pre-Islamic period (jāhilīya). In this context, the prohibition of tattooing does not appear in isolation but is frequently discussed alongside other prohibited or criticized practices. These include, among others, excessive mourning for the dead, bodily self-injury or modification, the handling of blood, certain beliefs concerning dogs, the cosmetic sharpening or filing of teeth, prostitution, and various forms of violence toward animals. The thematic clustering of these prohibitions within the hadith narrations suggests that the concern was less with any single practice than with a broader moral and social reordering, aimed at curbing certain cultural practices of pre-Islamic society that were deemed problematic. The prohibition of tattooing must be understood within this wider normative framework. Comparable narrations addressing tattooing can also be found in the Shiʿi hadith collections, known collectively as *al-Kutub al-Arbaʿa* (الكتب الأربعة, "the four books"), where the practice is similarly criticized and a prohibition is articulated. Over time, however, a partially divergent stance toward tattooing developed within Shiʿism. In the later Shiʿi legal and scholarly tradition, this prohibition was often interpreted less as a strictly binding legal injunction and more as a recommendation to avoid the practice. Consequently, a more nuanced assessment emerged within parts of Shiʿi legal thought: tattoos were not necessarily considered unequivocally forbidden but were instead classified as undesirable or practices that should preferably be avoided. This development demonstrates that the

interpretation of hadith narrations—even when based on comparable textual foundations—can yield differing legal and normative evaluations across Islamic traditions.

Digital age

In today's age of social media, nearly unlimited access to information represents both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because vast amounts of knowledge are freely available and can, in principle, be accessed at any time. At the same time, this abundance of information carries risks, as clear attribution or contextualization is often lacking. This issue is particularly evident in religious rulings, such as fatwas, which can easily give rise to confusion due to divergent interpretations. An analysis of religious legal opinions available online concerning the prohibition of tattooing in Islam yields a consistent pattern: insofar as the opinions reflect Sunni perspectives, the practice of tattooing is uniformly interpreted as forbidden. Regardless of whether these opinions originate from religious authorities in specific countries or from individual scholars commenting online, the most frequently cited justification is hadith literature, with the Qur'an cited less often. In the realm of Shiʿi legal opinions available online, a somewhat different picture emerges, partly diverging from actual practice: although tattoos are generally not explicitly prohibited, scholars commonly classify them as "discouraged" (*makruh*). At the same time, it is generally recommended to avoid tattoos whenever possible. These recommendations are often based on hadiths, which are, however, supplemented by commentaries and interpretations that sometimes bear little relation to the original reports or rely on the views of other scholars or Imams. A direct equation with an absolute prohibition is rarely encountered in this context. This indicates that, within Shiʿi legal thought, the issue is understood more as a matter of moral disapproval than as a strictly binding rule, with recommendations strongly shaped by the interpretive traditions of the respective scholars. More broadly, new trends can also be observed online: the tattoo renaissance of the past three decades no longer appears as prominent as it once did. At the same time, the quality of tattooing techniques has improved considerably, and the execution of motifs has become more precise. Nevertheless, anti-tattoo tendencies are also observable online, particularly within Islamic youth communities. Platforms such as TikTok foster a level of engagement with the topic that is far more pronounced than in the decades preceding the rise of social media. These digital debates illustrate how religious norms, aesthetic practices, and social attitudes interact within the context of the modern information society. The issue appears to play a particularly prominent role among Muslim youth and in countries with non-Muslim majority populations, compared with states where Muslims constitute the majority. Several studies on the subject corroborate this observation. Moreover, clear discrepancies between practice and theory can be identified: tattoos that, according to historical reports, were often applied in Islamic contexts until the twentieth century out of ignorance are increasingly perceived in the twenty-first century—driven in large part by the rapid flow of information online—as "un-Islamic," prompting a corresponding adjustment in attitudes. Over the past century, the gaps between tribal or cultural tattooing traditions historically practiced in certain regions—such as North Africa—and the injunctions of the Qur'an and the hadiths concerning the prohibition of tattooing have steadily narrowed. The prohibition of tattooing in Islam has evidently shaped Muslims' attitudes toward this practice and continues to exert an influence today. This influence

is further reinforced today by information disseminated extensively via social media platforms. Non-religious prohibitions on tattooing, as well as broader social norms, have also become more widely known globally through (online) media. Consequently, tattooing in everyday life is perceived differently today than it was in the period prior to digitalization and the advent of the internet. Ultimately, an individual's attitude toward tattoos depends on their own transcultural automatisms and their personal transculturality.[5] Depending on the cultural environment and social influences, this attitude may be rejecting, negative, or quite positive. The Islamic prohibition of tattooing, however, seems to have fulfilled its normative function, even though some tattooing traditions among Muslims have not completely disappeared. The prohibition of tattooing in Islam created an ethical–aesthetic framework as an anti-polytheistic counterconcept to Satan's intention when, according to the Qur'an, he says to God: "[…] I will surely take from Your servants a fixed portion, and I will lead them astray and arouse vain desires in them, and I will command them […] to alter the creation of God."[6]

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[5] Cf. Almir Ibrić. Transcultural Automatisms. Philosophy-Competence-Methods, Lit, Vienna 2023.
[6] Surah 4: 117-119, Der Koran. Übersetzung von Rudi Paret, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2014.