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Visible Marks, Invisible Boundaries: Tattooing, Scarification, and Social Stigma in Tunisia

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Abstract :

In contemporary Tunisia, the male tattoo asserts itself as a significant body marking, taking on a role beyond simple aesthetic adornment to become an arena for identity expression, social protest and gender rewriting. Emerging historically from spiritual, medicinal or tribal purposes, the practice has evolved to subvert its traditional significance under the push of modernity, globalization, and shifting constructions of masculinity.

This article examines masculine tattooing as a socially perceived risk factor through a qualitative investigation using semi-directive interviews, including conservative contexts where it is frequently linked to moral deviance, marginalization, or criminality. This stigmatization of the tattooed body extends beyond the individual and impacts the person's family and community, exposing deep social issues related to physical visibility and the conflict between traditional and modern identities.

The study clarifies the connections between self-affirmation, tattooing, and scarification in a post-revolutionary setting where the body becomes a negotiation ground between institutional pressures, individual agency, and social dominance. She finally examines the subjective meanings of tattoos for men while examining the social responses they elicit.

Keywords: body markings, risk behaviors, scarification, stigmatization

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Mots-clés : marques corporelles, conduites à risques, scarification, stigmatisation

Résumé :

Dans la Tunisie contemporaine, le tatouage masculin s'impose comme une marque corporelle significative, dépassant le simple ornement esthétique pour devenir un espace d'expression identitaire, de protestation sociale et de réécriture du genre. Issu historiquement de pratiques spirituelles, médicinales ou tribales, le tatouage a évolué pour subvertir sa signification traditionnelle sous l'effet de la modernité, de la mondialisation et des mutations des constructions de la masculinité.

Cet article examine le tatouage masculin comme un facteur de risque socialement perçu, à travers une enquête qualitative menée par des entretiens semi-directifs, notamment dans des contextes conservateurs où il est fréquemment associé à la déviance morale, à la marginalisation ou à la criminalité. Cette stigmatisation du corps tatoué dépasse l'individu et impacte son entourage familial et communautaire, révélant des tensions sociales profondes liées à la visibilité corporelle et au conflit entre identités traditionnelles et modernes.

L'étude éclaire les liens entre affirmation de soi, tatouage et scarification dans un contexte postrévolutionnaire où le corps devient un lieu de négociation entre pressions institutionnelles, agentivité individuelle et domination sociale. Elle interroge enfin les significations subjectives des tatouages pour les hommes tout en analysant les réactions sociales qu'ils suscitent.

الكلمات المفاتيح: العلامات الجسدية، السلوكيات المحفوفة بالمخاطر، التشطيب (الندب المتعمد)، الوصم الاجتماعي

الملخص:

في تونس المعاصرة، يبرز الوشم لدى الرجال كعلامة جسدية ذات دلالة، تتجاوز الزينة الجمالية البسيطة لتُصبح مجالًا للتعبير عن الهوية، والاحتجاج الاجتماعي، وإعادة تشكيل مفهوم الرجولة. وقد نشأ هذا الفعل تاريخيًا من أغراض روحية، طبية أو قبلية، لكنه تطور ليقلب معانيه التقليدية تحت تأثير الحداثة والعولمة وتغيّر بناء الهوية الذكورية.

تتناول هذه الدراسة الوشم الرجالي كعامل خطر يُنظر إليه اجتماعيًا، وذلك من خلال تحقيق نوعي يعتمد على مقابلات شبه موجهة، لا سيما في السياقات المحافظة حيث يُربط غالبًا بالانحراف الأخلاقي، أو التهميش، أو الإجرام. ويتعدى هذا الوصم الجسدي الفرد ليطال أسرته ومحيطه الاجتماعي، كاشفًا عن قضايا اجتماعية عميقة مرتبطة بالظهور الجسدي وصراع الهويات بين التقليدي والحديث.

تُسلط الدراسة الضوء على العلاقة بين تأكيد الذات، والوشم، والتشطيب في سياق ما بعد الثورة، حيث يتحول الجسد إلى مساحة تفاوض بين الضغوط المؤسساتية والفاعلية الفردية والهيمنة الاجتماعية. وتبحث أخيرًا في المعاني الذاتية للوشم لدى الرجال، كما تُحلل الاستجابات الاجتماعية التي تثيرها هذه العلامات المجسدة للاختلاف.

Introduction:

Skin in contemporary Tunisia is not only a biological surface, but an ideological backdrop on which stories of resistance and belonging are inscribed. Tattooing, among men particularly, is a hegemonic medium through which people engage in the visible reconception of self. Tattooing is an aesthetics-beneath-practice that penetrates deeper infrastructures of social meaning, cultural memory, and power relations.

With roots in North African society's history, tattooing has explicitly been associated with spiritual protection, membership in a tribe, and folk medicine. In the past, it meant religious, curative, or warrior meanings tattooing the body as part of a common moral and cosmic order. With modernity, globalization, and the definition of new masculinity, however, all these meanings have dramatically shifted. No longer confined by traditional logics, it has become an over-determined signifier: interpreted variously as a form of aesthetic expression, unusual activity, or political/social commentary.

This article situates male tattooing in Tunisia within a broader socio-anthropological framework, addressing the tattooed body as a site of tension between modernity and tradition, individual agency and control. Using qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, it analyzes the ways in which tattooing works not only as a personal practice but also as a public display that becomes intertwined with gender constructs, class affiliations, religious knowledge, and state regulation.

Above all else, this study investigates the stigmatisation of tattooed men, and particularly in conservative social spheres where the marking of the body is tied to criminality, marginality, or moral deviance. The stigma extends beyond the person its impact reverberates through family and communal networks, demonstrating the profound intergenerational costs of being perceived in a society that is still struggling with its post-revolutionary identity.

Through sociological analysis of tattooing, this article contributes to the understanding of the body as a socio-political object and tattooing as self-writing practice in unstable economic and cultural climates. It asks; How does the tattoo transgress or augment hegemonic definitions of Tunisian manhood? What do men perceive their tattoos to signify? And how do society react to these embodied tales of difference?

Along the way, it argues that tattooing among men in Tunisia is not a peripheral subcultural behavior, but rather a sign of deeper transformations in identity politics, body sovereignty, and the governance of visibility in a changing society.

I. The History of Bodily Marks in Tunisia: Aesthetic and Therapeutic Dimensions

Tattooing, as a deliberate bodily mark, constitutes a privileged object of study in sociology, insofar as it stages a society’s relationship to the body, identity, pain, the sacred, and the visible. In Tunisia, we are not the first to engage in this practice; it is part of an ancient popular heritage in which the human body has long served as a canvas for aesthetic, religious, or medicinal inscriptions.

This article seeks to trace the evolution of tattooing in Tunisia through a diachronic and sociological lens. Far from being a mere bodily ornament or a fleeting trend, tattooing is a socially charged act, laden with meaning, whose uses and representations have undergone profound transformations. From its prehistoric symbolic roles; religious, therapeutic, social, or aesthetic embedded in tribal and rural societies, to its

modern, urban, individualized, and sometimes assertive expressions, tattooing bears witness to Tunisia's cultural metamorphoses, identity reorganizations, and normative conflicts.

The aim here is not only to examine bodily practices in themselves, but more importantly to explore what they reveal about social relationships to the body, belief systems, and the power dynamics inscribed therein. Tattooing is not a neutral gesture; it carries symbolism, invokes collective memory, expresses belonging or rupture, and can reinforce the established order or subvert it.

In this perspective, the body is approached as a symbolic territory, a three-dimensional space where the political, the intimate, and the identity-related intersect. As a lived and shaped space, the body becomes a surface where norms, resistance, and individual narratives are inscribed. It is a site of social memory -a memory of suffering, expectations, affiliations, and conflicts- but also a space of performativity, through which the subject asserts or questions their place in the world.

In the Tunisian context marked by a complex entanglement of tradition and modernity, popular Islam and biomedical rationality, rural heritage and accelerated urbanization tattooing reveals the logics of continuity and rupture that traverse the body. It illustrates how Tunisians negotiate, in their very flesh, deep social conflicts: between communal belonging and individual subjectivity, between social invisibility and self-presentation, between the memory of a "former" body (rural, protective, therapeutic) and the desire for a "new" body (urban, free, aesthetic, or rebellious).

Thus conceived, this article offers a socio-anthropological exploration of tattooing as an expressive bodily practice, situated at the crossroads of gender relations, belief systems, social hierarchies, and cultural imaginaries. It particularly highlights the ambivalence of male tattooing in the construction of Tunisian masculinities; tattoos may be seen as signs of social integration, codified virility, or symbolic protection, but also as markers of marginalization, norm transgression, or assertions of individuality in rupture with traditional models.

1. Traditional Tattooing: Between Beauty, Belief, and Folk Medicine

1.1. An Aesthetic Rooted in Rural Symbolism

In precolonial and postcolonial rural Tunisian societies -particularly in the southern, Sahelian, central-western regions, and certain Berber-speaking areas- tattooing was a popular art with multiple meanings. It was not viewed merely as an aesthetic ornament but rather as a form of bodily inscription, following social, symbolic, and religious logics. The most common motifs included geometric shapes (crosses, dots, triangles), animal figures (fish, snakes, doves), plant motifs (palms, olive branches), or cosmic symbols (moon, sun, stars). Each design corresponded to a specific collective imaginary: the moon and star were associated with femininity, fertility, and cyclicality; the cross (often tattooed between the eyebrows or on the hands) was seen as protective against the evil eye.

Although tattoos were less common and less elaborate for men in Tunisia than for women, they nonetheless held deep social, religious, and symbolic significance. In the past, male tattoos were often tied more to protective or spiritual purposes than to any aesthetic pursuit. Tattooing was used by local religious leaders, healers, or marabouts within a symbolic prophylactic logic intended to ward off evil spirits, prevent illness, or strengthen vital energies.

1.2. Therapeutic Tattooing: Medicine of the Body and the Soul

The therapeutic function of tattooing is another, less well-known but widely recalled aspect in collective memory. It served as a popular response to bodily ailments and a substitute for formal medicine, which was often inaccessible or ineffective.

While women were more likely to use therapeutic tattoos in traditional Tunisian contexts, some men also resorted to tattooing as an empirical healing method centered on the body. When traditional treatments failed, tattoos were sometimes used to treat chronic conditions such as rheumatism, lower back pain, or

persistent headaches. These tattoos were applied to specific parts of the body where people most frequently reported pain or weakness such as the shoulders, lower back, or temples.

These marks were often created by folk healers or marabouts men considered bridges between the material and spiritual realms within rural or marginalized communities. In addition to their physical therapeutic value, tattoos carried ritual and symbolic connotations. The therapeutic logic included pain itself as part of the healing process; it activated the body's defenses, expelled evil spirits, and translated internal suffering into visible expression. Ritual activities such as invocations, Quranic verses, incense fumigations (bakhour), or ablution-like baths were commonly performed alongside the tattooing procedure. In this way, tattooing functioned both as a protective seal and as a scar of pain.

2. The decline, pathology, and refoulement of a physical memory

2.1. The modern medical and moral perspective on tattooing

With Tunisia's 1956 independence and the ensuing socioeconomic changes (urbanization, scholasticization, and the growth of modern medicine), tattooing gradually lost its status as a socially valued practice. The postcolonial state's modernization policies promoted a "propre," clean, well-groomed body free of "superstitions" and "rural archaïsmes."

Since then, tattoos have been viewed as a sign of ignorance, poverty, or even honte. It is now the stigmate of a body that has been left behind by advancements.

2.2. Religious pressure: between interdit and effacement

In addition to this social disqualification, there is also a religious disqualification. Because it alters the divine creation (fitra), tattooing is frequently viewed as haram (interdit) in rigorous lectures. Numerous hadiths, including those found in the Boukhari and Muslim collections, are invoked to denounce this practice. Some older tattooed men have felt more responsible as a result of this religious reprobation, and they have attempted to erase or dissimulate their marks. As a result, tattoos have faced two types of criticism: a social one based on modernist and medical standards and a religious one based on the sanctity of the natural body. The quasi-disparition of traditional tattooing in public spaces has been brought about by this double pression.

3. Contemporary tattooing: between identity restoration, urban aesthetics, and symbolic recomposition

3.1. From marginalization to artistic reimagining

There has been a resurgence of tattooing in Tunisian urban environments since the year 2000. This reappearance is not just a continuation of the past; rather, it is a part of an identity-recomposition process. In a society that is seen as normative, tattooing becomes a unique and frequently subversive language that is used to celebrate uniqueness.

The motifs used today are very diverse and include Arabic proverbes, Arabic symbols (such as the letter "ⵣ"), poetry, battle scenes, and portraits. Young people use their bodies as a means of expressing their stories, struggles, and sensibilities. Tattoos turn into works of art, beautiful postures, and silent manifestations. Social media, urban tattoo parlors, and cultural exchanges with Europe and the United States all contribute to this phenomenon. A "scene" of tattooing has emerged in Tunisia, driven by tattoo artists who balance modernity, tradition, and resistance.

3.2. Reviving old senses: tattoos for resistance and healing Fait remarkable:

Some aspects of therapeutic tattooing often take the form of surface art. The connections between tattoos and life force, physical memory, chakras, or emotional well-being are mentioned in pseudoscientific discourse. These discourses reveal a need for embodied spirituality and symbolic body care in the modern era, even if they do not reinterpret the codes of ancient healers.

In situations of precarity, social anxiety, or loss of reputation, tattooing can occasionally turn into a psychological act. The body is tattooed where it suffers, where it survecues, and where it wishes to express its existence. In this way, tattooing is a way for me to re-territorialize myself; A way of rewriting oneself in the face of the world's instability and reclaiming ownership of one's body.

II. Tattooing and Identity Affirmation: Between Individualization, Resistance, and Belonging

In contemporary Tunisia, the practice of tattooing -particularly among men- has evolved into a powerful mode of identity affirmation. No longer confined to ritual or medicinal contexts, tattooing today reflects deeper socio-cultural dynamics, functioning as a performative act of self-inscription in a society marked by political transitions, generational tensions, and shifting norms of masculinity.

From a sociological perspective, the tattoo is a symbolic resource mobilized by individuals to narrate, construct, and display identity in a fragmented social world. In post-revolutionary Tunisia, where traditional identity anchors (such as religion, nation, tribe, or class) have been destabilized or reconfigured, the body becomes a site of negotiation and reappropriation. Tattooing offers an embodied response to existential and social uncertainties. It becomes both a statement of presence ("I exist, I mark myself") and a form of resistance to imposed norms.

1. The Tattooed Male Body: Between Visibility and Vulnerability

In a culture where masculine identity has long been associated with stoicism, authority, and conformity, the tattooed male body emerges as a counter-narrative. For some Tunisian men, particularly in urban peripheries or among marginalized youth, tattooing is a way of reclaiming symbolic capital in the absence of economic or political capital. It confers recognizability within peer groups and neighborhood networks, and can signal affiliation to informal codes of honor, street culture, or diasporic aesthetics.

Yet this same tattoo may simultaneously carry a stigma in broader Tunisian society, where body modification -especially when visible- is still associated with criminality, deviance, or Westernization. This ambivalence places the tattooed male body at the crossroads of social transgression and identity affirmation. It both challenges and reinforces local notions of manhood: asserting individuality while also signaling resilience, suffering, and belonging to subcultural communities. But this very same tattoo is also, simultaneously, subject to stigma in broader Tunisian society, where bodily modification - especially when exposed- is still equated with criminality, deviance, or Westernization. This is a contradictory positioning that locates tattooed male flesh at the crossroads of social transgression and identity formation. It both transgresses and reifies local ideals of masculinity; affording an assertion of self while also encoding survival, endurance, and belonging within subcultural groups.

2. Tattooing as Technology of the Self

Recalling Michel Foucault's "technologies of the self," tattooing can be read as a technology of self-regulation and self-transformation. Tunisian men who get tattooed usually justify their actions in therapeutic, moral, or aesthetic terms. Some of them have a tattoo to remember a deceased parent, time incarcerated, or an epiphanic moment. Tattooing becomes an act of writing the self, and mapping experience of life onto the body in lieu of a public story available to speak and be heard.

Thus, tattooing is a biographical practice, a form of storytelling outside the bounds of official discourse. It provides a somatic vocabulary for the inscription of mourning, pride, rebellion, or allegiance, particularly for those whose voices are otherwise muted in dominant public spheres on account of social exclusion, political repression, or cultural alienation.

3. Global Aesthetics and Local Appropriations

The increasing influence of global tattoo cultures via digital platforms, music videos, diasporic flows, and global fashion has created a hybrid visual language in Tunisian tattooing. Young men increasingly adopt iconographies drawn from international pop culture, religious syncretism, Berber symbolism, political

emblems, and personal mantras. This hybridization reflects the local nature of identity construction, where local experiences are shaped by, and react to, transnational cultural currents.

Nevertheless, tattoos remain entangled in social hierarchies and moral economies. A tattoo may be celebrated in artistic or progressive circles, but viewed with suspicion in conservative or institutional settings (the workplace, family, police). This double standard reveals the stratified moral geography of the tattooed body, situated between cosmopolitan aspiration and local judgment.

4. Tattooing and Masculinity in Transition

At a broader level, tattooing among Tunisian men is emblematic of a transformation of masculinities. As traditional patriarchal roles are questioned and renegotiated under the impact of feminism, economic precarity, migration, and media exposure men explore new ways of embodying and expressing their identities. The tattoo becomes a fluid symbol, oscillating between aggression and sensitivity, protection and provocation, visibility and vulnerability.

In this regard, the tattoo is not merely an aesthetic or symbolic act; it is part of a social dramaturgy, a performative enactment of selfhood under late modern conditions. It opens a space for sociological reflection on how the male body, often disciplined and silenced by hegemonic norms, is reclaimed as a canvas of meaning a political and emotional text written in ink and skin.

Tattooing has shifted from a group ritual to a personal habit, from a sign of identity to a means of self-expression. The fundamental purposes (decoration, protection, healing, and communication) have remained unchanged despite the changes in form.

III. Stigmatization, Scarification, and the Social Labeling of Banditry

Scarification -like tattooing- is a form of permanent body marking that has historically held diverse meanings in North African societies, ranging from therapeutic and ritualistic to protective and aesthetic. In Tunisia, however, this practice -particularly when performed by men- has increasingly been subsumed under a stigmatizing social gaze, associated not with tradition or spirituality but with delinquency, marginality, and criminality. This part of the article interrogates how scarification has become a symbolic site of social labeling and moral judgment, functioning as a powerful visual cue in the reproduction of social exclusion.

1. The Shift from Ritual to Stigma

In pre-modern Tunisia, scarification (especially on the arms, chest, or temples) could signal participation in healing practices, rites of passage, or tribal belonging. Among rural populations, it was often administered by traditional healers and framed within an indigenous epistemology of pain, health, and protection. These marks were embedded in local cosmologies and collective identities.

However, as Tunisia entered a phase of modernization, urbanization, and state formation -particularly from the 1950s onward- such practices were increasingly pathologized and criminalized. What had once been read as culturally meaningful markings came to be viewed through the lens of medical deviance or criminal symptomatology, especially under a postcolonial regime obsessed with hygiene, discipline, and the construction of a modern masculine subject.

- **Shared Stigma: Familial Consequences of the Social Stigma of the Tattooed Body**

Tattooing in Tunisia, particularly when visible or associated with stigmatized places (like prisons, subcultures, or the informal economy), is likely to cause not only individual stigma but "courtesy stigma" in the sense used by sociologists, a form of stigma experienced by people closely related to the stigmatized individual (Goffman, 1963). It affects family members, above all in close-knit social milieus where honor, reputation, and community membership are main values.

In the Tunisian context, the tattooed male body is perhaps understood as being invested with deviance, delinquency, or social transgression. Whatever their origins in colonial heritage, religious interpretations,

or post-independence norms, these ideas do not remain anchored at the level of the wearer as an individual. Instead, they become collectivized, invested in the extended family group, who become second-order objects of suspicion, exclusion, or disapproval.

- **Family as a Mirror of Social Order**

The Tunisian household is similarly a microcosm of society and an acting agent in the enforcement of social integration. It is therefore required to discipline behavior, impose respectability, and reflect community norms. If one of its own -a father or son or brother- conducts himself with bodily expressions of deviance through the form of tattooing, this can initiate internal fissures within the home and external censure from neighbors, employers, or kin networks. Mothers bear the symbolic and affective burden of the tattooed bodies of their sons. Narratives of shame, evasion of dishonor, and efforts at "re-integration" of the tattooed son into normative expectation come to represent themselves in profound interviews in this research. Fathers also respond with reticence, distancing, or outright denunciation, a gendering of the negotiation of stigma process in the home setting.

- **From Private Disgrace to Collective Vulnerability**

In all but a few cases, the tattooed individual is not alone in exclusion. His or her siblings may endure reputational discrimination at school, in the workplace, or in marriage arrangements. Parents endure social withdrawal or relational loss, excluding themselves from certain community activities or facing implicit blame for "failure of upbringing." Such family stigmatization operates as symbolic violence reinforcing social hierarchy and normative power structures (Bourdieu, 1991). Moreover, the dynamic brings to the foreground the moral economy of invisibility: the tattoo, as a mark on the body, challenges the family's investment in invisibility and discretion as protective social strategies. To counter, some families pressure the tattooed person to get the tattoos removed or hidden, while others turn to narrative re-framing, constructing explanations (health, moral error, military symbolism) to diminish stigma.

2. Scarification and the "Bandit" Imaginary

In contemporary urban Tunisia, scarification is frequently associated with the so-called "bandi" (bandit) figure a masculine stereotype constructed through layers of media discourse, police profiling, and popular folklore. The scar becomes a social index, an external signifier presumed to reflect an internal moral deficit or criminal predisposition. Men bearing facial or bodily scars, especially in impoverished neighborhoods, are often subjected to hyper-surveillance, employment discrimination, and social exclusion, irrespective of their actual biographies.

This stigmatization is part of a broader symbolic economy of visibility, in which certain bodies are rendered suspect by their markings. Scarified men are read as aggressive, undisciplined, or prone to deviance a process akin to Erving Goffman's notion of "spoiled identity." The scar is not neutral; it is moralized, gendered, and racialized, inscribed into a system of social control and spatial marginalization.

3. The Role of Institutions in Reinforcing Stigma

State institutions, including the police, judicial system, and even schools, often play a crucial role in reinforcing the semiotic link between scarification and criminality. Police dossiers may note visible scars as identifiers, and courts may interpret them as signs of prior violence or affiliation with informal networks. Likewise, in job interviews or educational settings, visible scars may generate distrust or rejection, despite formal policies against discrimination.

Thus, scarification becomes a biopolitical issue; the marked body is not only stigmatized but also regulated, surveilled, and punished. This dynamic mirrors the broader process by which bodies become sites of state inscription where social worth and moral legibility are judged through corporeal signs.

4. Resisting Labeling: Counter-Narratives and Subcultural Capital

Despite the dominant narrative of deviance, some young men reappropriate scarification as a form of subcultural capital. Within certain street cultures, prison communities, or underground music scenes (such as Tunisian rap), scars may be reclaimed as badges of survival, authenticity, or masculine resilience. In these spaces, bodily marks articulate counter-narratives of honor, resistance, and brotherhood. The very stigmatization imposed by mainstream society becomes a source of in-group value and identity.

Nevertheless, these reappropriations are ambivalent and context-dependent. The scar can be empowering in one space, but deeply limiting in another, especially when navigating formal labor markets, state institutions, or middle-class respectability. This double bind illustrates the intersectional nature of corporeal stigma, shaped by class, gender, territory, and generation.

Methodological Framework

The paper employs a qualitative research design to which interpretive sociology concepts are drawn in order to interpret the social meanings and symbolic nature of tattooing and scarification practices for Tunisian men. In order to be able to understand the subjective experience, motivations, and social views of the body practices, semi-structured interviews were conducted in diverse public spaces.

- **Data Collection**

Fieldwork was done over the course of a succession of weeks in a variety of urban and peri-urban locations throughout Tunisia, such as cafes, and neighborhood community centers. These were chosen because they represented an intentional effort to create spontaneous and fairly informal patterns of interaction, thereby providing dialogue in a context of low institutional pressure.

There were 5 interviews with male interviewees aged [36-42], all of whom had visible body scarifications or tattoos. Each took no longer than 37 minutes, out of deference to the schedules of interviewees and the fluid nature of public interaction. The semi-structured approach allowed both comparability between interview as well as richness of theme, so interviewees could describe in length their own histories, symbolic significance, and social lives of body markings.

- **Saturation and Analytical Approach**

Interviews were carried out until theoretical saturation was reached that is, when additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or speech variations. Such saturation claimed the validity and consistency of the developing categories. The interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed thematically through an inductive coding process, informed by core ideas of symbolic interactionism, body sociology, and stigma theory.

Special attention was paid to the discursively created constructions of masculinity, identity, stigma, and resistance created in the process of the interviews. The aim was not to enumerate practices but to open up lived meaning and social significance of body marking within the Tunisian male context.

This method positioned at the intersection of ethnographic richness and sociological rigor provides a thick account of how tattooing and scarification are not only individual practices but also social texts written upon and read by society.

Practical section

I.Skin as an Interface of Identity

Skin, in both its symbolic and biological functions, becomes for some young Tunisians a true medium of self-expression. As David Le Breton affirms, “the body becomes language, the skin becomes the site of identity inscription” (*La peau et la trace*, 2003). This idea resonates deeply in the stories collected during our qualitative research with tattooed or scarred youth. Bodily markings appear as tools of self-narration, a way to make visible emotions, affiliations, or biographical ruptures.

One young man, who began tattooing at the age of 16, clearly states that this practice is “the only way to express his emotions and personality.” This statement highlights a lack of emotional communication in the

family sphere -frequent in these accounts- where the body then becomes a substitute for an impossible verbal language. Each tattoo he wears tells a part of his story, as if he were writing his autobiography on his skin. Another youth echoes this sentiment: "My skin is the mirror of my identity. When I feel something, I get a tattoo." He illustrates his point by referencing a *Game of Thrones*-inspired tattoo he got during a significant moment in his life. Here, the tattoo acts as an emotional anchor, a bodily memory marking a subjective stage of existence.

At the same time, scarification serves a specific identity function in certain working-class neighborhoods, where it is less perceived as an aesthetic practice and more as a rite of belonging. In these environments, as Meryem Sellami notes, the scar becomes a symbol of manhood and a sign of bravery (Sellami, 2014). One young man in our study illustrates this clearly, proudly stating: "I'm very proud of the scars on my forearm. I always wear T-shirts so people can see them. It shows that I'm a real bad boy, that I'm not afraid of pain." The inflicted pain becomes a proof of loyalty and initiation within a group seen as protective and validating, often in a context of social exclusion or marginalization.

Thus, tattoos and scarifications act as markers of subjectivity and recognition, revealing an identity quest that passes through the body when other forms of expression emotional, familial, social are blocked or insufficient. The skin, traversed by ink or blade, becomes the medium for a reclaiming of self in a world where words do not always circulate freely.

1. Bodily Marks as Rites of Passage

For many Tunisian adolescents, tattooing or scarification is not merely an aesthetic act but part of a powerful symbolic logic: that of a rite of passage. Rejecting traditional socialization channels like school or family, these youths seek to assert themselves in alternative spaces such as the streets, urban cultures, or neighborhood gangs. In these contexts, the body becomes a medium of transition, a canvas where the entry into a new, valued identity is inscribed.

One adolescent recalled his first tattoo at age 14, done in front of his middle school, surrounded by his hip-hop and breakdance crew. He explained that he was the only one without a tattoo in the group and felt an urgent need to mark his belonging to that culture: "It was like a passport to be accepted. If you don't have a tattoo, you're not really in."

A similar, even more virile scene was recounted by a youth from a working-class neighborhood. He described a night when, surrounded by local delinquents, he underwent a collective scarification ritual. One member pulled out a blade, scarred himself, then passed it around. The youth confessed he feared the pain but feared exclusion and ridicule even more: "Better to suffer than lose face," he said. The scars on his arm became a symbol of his masculinity and integration into the group. He now proudly displays them with sleeveless clothing.

These accounts echo what David Le Breton calls "individual initiation rites in a society without rituals." As he explains: "Tattooing or scarification can be interpreted as individual rites of passage in a society that no longer offers collective initiation rituals" (*Le Breton*, 2003). In street cultures or marginalized communities, physical pain becomes symbolic currency to gain social recognition. Bodily marking, far from being gratuitous, embodies a transition, a belonging, and an assumed identity in spaces where speech is often powerless.

2. Skin as a Space of Expression and Memory

Bodily marks in youth should not be seen as mere whims or impulsive acts; they are often the product of a deeply meaningful process. Through tattooing or scarification, the body becomes a space for self-expression, a medium for personal memory.

The first tattoos observed in our study often express homage to family, especially to the mother. Some youths tattoo their mother's name on their chest, near the heart, or on the forearm, as a way to signify both filial love and loyalty. This gesture, often presented as proof of attachment, can also be interpreted as a

strategy to soften the family's reaction to a perceived transgressive act. Thus, the bodily act does not erase generational tensions but negotiates them through emotion and symbolism.

Moreover, several stories reveal that skin is experienced as a space of emotional memory. One young man scarred himself after a heartbreak: "It was a way not to forget… This scar is a lesson, I don't want to make the same mistake again." Physical pain thus becomes a visible mark of learning, a trace of a biographical episode he does not wish to erase.

This logic strongly echoes David Le Breton's analysis: "Bodily marking constitutes a writing of the self, a memory on the skin's surface, a personal diary offered to the eyes of others or kept for oneself" (*Le Breton*, 2003). Thus, bodily marks become both silent speech, identity claims, and emotional memories. They bear witness to lived experience, relationships, pain, or love—in other words, they inscribe personal history into flesh.

II. Pain vs. Suffering: Bodily Marking as a Psychic Survival Strategy

Across the collected narratives, a common thread runs through the experiences of the youth: deep psychological suffering, often linked to identity malaise, traumatic events, or persistent social exclusion. For some, this inner pain stems from family conflicts, emotional isolation, or a need to belong to marginalized groups. For others, it is the imprint of particularly violent experiences, such as incarceration and abuse in prison.

In this context, scarification and tattooing cannot be considered naïve or aesthetic acts but rather existential responses to a suffering that is difficult to express in words. One young interviewee explained how he scarred himself in prison with pieces of glass and then a blade, stating: "Making myself bleed was to not lose my mind, to hold on. When the bottle didn't work, I used a blade." He continued: "If I hadn't done it, I would've killed myself."

This testimony perfectly illustrates what David Le Breton describes in *Conduites à risque*: "Risk-taking behaviors [...] are often attempts to live, not attempts to die." (*Le Breton*, 2007, p. 8). Physical pain, in these cases, becomes a way to channel psychic suffering, a means to regain control of the self when everything seems to collapse. In prison especially, several youths report using scarification to protest against police violence. Some claim to have mutilated themselves with handcuffs to stop the officers' beatings. These practices are not isolated but part of a carceral culture of survival and protest, where pain becomes language and skin becomes a medium of resistance.

These stories show that voluntarily inflicted pain is not a search for destruction but a strategy of resistance a silent scream written into the flesh, often the only way to express the unspeakable. As Le Breton reminds us in *La Peau et la Trace*: "When existence becomes too heavy, bodily marking is sometimes the only way to keep existing." (*Le Breton*, 2013, p. 95)

III. Bodily Marks as a Process of Entering Delinquency

In the Tunisian sociocultural context, heavily influenced by Arab-Muslim norms, visible bodily marks - particularly tattoos and scarifications on the forearms- constitute a transgression of dominant aesthetic and moral standards. These signs, often misunderstood by society (Besbes, 2017), are frequently interpreted not as expressions of inner suffering, but as stigmas of a marginal identity. Thus, rather than eliciting empathy, these bodily marks crystallize a negative social representation of the tattooed or scarred youth, who is immediately associated with the figure of the "bad boy," the delinquent, or the criminal.

The interviews conducted in this research reveal that bodily marks are not only signs of identity expression or suffering, but that they may also participate in a process. One of the young men interviewed admitted to having engaged in deviant behavior even before getting tattooed but emphasized that the body markings marked a turning point in his trajectory, they confirmed his integration into street life and into a broader dynamic of transgression, including fights, drug use, and opposition to authority figures.

Echoing Howard Becker's labeling theory (1963), it becomes evident that the social perception of these markings intensifies the exclusion of the youth involved. Three of the five young people interviewed who had experienced incarceration stated that their tattoos or scarifications increased police suspicion toward them. One of them reported being frequently stopped for no reason in public places or subjected to systematic searches in shared taxis. These practices illustrate how body markings become stigmas (Goffman, 1963), visible signs that trigger disproportionate social reactions, reinforcing exclusion and confining individuals within a deviant identity.

Thus, in a context of strong social and religious normativity, body markings are not merely a form of personal expression; they become, for these young people, a central element in the process of marginalization, fueling a cycle of mistrust, police control, and, at times, recidivism.

1. Judged by the Skin: Stigmatization and Social Rejection of Marked Bodies

While body markings allow many young people to assert a rebellious identity and join peer groups often situated on the margins of social norms, they also become a powerful factor of social stigmatization. Tunisian society, steeped in rigid cultural and religious norms regarding the body and appearance, tends to interpret these marks as signs of deviance, or even dangerousness. Several testimonies collected during our investigation reveal that the suffering does not lie solely in the act of tattooing or scarification itself, but in the social reactions they provoke. A young man recounted how the discovery of his scars by his parents broke an already fragile bond: "*I became a shame to the family. Even in the summer, my mother forces me to wear long sleeves to hide my marks*." Far from being a mere aesthetic or identity choice, the body mark here becomes a Goffmanian stigma, a visible trace that leads to rejection, tacit exclusion, or even assignment to a deviant identity.

Another testimony illustrates the lasting effect of social judgment: "*Even when my family eventually accepted my tattoos, society never forgave me*." This young man, tattooed all over his body, feels constantly judged even in religious spaces: "*At the mosque, the looks I get seem to say I don't even have the right to pray*." He even considered having his tattoos removed, but the high cost of the procedure prevented him. Eventually, he decided to move in hopes of living a life less marked by judgment.

These experiences illustrate what some call the "symbolic double punishment" of marked bodies: after suffering internally to the point of marking their skin, these young people endure external rejection that further reinforces their isolation. As one interviewee aptly put it: "*People judge the book by its cover without reading the content*." To better understand these life paths, we must be willing to turn the pages.

This superficial gaze, based solely on appearance, traps these youth in an identity they didn't necessarily choose—or that represents only one facet of their life journey.

2. When Stigmatization Overflows: The Burden of Body Marks on the Family

Beyond the individual who wears them, body markings deeply affect relational networks, particularly within the family. The stories collected show that social stigma does not spare relatives and that the family itself suffers the consequences of their children's bodily choices. This repercussion often triggers rejection or shame from the parents not just out of personal disagreement, but because the marks are perceived as symbols of parental failure.

One of the young men interviewed, an only child, shared how his scarifications caused profound disappointment in his family, seen as a major obstacle to any future stability whether marital or professional. The parents' pain is born from a double feeling of powerlessness and guilt, failing to protect their child and to preserve their own reputation.

Another account reveals the scope of family stigma, this young man, now indifferent to public judgment, expressed his sorrow at seeing his wife and son become targets of prejudice. Labeled as the partner of a "bad boy", his wife endures hurtful remarks from her social circle. Their child, too, becomes a collateral victim: mocked at school, questioned about his father's unusual appearance, and marginalized even during sports activities. As he describes: "*The other parents stay together, away from me.*"

This disconnect highlights an intergenerational transmission of stigma, where the body marks of one individual, despite themselves, become a social stain on their entire family circle.

Far from being mere ornaments or impulsive acts, the body markings of the young Tunisians interviewed in this study emerge as actions with remarkable symbolic weight. They reflect a deep need to speak out, to express oneself, in a context where speech is often constrained by rigid family and social norms. Whether to express suffering, assert belonging, reclaim memory, or rebuild after a rupture, these markings are silent yet powerful forms of expression. Yet this bodily expression, though personal, clashes with dominant social norms. In a society where appearance remains a vector of moral judgment, these marked bodies quickly become disqualified bodies. The young people interviewed pay the price in their social, family, professional, and religious relationships. This rejection does not affect only the marked individual; it extends to their loved ones, spreading stigma even within the family unit.

Conclusion:

This article has ventured into male tattooing in Tunisia through a sociological and anthropological lens, and it has been revealed as a complex and multilayered practice at the intersection of identity, culture, power, and resistance. Far from an aesthetic or personal act, tattooing has emerged as a dense social phenomenon, historically heavy in significance and symbolically rich.
In its traditional forms, tattooing was a ritualized practice of belonging, written in tribal, spiritual, and therapeutic logics. It wrote the body into a collective cosmology, often tied to gendered roles and social hierarchies. For men, such markings could signify strength, protection, association with religious or mystical figures, or allegiance to rural healing practices.
In the contemporary Tunisian context, however, tattooing has undergone radical semantic displacement. It's now associated with urban youth cultures, marginality, or globalized masculinities and self-stylization. That is a sign of broader social transformation: the erosion of traditional solidarities, the individualization of identity, and the influence of transnational aesthetic codes. Yet, even in its modern manifestations, the tattoo remains a visible tracing of social anxieties; a body practice that challenges norms, reclaims agency, and manifests the boundaries of acceptability.
Theoretically, the male tattooed body functions as a social text; It is read, judged, and interpreted according to dominant moral and cultural norms. Stigmatization, as has been described, is not just directed towards the individual but spreads through families, communities, and institutional networks. The tattoo then functions as a social marker that can promote self-affirmation and also provoke exclusion. It disrupts the normative enterprise of body discipline and manifests the disciplinary gaze of society (Foucault, 1975) in its attempt to police visibility, deviance, and the politics of appearance.
Furthermore, the article has shown how the family unit itself becomes embroiled in the moral economy of tattooing. As depositories of honour and social respectability, families are able to receive secondary stigma or take part in buffering the reputational implications of a member's body choice. This shows how corporeal expressions become written within social relationships, and bodies become relational landscapes on which identity, stigma, and cultural negotiation are played out.
In conclusion, the tattooed male body in Tunisia invites us to reconsider the sociology of the visible. It challenges us to look beyond binary interpretations of deviance or conformity, instead recognizing tattooing as a social discourse, a reflection and structuration of the multi-transitions of Tunisian society. As a practice that vacillates between continuity and rupture, between subversion and social inscription, tattooing reveals the body not just as a biological surface, but as a site of meaning, memory, and power.

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