

\*Note: This paper was originally supposed to be viewed as a MS Word Document but due to technical difficulties, I have submitted it as cut and paste with the original cover sheet and appendixes included. I apologize if it looks weird but I can submit a hardcopy if it is preferred.

\*\*\*\*

Tattoo Artists in Hawaii

By

Anthropology 200 Dagrossa 1 May 2006

Tattoo Artists in Hawaii

This study uncovered the subculture of tattoo artists in Hawaii. With interviews of about a dozen artists and clients, and surveys from over forty employees and customers, in more than a dozen shops and practices, Hawaii is home to a diverse population of tattoo enthusiasts of varying ages. All names (with the exception of celebrity references) and places have been changed to protect identities.

In order to get a feel for the broad spectrum of clientele and artists, two surveys, were passed out to everyone in the area who entered the tattoo parlors that were researched [Appendix I and II]. The responses and identities were kept completely confidential, and all informants were assured that the surveys would never be duplicated except for research purposes. The aim of this was to get an idea as to what interests people about tattoos, and how frequently informants visit and actually get "inked" by artists. A multiple-choice survey with a few short answer questions was administered with general questions about age, race, gender, religion, occupation, interests, and general inquiries about tattoos like preferences and amount. Artists were asked to fill out a slightly more complicated, open-ended survey about how much experience the average informant has acquired up until this point, what types of art they favored, their tools of choice, and most memorable experiences. Four tattoo parlors (also called the "four cores") in particular were studied in rotation for close to four months, each for six hours at a time, four days a week, in order to collect surveys, observe, and interact with informants on a personal level. The "home base" was Quest Tattoo in the Kailua area where most pictures, audio, and video footage could be obtained and some physical interaction and hands-on events could take place. Some data was collected prior to the beginning of the class due to an early start in internship.

Of the 150 client surveys and fifty-four artist responses, it seems that three main trends have appeared with customers in recent years. The first two trends are typically linked to people who artists do not want to deal with and tend to refuse whenever possible. The first deals with minors and those who are coming of age, and the second deals with those

on vacation and possibly under the influence. These are the impulse buyers of the tattooing world and eighty percent of artists try to dissuade or turn down these clients. The third trend is the rising popularity of commemoration tattoos, which most artists are more than happy to do.

When dealing with impulse buyers, "It's like buying that video game that was really hyped up but really sucks... and not being able to return it," says Donna at Darkness Tats. Her partner, Jack agrees, saying, "It's like having to play that sucky game every hour of every day for the rest of your life for the most part... but even that's really trivializing the matter. No one should get tattooed unless they're really sure about what they want and are passionate about the artwork to be put on their skin." There are strict laws against tattooing minors, but many shops still have to turn away many hopeful kids. Sorts of Ink in Kaimuki had a particular problem last year with middle and high school kids in gangs trying to get popular gang motifs tattooed. One artist, Soren, commented that it was really hard to deal with. "We couldn't report it because we couldn't prove that they were in gangs, and we'd lose business, but it's heartbreaking to see kids getting into trouble like that. I mean, I'd really rather tattoo them in the shop rather than try to do homemade crap."

Queen of X in Waikiki has been having problems with tourists since they opened. A big trend in tattooing nowadays is commemoration tattoos of people or places. Mirra, the owner, says that they've gotten a lot of kids on vacation or college students trying to get gaudy tattoos to reflect their partying in Hawaii. "We try to dissuade people from getting that bright hula girl or whatever because, yeah, we want to make money, but when they get home are they still going to like it? I'd hate for someone to look at my drawing and regret it," says Keith at Darkness Tats, "Oh and I really hate people who come in under the influence [of drugs or alcohol] and want to get inked. We show them the door."

Commemoration tattoos can have a much deeper meaning though. For some, a physical manifestation of a Hawaiian vacation or duty station is the best way to inspire life and hope. Many soldiers pass through tattoo parlors in the islands on their way to the Middle East and other foreign countries. One staff sergeant wrote that he didn't know how many of his platoon members he'd be bringing home, and he hoped that all would return, but if not, their unit would always have matching tattoos to remember each other and their brief stay here. The emblem in question (not photographed) was a silhouette of a palm tree at sunset with a rising Marine Corps Eagle Globe and Anchor as the sun. It was designed by a member of the same group who had died on a previous deployment.

Other popular designs for commemoration tattoos in the four core shops are colors, symbols, images from, or mottos of gangs, deceased family members, or religious icons. These are popularly for protection in dangerous situations.

Another form of commemoration in recent years has been the name of a deceased friend or family member in script on

the body, either down the arms or across the chest. Hawaii Ink Inc in Waimanalo, one of the four cores, specializes in a more spiritual type of tattoo. "My 'aumakua [spirit animal] is the shark, and I'm a surfer, so I get it here on my chest," says Bradly Ka'anehe proudly, showing off a Hawaii Ink shark in monochromatic blue, vividly detailed, curving over his heart.

Unlike most artists, Keoni Kaimanu, Hawaii Ink's owner, specializes in traditional tattoos. A normal tattoo "gun" looks much like a hand-held drill with tiny teeth in the chuck instead of a regular bit. For many, this is very frightening, but it is quick and efficient, allowing a lot of detail to be used and a variety of colors to be easily blended. However, Keoni prefers to use a very carefully filed comb-like implement which is tapped rhythmically on the back to press the all-natural, traditional, plant-based pigments into the skin. He says he learned from his Kupuna, and can only do certain types of patterns with permission from his ancestral spirits. Pricing on tattoos is usually by the square inch or by the hour, and double for full-color, but Keoni charges by intricacy of design. The average he makes is \$300 per tattoo, usually sized about four square inches.

The uniquely blended cultures of Hawaii yields some favorites. The traditional Hawaiian or Polynesian designs are among the most coveted, but the top three styles statistically are kanji symbols, black-and-gray portrait, and fine line. Queen of X has seen a lot of the latter two. Mirra's specialty is portraits, which are world-renowned for having an almost photograph quality. She has attended conventions with celebrity artists like Chris Garver and Kat VonD of True Tattoo Hollywood for her old-fashioned pin-up girls, and artistic renditions of Hawaiian gods like Pele and Lono. She has also replicated baby footprints for proud first-time fathers, and praying hands for mothers. Her partners have used fine-tipped instruments to create landscapes, images of the Hawaiian island chain, and the occasional kanji symbol. "I don't like doing kanji," says Peter with a laugh, "because I don't read Chinese or Japanese so I don't know if what I'm writing is 'good luck' or 'die bitch'."

Despite some degree of financial instability in the trade, artists are often found in high-rent areas like Kailua. Quest's Don says that he just charges "what he's worth" (average, about \$100 per hour) and that it takes care of the rent easily with his four partners pitching in a set percentage of their earnings as well. Darkness Tats's Clarisse says that she advertises by flyer in clubs, and showcases her artwork on "models" wherever she goes. "My husband and sisters are my biggest clients," she laughs, "and seeing my work makes me more famous and grants me more business. In fact, I even give the occasional tattoo party in which I tattoo for six hours straight at my house for exclusive clients." Several

members of the four cores have had coverage in Tattoo magazine, Playboy, and on countless Internet sites. This is attractive to potential clients, and with fame comes great financial success for world-class artists.

The artists in this study average over ten years of experience. When asked the most significant factor in choosing an artist to work with, eighty-four percent of customers chose experience over talent, age, work environment, or other varied answers such as, publicity, celebrity endorsement, religious background, or family ties. Artists are proud to showcase their extensive portfolios to potential clients, but tend to be shy of the general public because despite growing popularity, tattoos are still the subject of some debate in many religious family groups, schools, jobs, and conservative locations. Donna has met a lot of opposition in her time. "I did my first tattoo when I was fifteen. It was this eye on my hand... my father beat me pretty bad. Oh well." Soren says, "I don't want everyone to see my work all the time for free. I want people to meet me and know me, and know what I'm about before they have an opportunity to judge my work."

Though artists in Hawaii grapple with economic and cultural issues in their practices, many have found a niche in this exclusive subculture with spiritual themes or popular aesthetics. It seems that there is no end to the stream of customers flowing through tattoo parlor doors. Clients seek inner peace, remembrance of family members or events, and identity through permanent body art, with a flare and flavor that is only found in the islands of Hawaii.

#### Appendix 1 Artist Survey Callisto Harada Anthropology 200 2006

Participation in this survey is purely voluntary and informants may choose to remain anonymous. This survey will be used as general data for an anthropology class in May 2006 at Windward Community College.

1. How many years have you been a tattoo artist?
2. How long have you worked in this location?
3. (If any) what do you consider to be your specialty and why?
4. a) How many clients do you see in a week on average? b) Does this number vary due to time of year?

If answered yes to b) in last question, why?

5. Describe briefly any trends you have observed as far as clientele or types of desired tattoos within the last year (attach additional sheet if necessary).
6. How much, on average, do you charge for your work? What is your average income?
7. How do you gain popularity? (How do people find out about your work?)
8. Are you licensed to tattoo in this state? How long have you been licensed?
9. If answered yes to number 8, then briefly describe the process of getting licensed.

10. What do you like the most about your job?
11. What is your gender? Do you think that this affects your career? If so, how?
12. Is there a religious background to your occupation? Explain.
13. What is your tool of choice? Why?

Appendix 2 Client Survey Callisto Harada Anthropology 200 2006

Participation in this survey is purely voluntary and informants may choose to remain anonymous. This survey will be used as general data for an anthropology class in May 2006 at Windward Community College.

1. Are you here because you're getting a tattoo (or are you here to watch, give moral support, etc)? Is this your first time?
2. How many tattoos do you have right now?
3. Describe your favorite if you have one.
4. What kind of tattoo are you getting today? (Or whoever you're attending, what is he/she getting?)
5. What do you look for in an artist? Does it vary from tattoo to tattoo or session to session?
6. Does a tattoo have a special meaning to you? Describe.
7. Have you ever encountered social problems because of tattoos? Please explain.
8. Do many people you know have tattoos? How many?
9. How much do you plan to spend on this particular tattoo?
10. How did you find out about the artist you're getting the tattoo from?
11. What are your general thoughts on the tattoo experience so far?
12. What do you look for when you go to a tattoo parlor? ( i.e. environment, certain artists, permits, cleanliness, etc.)
14. Describe any further thoughts on the matter of tattooing/
15. How old are you?
16. What is your gender and does this affect your tattooing experience? If so, how?
17. What is your occupation?
18. Does this affect your tattoo experience or does your tattoo experience affect your work? In what way?
19. What are your interests and hobbies?