

CASE REPORT

“CHOUMPS” ENAMEL TATTOOS – REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

Because all humans have an identity in life, compassionate societies require that this identity be recognized after death. Traits that are incorporated purposefully into the teeth as a result of cultural considerations are common. The positive identification of living or deceased persons using the unique traits and characteristics of the teeth is a cornerstone of forensic science. As an adjunct to the previously published article on “CHOUMPS” Enamel Tattoos, (Journal of Forensic Odonto-stomatology 2007;25;61-2), the present report provides an insight into more patterns of highly individual enamel tattoos, various instruments and procedures to perform it and discusses the myths and beliefs associated with this practice.

KEY WORDS: *enamel tattoo, “choumps”, forensic odontology, dental mutilations*

INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial the teeth, the mouth, and face have held a seemingly intrinsic fascination for mankind. They have been and continue to be the subject of many oral and written beliefs, superstitions, and traditions and the object of wide range of decorative and mutilatory practices. Decorating and mutilating the human body are carried out for a variety of reasons ranging from motives related to aesthetics and concepts of beautification to motives which are extremely complex. Interestingly, of the many different forms of body decoration and mutilation encountered in the modern world, the basic theme underlying all of them would appear to be communication either at the interpersonal level or at the spiritual level.¹

Of the various forms of body decorations and mutilation which may be encountered in contemporary societies, mutilation and adornment of the teeth and oral soft tissues

comprise a group of practices of obvious significance to students and practitioners of dentistry.^{2,3,4,5} Knowledge of these practices is important for the valuable insights they provide into the cultural beliefs and traditions of the people who practice them. By examining the dental traits in the form of these adornments or mutilatory practices, it is possible for the odontologist to provide the corpse with its identity and satisfy a basic societal need. A tooth tattooed with Choumps has extremely low incidence and could be used as an identification trait.⁶

CASE REPORTS

Choumps are a rare type of tooth tattoo made in gold and are placed on the tooth enamel, mainly on the labial surfaces of the maxillary anterior teeth. This unique practice of getting the teeth engraved with these tattoos is prevalent among certain tribes of western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, India, specially the Gujjar Tribes, and also some Jaduvanshi Thakurs & Jaat Tribes. This practice is equally prevalent amongst both the sexes and is mainly carried out after the eruption of maxillary permanent incisors.

The patterns of these tattoos vary among different tribes but one tribe following more than one pattern was also noticed. The patterns included single gold spot tattoos (Fig.1), double gold spot tattoos (Fig.2), triple gold spot tattoos (Fig.3), six gold spot tattoos (Fig.4) on each of the upper central incisors. Other patterns include triple gold spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors and single gold spot tattoos on each of the upper lateral incisors (Fig.5), triple

gold spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors and single gold spot tattoo on left lateral incisor (Fig.6), and triple colored spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors and single colored spot tattoos on each of upper lateral incisors (Fig.7).

In this practice tooth enamel of the labial surface of upper central incisors are engraved with circular patterns using a hand drill and are later filled with gold. The instruments used in the technique are known by various local names like plas or a plier, burma or a hand driven drill, cutter, hammer or hathoda, chimti or forceps, drilling burs or ghurni, gold wire and polishing stone (Fig.8).

These tattoos are not made by professionals, but rather by a local tattoo maker, better known as a Ferua. Feruas usually come to the villages during festivities or villagers visiting the local fares (Melas) get them done. The procedure for placement of Choumps, although simple is unhealthy. It is as follows –

- I. The tattoo seeker is made to sit on the ground and the Ferua (Tattoo Maker) sits on the raised platform or a chair. A cloth piece is inserted into the mouth to stabilize the jaws and to prevent aspiration of foreign body. (Fig.9)
- II. The labial surfaces of the upper teeth are polished using a local polishing stone. (Fig.10) and then using a drilling bur, markings are made on the teeth where gold wire is later placed (Fig.11).
- III. Following this, a hand drill is rotated simulating the lock opening movements thus creating tiny holes at the site of interest. The drilled holes are approximately 0.5mm deep. (Fig.12)
- IV. The gold wire is then uncoiled using forceps and is then placed against the already drilled holes. (Fig.13 A,B)

V. Excessive wire is cut (Fig.14A) and the rest of the wire is hammered against the tooth surface to ensure proper adaptation. (Fig.14B)

VI. In the end, a pliers is used to smooth the cut ends of the wire (Fig.15) to get a finished tattoo (Fig.16).

ORIGIN AND MYTHS

The origin of this practice is thought to date back thousands of years. The fact that individuals within a single society or tribal group may possess different levels of knowledge regarding the purposes of a particular dental mutilation practiced by them, lead to the advancement of a number of reasons for a single type of mutilation by different members of a single society or tribe. They include:

Mahabharata and Choumps - According to the great Indian epic, The *Mahabharata*, which was written thousands of years ago, Princess Kunti was blessed with a son named Karana and because of his generous nature; he was popularly known as "Danveer Karana". When Karana was on his death bed, Lord Krishna (Hindu God) came to him in the disguise of a beggar and asked for some donation in kind to judge his generosity. Even though he was penniless, he realized that he had a tooth with a golden choump on it and so he plucked out his tooth and gave it to the beggar. On seeing this act of kindness, Lord Krishna appeared in his real avatar and blessed him. Since then the devotees of Lord Krishna, follow this tradition of tooth Choumps, in the hope that they will be blessed by Lord Krishna.

The Five Tatvas - According to Hindu mythology, a person should carry five basic elements, called tatvas, in his mouth at the time of his death. One of the five tatvas is gold; hence this particular nomadic clan follows this tradition of engraving gold during their lifetime.

Purity of Speech and Mind - Gold being a purest metal symbolizes truth. Hence this tribe has a belief that a person who has gold engraved in

his mouth will follow the path of honesty and truthfulness.

Branding - In olden times, members of a particular tribe were recognized on the basis of the specific patterns of the Choumps.

Biological - Some even believed that engraving the Choumps would arrest the growth of tooth, and thus prevent unnecessary lengthening of the crown.

Fashion Statement and Beautification - Younger generations unaware of the mythological significance followed this practice as a fashion statement.

DISCUSSION

Mutilatory practices involving teeth have been present since pre-historic times and many of these practices are still being followed, but adequate data regarding each is lacking. Non-therapeutic tooth extraction or deliberate tooth avulsion of upper incisors is being practiced by Australian Aboriginal tribes⁷ and in regions of the African continent including Nigeria, Uganda and Tanzania.^{8,9} The custom of chipping the incisal edges of incisors is well known amongst the Bushmen tribes of Africa.^{8,9,10} In certain areas of the Philippines, the practice of inlaying small gold discs, often multiple, in the labial surfaces of anterior maxillary teeth, was prevalent. The practice of mounting decorative inlays like pearls and semi-precious stones on anterior crowns, was also carried out in India by the kings and rulers of ancient times. The Dyaks of Borneo were also reported to drill small holes into the labial surface of maxillary teeth and to place pieces of copper in variously shaped defects. Some people of Algeria in North-West Africa are known to insert a small piece of gold between the proximal surfaces of anterior maxillary teeth for adornment purposes.¹¹ Among Muslims, the presence of a gold crown on a front tooth is used to signify that the wearer has visited Mecca, the spiritual centre of that religion. Also use of gold jacket crowns is favored by some people in the

Caribbean and some groups of Urban Blacks in USA as a status symbol.¹²

Not only the hard tissues, but the peri-oral soft tissue, may also be involved in mutilatory practices which can range from lacquering and black staining, dyeing using iron or barks, tattooing of lips and gingiva, piercing of lips and other soft tissues and insertion of materials such as wood, ivory or metal, uvelectomy and facial scarring.^{3,4,5,13,14,15}

CONCLUSION

Data with low frequency of occurrence are considered to be important to those seeking to identify the deceased.¹⁶ The practice of enamel tattoos Choumps is unique in itself by the way of its geographical distribution and the nomadic clan following this traditional practice. Hence it is appropriate to include tooth art or modifications in ante-mortem records and to reproduce proper radiographic and photographic records of these modifications, which will enable not only to secure cultural heritage but ease job of forensic specialist. We also emphasize the need for further studies regarding the prevalence of other mutilatory practices involving the oral and peri-oral structures in various tribes of Indian subcontinent.



Fig.1: Single gold spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors.



Fig.2: Double gold spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors.



Fig. 5: Triple gold spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors and single gold spot tattoos on each of the upper lateral incisors.



Fig.3: Triple gold spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors.



Fig. 6: Triple gold spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors and single gold spot tattoo on left lateral incisor.



Fig. 4: Six gold spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors.



Fig. 7: Triple coloured spot tattoos on each of the upper central incisors and single coloured spot tattoos on each of the upper lateral incisors



Fig. 8: Armamentarium used in placing the enamel tattoo.



Fig. 11: Markings with a bur.



Fig. 9: Positioning of the tattoo seeker and the tattoo maker.



Fig. 12: Holes created with the help of a hand drill.



Fig. 10: Polishing.



Fig. 13A,B: Placement of the gold wire.

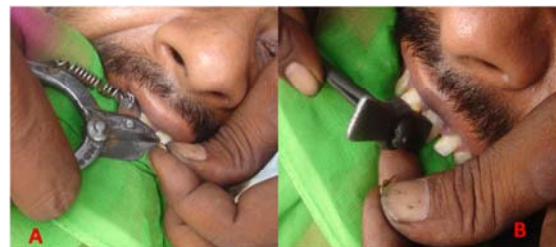


Fig. 14: A – Excessive wire being cut; B – The remainder of the wire being hammered.

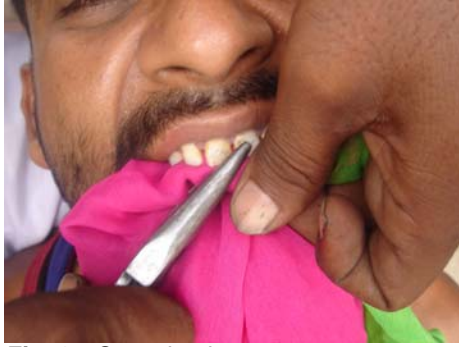


Fig. 15: Smoothing.



Fig. 16: The finished tattoo.

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