



Where I work Lars Krutak

Photographed by
Michael Zomer.

Tattoos tell stories and connect people to their pasts. In this picture taken in November 2019, I take notes as Chen-o Khuzuthrupa, a centenarian nobleman of the Chen tribe of northeastern India, describes a tattoo on his back: a sacred tiger familiar spirit. He received the tattoo – a tiger stripe motif with circles that represent the spirit – during an elaborate ceremony in the 1930s, when he was a young headhunter and warrior. He says the markings gave him a tiger's strength in battle and the ability to spy on his enemies in his dreams. Those powers are gone. He lost the connection to the tiger spirit decades ago when he converted to Christianity.

The picture is a still from *Patterns of Life*, a documentary of Indigenous tattoos that is currently available on Instagram. As a tattoo anthropologist, I work to document, preserve and interpret a neglected part of cultural heritage. Young people in these villages often sport modern tattoo designs, such as barbed wire across the biceps. I've asked them why they prefer images from other cultures, and they explain that they want to move forward,

not look back. And modern tattoos have a lot more colour. Khuzuthrupa's tattoos were made from soot from a fireplace.

Young people can put whatever they want on their bodies, but they should at least be aware of the designs of their ancestors because it's a part of their heritage. That's why I wrote *Kalinga Tattoo*, a 2010 book about tattoos of the northern Philippines, and sent a pallet of copies to villages in that area. Those images shouldn't just sit around in my office.

Anyone could get a tiger spirit tattoo in the style of Khuzuthrupa's, but much of its significance would be lost without the culture and context around it. The original artist is long dead, and nobody remembers the prayers, songs and other aspects of the tattooing ceremony. The two other men in the village with this particular tattoo are in their nineties. They are the last generation to carry the tiger spirit.

Lars Krutak is an anthropologist with the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. **Interview by Chris Woolston.**