Karma

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her family to survive through hard times gone past, but it was obvious that her Krishna tattoo was one aspect of her identity that she could afford to value. It could not be sold or taken away, and for this permanence it was a precious possession.

This woman, whom I only knew as Dee-Dee, meaning older sister, (in Nepal the people use kinship terms to address each other) was different than many others because she had received this tattoo by choice, as an adult, and as a paying customer. Her husband actually paid for her to get it, (this is unusual—men don't generally do things for their wives there) as if he hoped some of the luck it would bring might rub off on him. The permanent illustration of Krishna on her skin was a form of spiritual insurance, in a land where there is no other. It was a hopeful guarantee that, in the next life, she will climb the karmic ladder and come into life of a higher caste and financial position.

This combining of modern equipment with the traditional ideals in tattooing is more recent on the Indian subcontinent than other parts of Asia. In my travels through India and Nepal, covering a time period of ten months—and all but the remotest regions—I only came upon a few "official" tattooing shops (which still aren't very official—or necessarily reliable) and every single one of them catered to the tourist trade. They were all located on various parts of the Arabian coast, on the main stretch of the typical travelers trail through Asia. No average Indian would go into one of these shops, other than to look at the crazy Western kids. What we pay for a simple tattoo is equivalent to about two months salary for them, and that's taking into consideration that the shops there give tattoos at a price (generally $40-$50 per hour) we'd consider very reasonable.

The shops I visited were run mostly by old men, because the actual professional world of art is one that only men may enter (it would be blasphemous for a woman to touch all these strange men!). All of the artists used either questionable hand-made guns or the common mail-order variety from the West. Most of them said that they had learned to tattoo in the old days with just a single needle (one of the artists told me his mother first taught him this method) and only picked up a gun when they saw an opportunity to make money during the '60's—when India was becoming a popular destination for young travelers.

They all seemed delighted to have found a profession where they could be working for foreigners, which allowed them to break free of caste restrictions and receive relatively comfortable incomes doing so. Unfortunately, most of the customers visiting the shops were not too demanding of the artists and they typically just wanted a flash design.

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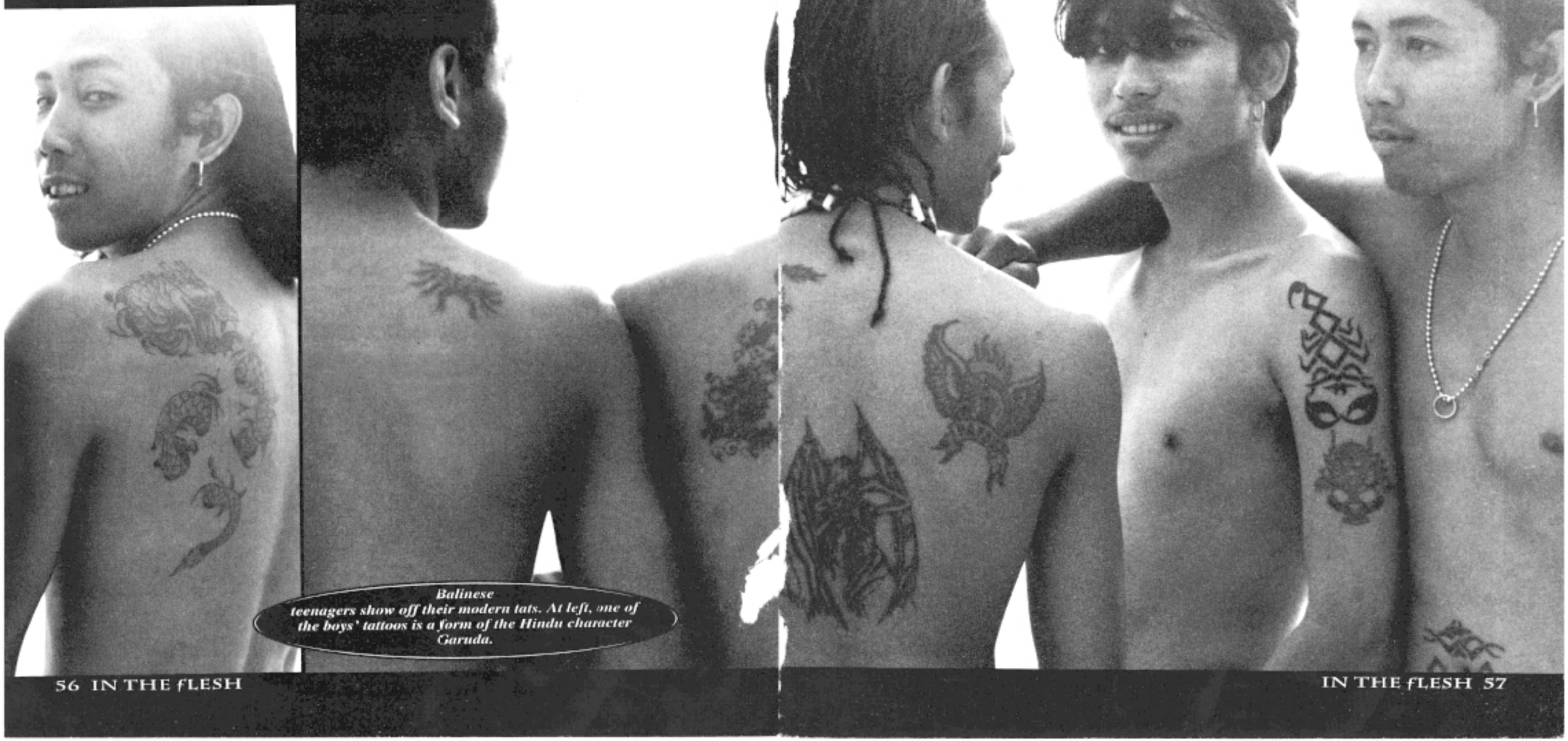
Further over into the Pacific, the people of Indonesia also have a Hindu tattooing tradition that not much knowledge has been gathered on, with the other tattoo practicing societies nearby receiving more of the spotlight. In many ways Inconesia, particularly the more modern islands of Java and Bali, are places more advanced than India and Nepal in their evolution of the art. The old tradition has practically died out but the young have adopted the art and transformed it. The tattoo wearers there, these days mostly young men, (although there are still some women around who have the small simple hand-done designs)



Balinese teenagers show off their modern tats. At left, one of the boys' tattoos is a form of the Hindu character Garuda.