

# Deq and Xal: An Ethnographic and Historical Analysis of Kurdish Tattooing Traditions

## 1. Introduction: The Enduring Marks of Deq/Xal in Kurdish Culture

The ancient practice of tattooing, known in Kurdish dialects primarily as *Deq* and also as *Xal*, represents a profound and historically rich tradition central to Kurdish cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup> For centuries, these indelible marks have been inscribed upon the bodies of Kurdish people, predominantly women, though men have also participated in the tradition.<sup>2</sup> Deq is far more than mere bodily adornment; it is a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, serving as a visual language of identity, a conduit for spiritual protection, a marker of tribal and communal affiliation, and a living archive of personal and collective narratives.<sup>3</sup> The symbols etched into the skin are imbued with meanings drawn from the natural world, cosmological beliefs, and the rhythms of daily life, reflecting a deep connection between the Kurdish people and their ancestral lands.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its historical depth and cultural significance, Deq has faced a period of decline, influenced by socio-cultural transformations, modernization, and the increasing prevalence of religious interpretations that discourage or prohibit tattooing.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in a testament to its enduring importance, recent years have witnessed a growing movement towards the revival and preservation of this unique art form, driven by artists, cultural activists, and members of the Kurdish diaspora keen to reconnect with their heritage.<sup>7</sup> This report aims to provide a comprehensive ethnographic and historical analysis of Kurdish tattoos, examining their origins, symbolism, traditional techniques, cultural and social significance, regional variations, and the contemporary dynamics of decline and revitalization.

The persistence of Deq, and the active efforts to reclaim it, particularly in the face of historical and ongoing pressures such as religious proscriptions and the homogenizing forces of modernization, underscore its profound role in Kurdish identity. This is not simply an artistic practice; it is an emblem of cultural tenacity. The efforts to revive Deq suggest that it functions as a potent symbol, a means by which cultural memory and distinctiveness are maintained and reasserted.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, while tattoos are, by their nature, visible declarations upon the skin, the characterization of Deq by some as a "secret language," especially among women, points to intricate layers of meaning.<sup>4</sup> This suggests a nuanced system of communication where meanings may not be universally accessible, perhaps guarded within familial, tribal, or gender-specific lines of knowledge transmission. This interplay between the overt display of identity and the covert conveyance of deeper,

protected meanings adds a compelling dimension to the study of Deq, hinting at sophisticated social and symbolic functions that extend beyond simple ornamentation.

## **2. Echoes of Antiquity: Tracing the Historical and Mythological Roots of Kurdish Tattoos**

The tradition of Deq is deeply embedded in the ancient landscapes of Mesopotamia, with some accounts suggesting its origins may extend back as far as 10,000 years.<sup>3</sup> This places Kurdish tattooing within a broader history of body marking practices in a region considered a cradle of civilization. The practice is understood to predate Islam and is intertwined with pre-Islamic spiritual beliefs and ancient religious systems that have shaped the cultural matrix of the Kurdish people, including Zoroastrianism and Yezidi cosmology.<sup>3</sup> These ancient spiritual underpinnings are often reflected in the motifs and symbolism inherent in Deq.

Early written documentation offers glimpses into the historical presence of such practices. Aëtius of Amida, a 6th-century Byzantine Greek physician, provided one of the earliest known descriptions of the materials and preparation methods for tattoo pigments used in the region, which align with aspects of Deq.<sup>2</sup> Centuries later, European explorers and ethnographers traversing Kurdish territories in the 19th and 20th centuries also recorded the prevalence of tattooing. Jacques de Morgan, during his travels in 1895, noted the extensive tattooing among older Kurdish women, sometimes covering their entire bodies, while men were tattooed predominantly on their hands and rarely on the face.<sup>2</sup> Anthropologist Henry Field made similar observations in the Kurdish provinces of Iran in the 1950s, documenting the continuation of this tradition.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary scholarship, such as Margo DeMello's "Inked: Tattoos and Body Art around the World" and Ahmet Yavuklu's "Ancient Footprints," continues to explore and document the significance of these practices.<sup>3</sup>

An intriguing, though debated, hypothesis regarding the deeper historical lineage of Deq motifs has been proposed by scholar Mehrdad Izady. Izady suggests a connection between traditional Kurdish tattoo designs and the iconography found on ancient Hurrian figurines from the Bronze Age, positing a continuity of symbolic language spanning millennia.<sup>4</sup> He points to shared motifs such as the serpent, sun disc, dog, and comb/rain symbols, suggesting that Deq may preserve elements of a much older visual lexicon. While such direct linkages require further archaeological and comparative research, the proposition highlights the potential for Deq to carry echoes of very ancient belief systems.

The diverse historical influences—ranging from ancient Mesopotamian practices to Zoroastrian and Yezidi beliefs, and potentially even Hurrian artistic traditions—suggest that Kurdish Deq is not a monolithic or static tradition. Rather, it appears to be a cultural palimpsest, having likely absorbed, adapted, and reinterpreted symbols and meanings over millennia of interaction with various cultures and belief systems dominant in the region. This long and complex history implies a dynamic process of syncretism, where Deq has evolved as a layered cultural text reflecting the intricate historical tapestry of the Kurdish people.

It is also noteworthy that much of the early documented history of Deq comes from the observations of non-Kurdish individuals. While the accounts of figures like Aëtius, de Morgan,

and Field are invaluable for historical reconstruction, they represent an external gaze. These observers would have interpreted the practices through their own cultural frameworks and may not have had access to the full spectrum of meanings, particularly given the aforementioned "secret language" aspect of Deq, which suggests that deeper layers of understanding were often held within the community, especially among women.<sup>4</sup> This underscores the importance of contemporary ethnographic work with tradition bearers to complement historical accounts and achieve a more nuanced understanding of Deq's profound cultural significance.

### **3. A Lexicon Inscribed: Unveiling the Motifs, Symbols, and Meanings of Deq**

Kurdish Deq tattooing encompasses a rich and complex symbolic system, a visual lexicon etched onto the skin, with motifs predominantly inspired by the natural world, celestial bodies, and the artifacts of daily life.<sup>6</sup> These symbols are not arbitrary decorations but are imbued with layers of meaning, reflecting beliefs, hopes, and cultural values. The meanings attributed to these motifs, however, are not always fixed; they can exhibit variations based on geographical region, specific cultural background of the community or tribe, the personal intentions of the wearer, and the precise placement of the tattoo on the body.<sup>7</sup> For many Kurdish women, their Deq served as an intimate "diary," a visual chronicle of significant life events and experiences.<sup>2</sup>

The sun (*roj* in Kurdish) is one of the most prominent and potent symbols, frequently tattooed on the forehead, and is widely interpreted as representing life force, the sanctity of light, and the hope for an endless and healthy life.<sup>6</sup> The moon (*heyv*) and stars (*stêrin*) are also common celestial motifs, often symbolizing the vastness of the sky, beauty, and cosmic harmony.<sup>6</sup> The "Tree of Life" is another powerful symbol, frequently depicted extending from the chest to the chin on women, signifying immortality, the continuity of life, reproduction, health, and a profound connection to ancestors and nature.<sup>3</sup>

Animal motifs abound, each carrying specific connotations. The gazelle (*xezal*) is often associated with beauty, grace, and luck.<sup>4</sup> Birds can symbolize freedom or messengers, while snakes (*marin*) might represent healing, protection, or a connection to chthonic forces. The scorpion is a symbol of heroism, mystery, and sometimes healing.<sup>9</sup> Partridge eyes, a motif shared with other regional traditions like Amazigh tattoos, are linked to grace, beauty, and an awareness of the omnipresence of danger.<sup>13</sup> Other animals like wolves and rams also feature in the Deq repertoire.

Floral and plant motifs, such as flowers, petals, wheat, tulips (*lale*), and roses (*gül*), signify fertility, abundance, and the beauty of the natural environment.<sup>6</sup> Geometric shapes are fundamental to Deq designs. Dots, often in arrangements of three, are particularly significant, symbolizing strength, stability, and protection from malevolent forces like Satan or the evil eye; they are also applied for therapeutic purposes, such as easing headaches when tattooed on the temples.<sup>1</sup> Crosses are commonly used to ward off evil spirits, while diamonds are

believed to impart strength, and circles are often linked to fertility.<sup>2</sup> The V-shape can serve as a tribal identifier.<sup>4</sup> Lines, swastikas (an ancient symbol with varied meanings across cultures), and other geometric patterns form the building blocks of many complex Deq compositions. Objects from daily life are also transformed into meaningful symbols. The comb (*tarak*) and mirror (*ayna*) represent beauty and femininity.<sup>15</sup> Scissors (*meqes*) and spindles appear as motifs, connecting to women's work and domestic life.<sup>10</sup> Beyond these general categories, specific named motifs hold particular cultural weight. The *tac* (crown), typically placed on the forehead, symbolizes leadership, nobility, and honesty.<sup>15</sup> Another notable, though painful, motif is the *redhamiyet*, a tattoo on the lower lip reportedly adopted from Arab women, associated with a story involving Hz. Fatimah and intended to make the lip forbidden.<sup>15</sup> The following table provides a compendium of common Deq motifs and their attributed meanings, drawing from various ethnographic and scholarly sources:

**Table 1: Compendium of Common Deq Motifs and Their Attributed Meanings**

Motif Category	Specific Motif	Reported Meaning(s)/Significance	Source Citation(s)
Celestial	Sun ( <i>Roj</i> )	Life force, sanctity, light, endless/healthy life, worship, blessings, protection. Often on forehead.	<sup>2</sup>
	Moon ( <i>Heyv</i> )	Sky, beauty, endless/healthy life, nature.	<sup>2</sup>
	Stars ( <i>Stêrin</i> )	Sky, beauty, nature, protection.	<sup>2</sup>
Faunal	Gazelle ( <i>Xezal</i> )	Beauty, luck, grace.	<sup>2</sup>
	Birds	Nature, freedom.	<sup>2</sup>
	Snake ( <i>Marin</i> )	Protection, healing, nature.	<sup>10</sup>
	Scorpion ( <i>Akrep</i> )	Heroism, mystery, healing, strength, protection from bad luck.	<sup>9</sup>
	Partridge Eyes	Grace, beauty, omnipresence of danger.	<sup>13</sup>
	Millipede	Good housekeeping.	<sup>4</sup>
Floral	Tree of Life	Immortality, life, reproduction, health,	<sup>3</sup>

		long life, connection to ancestors/nature, protection of marriage/childbirth. Often chest to chin on women.	
	Flowers, Petals, Wheat, Tulip ( <i>Lale</i> ), Rose ( <i>Gül</i> )	Abundance, fertility, blessings, nature, beauty.	2
<b>Geometric</b>	Dots (often three)	Strength, stability, protection (from Satan/evil eye), healing (migraines), preventing husband from taking other wives.	1
	Crosses	Ward off evil spirits, sky.	2
	Lines	Basic element, combination.	2
	V-Shape	Tribal identifier.	4
	Swastika (Gamalı Haç)	Ancient symbol, various meanings.	2
	Diamonds	Strength, courage.	2
	Circles	Fertility, womb.	2
	Crescent Moon (Yarım Ay / Hilal)	Nature, sky.	2
<b>Symbolic Objects</b>	Comb ( <i>Tarak</i> )	Beauty.	2
	Mirror ( <i>Ayna</i> )	Beauty.	15
	Scissors ( <i>Meqes / Cawbirr</i> )	Daily life object.	10
	Spindle	Daily life object, womanhood.	2
<b>Specific Named Motifs</b>	'Tac' (Crown)	Leadership, nobility, honesty.	15
	'Redhamiyet'	Lower lip tattoo (painful), adopted from Arab women, story of Hz. Fatimah.	15

The polysemic nature of Deq symbols is a crucial aspect of their power and endurance. Many symbols, as indicated, carry multiple, sometimes overlapping or context-dependent meanings.<sup>10</sup> For instance, a simple dot or a series of dots can signify protection against the

evil eye, serve a therapeutic purpose for ailments like headaches, or represent strength and stability.<sup>7</sup> This fluidity suggests a dynamic symbolic system rather than a rigid, unchanging code. The meaning is not inherent in the symbol in isolation but is activated and shaped by a confluence of factors: the identity of the wearer, the specific placement on the body, the intentions behind receiving the tattoo, and the cultural lens of the interpreter. This complexity transforms Deq into a living language, capable of expressing nuanced ideas and adapting to evolving personal and communal narratives.

Furthermore, the predominant themes embedded in Deq symbolism—fertility, protection, health, connection to nature, and social status—reflect universal human concerns. However, these universal themes are articulated through motifs deeply rooted in the specific ecological and cultural milieu of Kurdistan.<sup>6</sup> The animals, plants, and celestial bodies depicted are those familiar to the Kurdish landscape and worldview. This demonstrates how the universal is expressed through the particular, grounding abstract concepts like "protection" or "fertility" in tangible, culturally resonant symbols. Deq thus serves as a visual articulation of the Kurdish people's relationship with their environment and their understanding of the forces that shape human existence.

## 4. The Sacred Craft: Traditional Techniques, Tools, and Pigments of Deq Tattooing

The application of Deq is a traditional craft, distinguished by its manual techniques and unique, often ritually significant, materials. It is fundamentally a hand-poke or hand-tap method, performed without the use of modern electric tattooing machines.<sup>7</sup> The term "Deq" itself is reported to mean "to strike" or "tap," alluding to the percussive action of the needle against the skin.<sup>1</sup> This method involves drawing the chosen design onto the skin and then meticulously pricking or striking the skin along these lines with a needle or a bundle of needles, into which the ink is then rubbed.<sup>1</sup> The process was often described as long and painful, sometimes considered a rite of passage, signifying courage and resilience.<sup>5</sup> The tools of the Deq artist (*dekkake* if female, *dekkak* if male) were relatively simple but effective.<sup>15</sup> The primary instrument was the needle (*derzî* in Kurdish). Often, a group of needles, commonly seven, were bound tightly together with thread to create a tattooing implement capable of delivering more pigment with each strike.<sup>9</sup> In some instances, rudimentary metal tips might also have been used.<sup>5</sup> The individuals receiving the tattoos were known as *medkuke* (female) or *medkuk* (male).<sup>15</sup>

The composition of the ink is one of the most distinctive and culturally significant aspects of Deq. The primary and most commonly cited ingredients are soot (lampblack) and human breast milk.<sup>1</sup> The soot, providing the black pigment, was typically obtained from the burning of materials like rags or, in some accounts, pomegranate peels.<sup>9</sup> The breast milk, however, carried particular ritualistic importance. It was widely believed that for the tattoo to be successful—to last long, appear dark and vibrant, bring luck, or "stick" permanently—the milk had to come from a woman who had given birth to a baby girl.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, milk from a mother

who had borne a son was sometimes considered unlucky, believed not to heal the wound properly, or not to yield the desired color.<sup>15</sup>

Other ingredients have also been reported, suggesting regional variations or changes over time. Animal bile, specifically fluid from the gallbladder, is sometimes mentioned as an additive to the ink mixture, possibly to enhance color or permanence.<sup>4</sup> Herbs are also noted in some accounts.<sup>10</sup> An older, 6th-century account by Aëtius of Amida describes a more complex ink preparation involving crushed pine wood (preferably bark), corroded bronze, gum, and oil from trees, with a separate mixture of corroded bronze and vinegar, and the use of leek juice for cleaning the skin.<sup>2</sup> This historical recipe points to a potentially different or earlier formulation of Deq ink.

The tradition of Deq, including the knowledge of ink preparation and application techniques, was often passed down matrilineally, from woman to woman within a family.<sup>7</sup> This underscores the central role of women in sustaining and transmitting this cultural practice.

**Table 2: Traditional Deq Ink Ingredients and Their Cultural Significance**

Ingredient	Method of Preparation/Source	Believed Purpose/Symbolic Value	Source Citation(s)
Soot / Lampblack	From burnt rags, pomegranate peels, sheet metal soot, or coal dust.	Primary black pigment.	<sup>1</sup>
Breast Milk (specifically from a mother of a baby girl)	From a lactating mother who has given birth to a female infant.	Ensures tattoo longevity, darker color, luck, permanence ("sticks well"). Milk from mother of a boy sometimes seen as ineffective or unlucky.	<sup>1</sup>
Animal Bile / Gallbladder Fluid	From animal gallbladder.	Added to ink mixture, possibly for color enhancement or permanence.	<sup>4</sup>
Herbs	Mixed into ink.	Specific herbs not always detailed; likely for color, healing, or symbolic properties.	<sup>10</sup>
Pine Wood (esp. bark)	Crushed and mixed.	Ancient ingredient mentioned by Aëtius of Amida for ink preparation.	<sup>2</sup>
Corroded Bronze	Crushed and mixed	Ancient ingredient	<sup>2</sup>

	with other ingredients or with vinegar.	mentioned by Aëtius of Amida.	
Gum / Oil from Trees	Mixed into ink.	Ancient ingredients mentioned by Aëtius of Amida.	<sup>2</sup>
Leek Juice	Mixed with water.	Used for cleaning the skin prior to tattooing (Aëtius of Amida).	<sup>2</sup>

The profound emphasis on using breast milk specifically from a woman who has birthed a daughter imbues the Deq ink with sacred and deeply gendered significance. This practice inextricably links the act of tattooing to female procreative power, matrilineal continuity, and a worldview where specific feminine energies are considered vital for the efficacy and auspiciousness of the ritual. The ink, therefore, transcends its function as a mere pigment; it becomes a potent symbolic and ritualistic substance, charged with cultural meaning and embodying a connection to the life-giving capacities of women.

The existence of older recipes, such as the one documented by Aëtius of Amida in the 6th century which includes ingredients like pine wood and corroded bronze, alongside the more commonly cited 20th and 21st-century ethnographic accounts focusing on soot and breast milk, suggests an evolution in material practices over time or the presence of distinct regional variations.<sup>2</sup> This highlights the adaptability of the Deq tradition. Such discrepancies could indicate historical shifts influenced by the availability of materials, evolving beliefs, or different local customs that may have co-existed. This capacity for change, while retaining core cultural significance and the fundamental hand-poking technique, underscores that "traditional" practices are not static entities but are subject to transformation over extended periods.

## 5. Woven into Being: The Cultural and Social Tapestry of Kurdish Tattoos

Kurdish Deq tattoos are far more than aesthetic markings; they are intricately woven into the social, cultural, and spiritual fabric of Kurdish life. These tattoos serve as powerful communicators of identity, embody ancestral connections, navigate gender roles, and function within systems of belief concerning protection and healing.

### 5.1 Identity, Ancestry, and Belonging

Deq is a critical signifier of Kurdish cultural embodiment, a visible testament to an individual's connection to their heritage.<sup>12</sup> For many, particularly those in the diaspora or younger generations seeking to reconnect with their roots, Deq serves as a tangible link to their ancestors and a way of "communicating with ancestors".<sup>7</sup> Elu Aiyana, a contemporary Deq revivalist, articulates this sentiment powerfully, stating, "It's a form of self-expression, it's a form of identification, but mostly for me it's a form of communicating with my ancestors".<sup>7</sup> This highlights the deeply personal and spiritual dimension of Deq as a conduit to heritage. Historically, Deq also played a crucial role in marking tribal affiliation, lineage, or region of

origin.<sup>3</sup> Specific motifs, such as the "V" symbol, or particular arrangements of common symbols, could denote a person's belonging to a specific Kurdish tribe or community.<sup>2</sup> In the past, it was reportedly possible to identify the tribal affiliation of a Kurd by their Deq, suggesting a more codified system of visual identification than may be prevalent today.<sup>2</sup> For women, these tattoos often served as a "diary," a deeply personal and culturally understood chronicle of significant life events, experiences, and transitions.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, Deq transforms the body into a living canvas, an embodied archive that carries personal, familial, tribal, and collective Kurdish identity. These are not mere decorations but inscriptions of belonging and history, particularly vital in cultures with strong oral traditions where such visual markers can carry substantial mnemonic and narrative weight. The tattoos become repositories of information and memory, inscribed directly onto the person, serving as a testament to lineage and lived experience, a practice especially important for the intergenerational transmission of identity when written records may be sparse or inaccessible.

## **5.2 Gender, Womanhood, and Bodily Autonomy**

Deq is overwhelmingly a tradition associated with women; it has been predominantly performed by women, on women, with the knowledge and techniques often passed down through matrilineal lines.<sup>7</sup> This gendering of the practice is central to its social dynamics and meanings. Deq often marked significant phases in a woman's life, such as the transition to womanhood, marriage, or childbirth, visually punctuating her journey through socially recognized stages.<sup>13</sup>

A primary motivation for acquiring Deq was beautification, the enhancement of feminine charm and allure according to culturally specific aesthetic ideals.<sup>1</sup> However, feminist ethnographic perspectives, such as those offered by Beyza Huriye Turgut in her study of Deq-bearing women in Southeastern Anatolia, suggest deeper layers of meaning related to female agency.<sup>19</sup> From this viewpoint, Deq can be interpreted not only as a pursuit of beauty but also as a means of "claiming ownership over one's body," an expression of individual difference, and even a subtle form of "resistance to the father" or patriarchal norms.<sup>19</sup> Certain Deq beliefs were directly related to marriage and spousal relationships. For instance, a widely reported belief was that a tattoo on a woman's right hand, or specific dot configurations, could prevent her husband from taking a second or third wife.<sup>1</sup> While not universally subscribed to, as illustrated by Zainab's personal account where she acknowledged the belief but did not apply it to her own situation, its existence points to Deq's role in navigating marital dynamics.<sup>1</sup> Within a traditionally patriarchal social structure, the domain of Deq, largely controlled and enacted by women, may have provided a unique space for female expression, social bonding among women, and the articulation of female concerns. It could have functioned as a tool for women to negotiate social norms, assert their identity, and even attempt to influence their marital circumstances, suggesting that Deq was not solely about conforming to societal expectations but could also be a nuanced instrument of female agency.

### 5.3 Spirituality, Protection, and Healing

The spiritual dimension of Deq is profound. Traditionally, it was considered by some to be a form of worship, a way to offer prayers for abundance, fertility, blessings from a higher power, and, crucially, protection.<sup>6</sup> The protective qualities of Deq are among its most frequently cited purposes. Tattoos were believed to ward off malevolent forces, particularly the evil eye (*nazar*), a pervasive belief in the region.<sup>1</sup> Specific symbols or placements were thought to safeguard individuals from harm, ensure safe pregnancies and childbirth, and even offer protection in battle, a meaning more commonly associated with Bedouin male tattoos but potentially holding similar connotations for Kurdish men in certain contexts.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond spiritual protection, Deq was integral to traditional healing practices. Certain tattoos, particularly dots applied to the temples, were believed to alleviate or cure migraines.<sup>7</sup> Other accounts suggest Deq was used to treat ailments such as rheumatism, hand numbness, and lip cracking.<sup>22</sup> Some broader claims even suggest that certain patterns were thought to cure diseases or boost the immune system.<sup>5</sup> There was also a belief that Deq could prolong life and ensure divine protection for the wearer.<sup>22</sup>

The application of specific tattoos to particular body parts for designated ailments, such as temple dots for migraines, suggests a system with parallels to acupuncture or other traditional body-based therapeutic modalities. This indicates a belief system where symbols, when inscribed on the body, were thought to have a tangible and potent power to affect reality, intervening in the spiritual and physical well-being of the individual. Deq, in this context, functions as an embodied apotropaic and therapeutic system. The tattoos are not merely passive symbols but are performative, actively working to shape and maintain spiritual and physical health, making the body a site of ongoing protection and healing. The question of whether specific rituals or incantations accompanied the tattooing process to amplify these protective or healing properties remains an area for deeper ethnographic exploration.

## 6. A Nomadic Art: Regional Variations and Shared Motifs Across Kurdistan and Beyond

The practice of Deq is not confined to a single locality but is found across the vast and diverse regions inhabited by Kurds. Ethnographic accounts and contemporary observations confirm its presence in various parts of Kurdistan, including southeastern Turkey (in provinces such as Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Siirt, Diyarbakır, Batman, Van, Adana, and the Dersim/Tunceli region), northern Iraq, northern Syria (notably among the women of Kobani), and western Iran (particularly in the Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces).<sup>2</sup> This wide geographical distribution has naturally led to regional variations in motifs, their specific meanings, and associated practices.<sup>10</sup>

While a shared repertoire of symbols inspired by nature, cosmology, and daily life exists, the interpretation and emphasis on certain motifs can differ. For instance, the *redhamiyet* motif, a painful lower lip tattoo, is noted as being adopted from Arab women and is particularly discussed in the context of Turkish Kurdistan.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the specific patterns and their

significations among Yezidi Kurds, while sharing commonalities with broader Kurdish Deq, also feature unique elements reflecting their distinct religious beliefs. Yezidis often incorporate the sun symbol more prominently, aligning with its central place in their worship, and have specific patterns such as the *daqqayeh* (an animal figure), sandgrouse foot, *res daqq* (an inverted 'v'), and *dimlich* (a figure resembling a bag with strings), alongside shared symbols like the comb, cross, and gazelle.<sup>2</sup>

Comparisons with neighboring ethnic and religious groups reveal both shared cultural currents and distinct expressions. Arab tattooing traditions, for example, are noted for sometimes featuring larger motifs, and the bottom lip tattoo is described as exclusively seen on Arab women in some contexts.<sup>9</sup> Assyrian communities might incorporate Christian symbols like the cross or images of Jesus into their tattooing practices, reflecting their religious identity.<sup>9</sup> The presence of Deq among Turkmen and Dom (Roma) communities in the region further underscores the interplay of cultural exchange.<sup>3</sup> Parallels have also been drawn with the tattooing traditions of Amazigh (Berber) women in North Africa, who similarly use tattoos for beautification, protection, and marking identity, often employing geometric and nature-inspired motifs.<sup>3</sup>

The existence of tattooing across these diverse groups in Mesopotamia and beyond points to a broader regional cultural complex of body adornment and symbolic expression.<sup>3</sup> Within this larger sphere, Deq serves as both a bridge, connecting Kurds to shared regional aesthetic and symbolic currents, and as a boundary, where specific motifs, interpretations, and associated beliefs delineate distinct Kurdish ethnic and sometimes religious identities. The "nomadic history" of many Kurdish communities, as mentioned by contemporary artist Elu Aiyana, has likely contributed significantly to these regional variations and the lack of a single, unified "visual glossary" for all Kurdish tattoos.<sup>11</sup> This historical mobility and the dispersed nature of communities would naturally foster localized adaptations and diversifications of cultural practices like Deq. Consequently, studying Deq necessitates an appreciation for this inherent diversity and an approach that acknowledges micro-regional expressions rather than seeking a monolithic, pan-Kurdish standardized system.

## **7. Fading Lines, Resilient Strokes: The Decline and Contemporary Revival of Deq**

The rich tradition of Deq, despite its deep historical roots and cultural significance, has experienced a notable decline in practice over the past century. Several interconnected factors have contributed to this fading of ancestral lines on Kurdish skin. One of the most significant influences has been the interpretation of Islamic teachings, as mainstream Islamic jurisprudence generally considers permanent tattoos (*haram*, or forbidden) as an alteration of God's creation.<sup>2</sup> This religious proscription has led many, particularly in more recent generations, to eschew the practice, and some older women have expressed regret after learning of this religious stance, even though removal of the permanent Deq was often not a viable option.<sup>1</sup>

Modernization and the influx of Western fashions and beauty standards have also played a

role, leading some to view Deq as "old-fashioned" or less desirable compared to contemporary aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, pressures for assimilation into dominant non-Kurdish societies or a desire to avoid marking oneself in ways that might be perceived negatively in urban or more religiously conservative environments have contributed to the decline.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the tradition is now predominantly visible on the skin of older women, who are often referred to as the "last guardians" or "living artifacts" of this fading art form.<sup>5</sup>

However, in the face of this decline, a vibrant and multifaceted movement to revive and preserve Deq has emerged. This resurgence is fueled by a collective desire among many Kurds, both in the homeland and in the diaspora, to reconnect with their ancestral heritage and reassert their cultural identity.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary artists are at the forefront of this revival. Figures like Elu Aiyana, a Kurdish artist from Dersim based in Portugal, and Fatma Temel, from Mardin working in Diyarbakır, are actively practicing Deq, researching its symbolism, and bringing it to new audiences.<sup>7</sup> Elu Aiyana, for instance, has been working with Çiler Kiliç on a documentary to record the testimonies of the last traditionally tattooed women in Dersim, while Fatma Temel is engaged in archiving motifs for a future book, underscoring the urgency of documentation before this knowledge is lost.<sup>7</sup>

These revivalists utilize modern platforms such as social media, art galleries, and documentary filmmaking to showcase Deq and educate a wider public.<sup>7</sup> Their motivations are deeply personal and cultural: to forge a spiritual connection with their roots, to communicate with ancestors, to express their Kurdish identity, and to ensure this rich tradition is passed to future generations.<sup>7</sup> The Kurdish diaspora, in particular, has become a significant catalyst for this cultural preservation and reinterpretation. Artists and individuals living outside Kurdistan often experience a heightened sense of cultural identity and an urgent desire to maintain connections to their heritage, leading to innovative approaches to traditional practices.<sup>10</sup> Elu Aiyana notes that it can be "easier for the diaspora to pick up these practices again" <sup>11</sup>, suggesting that distance can sometimes provide a space for re-engagement free from some of the pressures present in the homeland.

The revival also involves adaptations in technique and approach. While some artists strive to use traditional methods, others, like Elu Aiyana, employ a modern "stick and poke" hand-tattooing method using contemporary tattoo inks, while still focusing on traditional symbolism.<sup>11</sup> Some Islamic interpretations are also being navigated; for instance, modern machine application of tattoos is considered permissible by some if it avoids the mixing of blood and ink in the traditional manner, and the use of temporary markings like henna or eyeliner to create Deq motifs offers an alternative for those who wish to honor the aesthetic without permanent modification.<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates a dynamic negotiation of faith and heritage, where the revival is not necessarily a rejection of religious identity but often an attempt to find harmony or new forms of expression.

Academic and institutional efforts complement these grassroots movements. Anthropologists like Ahmet Yavuklu have contributed to the understanding of Deq's traditional meanings and significance.<sup>7</sup> Exhibitions, such as "The Deq Exhibition" in Iraq, organized by The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARI) and supported by the British Council's Cultural

Protection Fund, aim to document the knowledge held by elderly practitioners and reconnect younger generations with this endangered heritage.<sup>24</sup> These combined efforts from artists, scholars, and cultural institutions are vital for the continued survival and evolution of Deq.

## 8. Conclusion: The Living Heritage of Kurdish Tattoos

Kurdish Deq tattooing, an ancient and symbolically rich practice, stands as a vital testament to Kurdish cultural identity, spirituality, and embodied history. Predominantly a tradition of women, Deq has served as a visual language communicating belonging, ancestral connection, protection, healing, and personal narratives etched directly onto the skin. The motifs, drawn from the natural world and Kurdish cosmology, carry layers of meaning that have been transmitted across generations, adapting to regional variations and historical currents.

The tradition has faced significant challenges, leading to a decline in its practice due to religious interpretations, modernization, and assimilationist pressures. However, the resilience of Deq is strikingly evident in the contemporary efforts to document, preserve, and revive this ancestral art form. Artists, scholars, and cultural activists, both within Kurdistan and in the diaspora, are breathing new life into Deq, driven by a profound desire to reconnect with their heritage and ensure its transmission to future generations. This revival is not merely an attempt to replicate the past but involves a dynamic engagement with tradition, adapting techniques and finding new relevance for Deq in modern contexts. Artists like Elu Aiyana co-create contemporary Deq designs with clients, demonstrating that the tradition continues to evolve and resonate with younger Kurds, irrespective of gender.<sup>7</sup>

The story of Deq's decline and revival illustrates a complex interplay between local knowledge held by elders, the catalytic role of diaspora communities in cultural preservation, the contributions of international researchers, and the power of global platforms in raising awareness. This global-local nexus highlights how the safeguarding of specific, localized cultural traditions is increasingly an interconnected effort.

Ultimately, Deq is more than a collection of symbols or a historical practice; it is a living heritage. Its enduring lines and resilient strokes speak to the tenacity of Kurdish culture and the universal human need to mark one's existence and belonging in meaningful ways.

Recognizing Deq as a significant element of both Kurdish and global intangible cultural heritage is crucial for supporting its continued journey, ensuring that this unique lexicon inscribed on the body continues to tell its stories for generations to come.

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