

By Jens Uwe Parkitny

Leopard Skin: The Dai Chin tattoo of Daw Shen Thang resembles the spots of a wild cat. It consists of dots only. Southern Chin State, Myanmar (Burma).

By Jens Uwe Parkitny

## Chin Women and their facial tattoos

The first time I met a Chin woman with a facial tattoo in Myanmar was in 2001. It was in Kanpelet, a small settlement in the mountains of Southern Chin State.

What struck me when staring at the woman's face, and I could do not other than stare, was that she embodied a beauty perception completely alien to the West. Though hardly any body part is spared from being pierced and tattooed in the so-called "civilized world" - think of all the high street tattoo shops in New York, London or Paris - the face is still considered a taboo. Not so in some tribal societies.

There is no other country in Asia with such a large ethnic group that practiced facial tattooing on their women until very recently. As recent as the year 2000 - the youngest Chin woman bearing the ancient marks of her group was 17 year old when I met her in 2005. ▶▶

- 1-3  
Feature of the Week
- 4  
From the AERA
- 5-8  
In & Out of Town
- 9  
Photo of the Week
- 10  
Classifieds
- 11  
Events Calendar

# SBURMA SHAVINGS

Volume 40 ❖ November 14, 2013



# Feature of the Week

Feature

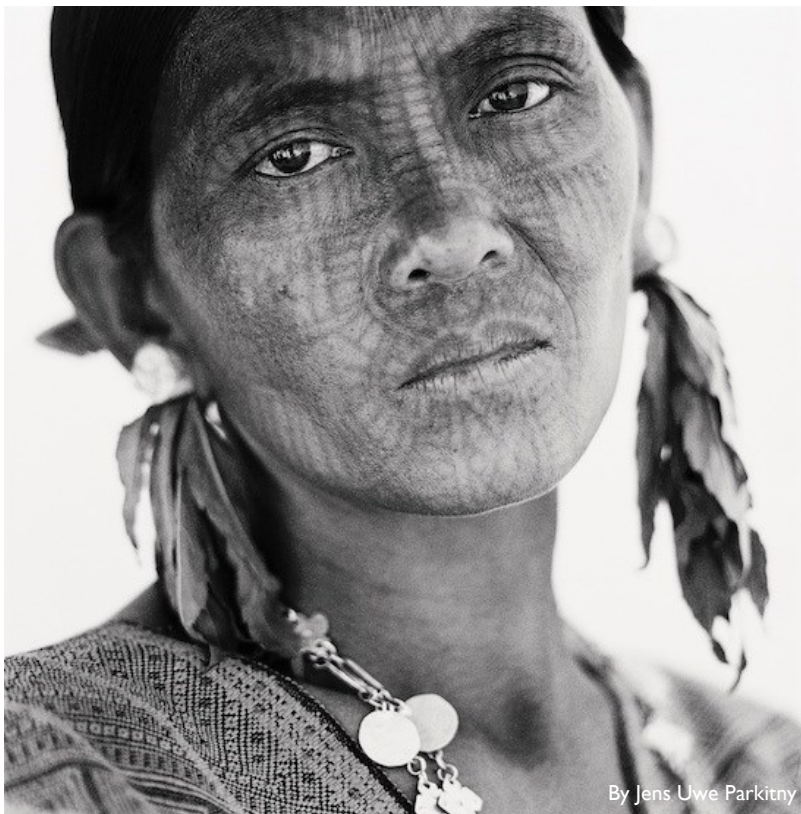
AERA

Town

Photo

Classifieds

Calendar



Earmarking: Tree leaves, instead of traditional jewellery, embellish the ears of Daw Cue Ma Oo of the Laytu Chin group.

Tattoos have for centuries been more than just about body decoration. They serve to distinguish a group of people and, in tribal societies, are often indicative of social status and life stages. The various Chin groups in Myanmar - it is not known how many of the officially mentioned 53 Chin groups practiced facial tattooing as the practice has never been the subject of any scholarly investigation - however, are not the only ones to have tattooed the faces of their girls and young women.

Only five years earlier, she underwent the excruciatingly painful practice: the spider-web like pattern was painted with a chicken feather on her face and then tapped into the skin with thorns, followed by a week of only being able to eat rice porridge due to the swelling of the face. One can imagine the "blood, sweat, and tears" dripping down her face and jaw. On the other hand: the result is beautiful and the tattoo masters were extremely skillful. None of the young women would not have wanted it. In fact, in some cases, the parents didn't want it and their daughter run away to get it done in another village.



Buddhist by Belief: While most tribal groups in the Southern Chin Hills have been baptized by Christian missionaries a few decades ago, Buddhist monks live among the Chin groups in the plains of Northern Rakhine State. Daw So Jar and her son reside in a small village with a simple buddhist monestary and a 'Sayadaw' in Nothern Rakhine State, Myanmar (Burma).

DO NOT FORWARD



# Feature of the Week

Feature

AERA

Town

Photo

Classifieds

Calendar

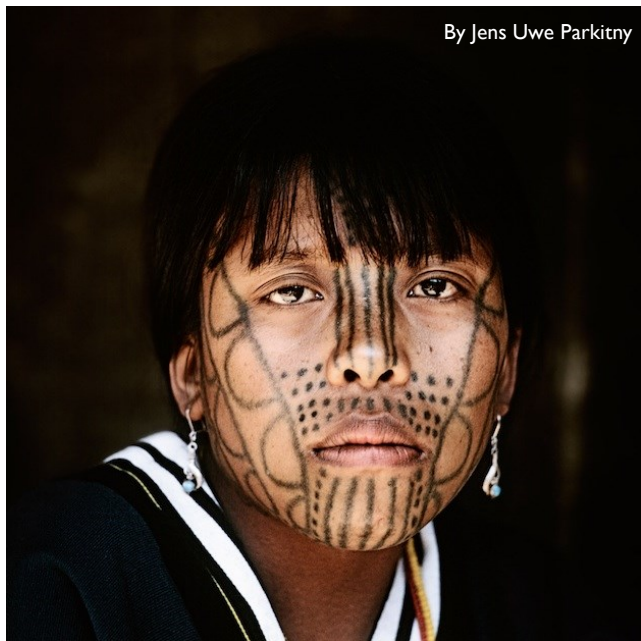
DO NOT FORWARD



In Asia, it was a fairly widespread practice among hill tribes. Traces of this ancient custom can still be seen in the faces of the elderly women of ethnic minority groups in China, Vietnam, Taiwan and India. Expression of social status, belonging, beauty, spiritual protection and having mastered the transition from one stage of life to the next are all good reasons for facial tattooing among these groups, all belonging to the so-called "scriptless cultures" which pass on their knowledge orally and not in written records. The various Chin groups too have no tangible records which would allow a deeper understanding of their symbol-

ism. The translation of these visual codes seems therefore irretrievably lost.

There is, however, a story often told and which I heard several times while roaming the Chin hills. The story claims that the Chin women started to tattoo their faces to make themselves ugly, so that Burmese kings would stop raiding their villages and taking them as slaves. Given the perceived enhanced beauty a facial tattoo lends to its bearer in tribal societies and the higher social status which comes along with it, it is likely that this story was fabricated in recent times by those representing a "civilized world" view which perceives a facial tattoo as "ugly" and "defacing". There is no historical evidence suggesting any truth in the story. It can be considered a myth.



A Tattoo: Ma Ning Li is the youngest Mun Chin girl with a tattoo I have met on my several journeys through Southern Chin State, Myanmar (Burma). Though she said she is above 20, I reckon she is still in her teens and was tattooed only a few years ago.



Dressed to Thrill: Wearing a headdress is common practise among women of hill tribes. They do it not only to protect themselves from the sun when working on the fields but also as an expression of beauty. Daw Mna Thi from the M'Khan Chin community near Mindat has chosen a colourful towel to fit the purpose.

