

Tattoos for Beauty

English translation:

Beauty has different definitions in different countries. And in Ethiopia, one of the signs of beauty is the traditional *nikisat* or tattoo, when translated. People get tattooed in many different places, and one common way is to get your gums tattooed. If you look at my gums, for example, you can see that they're a bit dark. And the reason that people get tattooed on their gums is because it is believed that when someone has darker gums, it makes their teeth look prettier. This is guided by the belief that the contrast between black and white is beautiful. That being said, the tattooing process is very long and quite painful. When someone is about to get tattooed, they take a needle and prick the area thoroughly. After they've been pricked and the area starts to bleed freely, they take coal – crushed coal – and smear it on their gums, and when it dries, the gums are dark. When the gums are really dark, then they're considered to be very beautiful.

Another place that people get tattooed is on their necks, and many people get their entire necks tattooed in many different designs. The process is the same: the shape of the design is pricked onto their skin by a needle. Afterwards, they spread the coal over it. And after that, instead of being black, the tattoo takes on a dark-greenish color. This is one mark of beauty. At the same time, many people do this in connection with their faith. When many women get tattooed on their hands or their necks – or here on their foreheads – they get crosses; a very common tattoo is the cross. Just as people get tattoos here to define themselves, in Ethiopia, people get tattoos of crosses to show their love of God.

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