

**The Linguistic Aspects Common  
in East Africa Tattoos:  
A Photographic Analysis**

*JLLE*  
Vol 18(1) 35–62  
© The Publisher  
DOI:10.56279/jlle.v18i1.3

*David Masereka*<sup>1</sup>

**ORCID:** 0009-0001-1860-2021

and

*Nicholous Asheli*

**ORCID:** 0009-0000-3858-0467

**Abstract**

*Tattoos have been a form of personal expression and cultural significance across regions and communities around the world for years. East Africa, with its rich cultural heritage and diverse linguistic landscape is no exception. This study analysed 80 tattoo images as used by tattoo bearers, 20 collected in each of the four East African cities of Dar es Salaam-Tanzania, Nairobi-Kenya, Kampala-Uganda and Bujumbura-Burundi, which were categorised with regard to their linguistic status, colour, size and location on bearers' bodies. This categorisation enabled a photograph analysis using a non-animated visual display of information typology by John Grady. Through observation, interviews, and analysis of visual data, the study uncovered visual patterns, similarities and differences in the linguistic aspects of the tattoos across East Africa. The findings indicated that plain meaning symbols and texts were the most language aspects prevalent among tattoos in East Africa as metaphors in tattoos were less noticed but reported to be on an increase as well. Medium sized and colour tattoos were the most preferred with the arm being the most ideal location to have the images applied. The study concluded that Grady's aspects of image analysis like type, colour, size and location were found to influence the linguistic appreciation and interpretation of messages of tattoos in East Africa.*

**Keywords:** *Tattoos, linguistic aspects, East Africa, photographic analysis*

---

<sup>1</sup> **Corresponding author:**

David Masereka, is a PhD (Linguistics) student in the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Email: davidmasereka256@gmail.com

## Introduction

A tattoo is a permanent design made on the body by pricking small holes in the skin with a sharp instrument like a bone, stick or needle that has been dipped into pigment with natural colour (Hunter, 2021; Arp & Allhoff, 2012; Govenar, 1993). The available records of tattooed individuals date as far back as 6000 BCE with the oldest evidence of human tattoos being believed to have lived between 3370 BC and 3100 BC with European natural mummy, *Ortiz* the Iceman. The tattoos worn by *Ortiz* are believed to have been intended for therapeutic purposes (Islam, 2016; Birmingham, Mason & Grubin, 1999; Mallon & Russell, 1999). Tattoos have always been a powerful medium for individuals to express their personal identities and cultural affiliations. This form of body art has transcended geographical boundaries and professional fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology and communication (Arp & Allhoff, 2012; Irwin, 2001; DeMello, 1993) and more recently, linguistics.

By highlighting the linguistic aspects that tattoos in East Africa have in common, this study makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of knowledge concerning the symbiotic relationship between language, culture, and visual representations. It not only provides insights for scholars, anthropologists, linguists, and tattoo enthusiasts interested in understanding the intricate connections between language and body art in East Africa, but also extends its implications to a broader context of language culture.

### *Tattoos as Visual Elements*

Tattoos have gained significant importance as visual communication elements in linguistics, primarily due to their ability to convey personal and cultural identities, beliefs, and affiliations, even when they have previously been neglected in the communication literature (cf Doss & Hubbard, 2019). Tattoos also serve as powerful forms of visual language that can communicate messages and meanings to others without the need for verbal communication. In the field of linguistics, tattoos provide an intriguing avenue for studying the intersection of language, culture, and identity, where they offer insights into the ways individuals use visual symbols to express their linguistic preferences and affiliations, reflecting their cultural backgrounds and linguistic communities. By examining the linguistic elements incorporated in tattoos, linguists can gain valuable insights into the diverse linguistic landscapes that exist within societies.

In a study conducted by Jackson (2018), the researcher analysed the linguistic features found in tattoos among a sample of bilingual individuals in a multicultural community. The study revealed that the participants used tattoos as a means of displaying their linguistic repertoire and bilingual identities. Earlier studies also indicated that the decision of tattooing is entirely premeditated and deliberate (Bell, 1999; DeMello, 1995; Irwin, 2001; Sweetman, 1999; Vale & Juno, 1989). By incorporating words, phrases, or even entire sentences in different languages, individuals express their language skills, cultural heritage, and connections to various linguistic communities. Moreover, tattoos can serve as markers of specific subcultures or communities with their unique linguistic registers and dialects as seen in a study by García and Rivas (2016) who explored the use of tattoos among members of the Chicano community in the United States. The researchers found that Chicano individuals often incorporated Spanish words and phrases, as well as specific lexical choices associated with their community, reflecting

their linguistic and cultural identities as bilingual speakers, a very notable trend among tattoos in East Africa where tattoos have been found to express a 'bi-cultural' trend of one's indigenous culture and love for pop culture. The struggle for this cultural fusion is very visible among tattoo bearers.

It, therefore, became inevitable to affirm that tattoos emerged as significant visual communication elements in linguistics, enabling individuals to express their linguistic preferences, cultural identities, and affiliations. Through the analysis of linguistic features in tattoos, tattoos were found to serve as a form of visual language that enriched understanding of linguistic diversity within societies as well as enable researchers gain valuable insights into the ways language and culture intersect in personal expressions of identity.

### *Tattoos as Linguistic Elements*

Cobley (2010) observes that to know human communication and *semiotics*, will be characterized not just by verbal expressions but also by the realm of the non-verbal, which offers a great opportunity of enriching the understanding not just of communication but also of cognition. Tattoos in communication fall under the auspice of nonverbal communication and orthographic elements, as Doss and Hubbard (2019) found that tattoos are somewhat viewed as communicative and that as the apparent communicative value of the tattoos increased, so did their visibility.

Being a subcategory of tattoos, text elements in tattoos provide language cues such as names, dates, codes and personal information (Xu, Prasad, Cheng et al., 2022). As text elements, tattoos offer a unique form of self-expression and communication that allows individuals to convey personal narratives, beliefs, and identities through written words permanently marked on their bodies. Symbolic aspects in tattoos refer to the tattoo symbols, images, and designs that represent ideas, concepts and emotions, thereby conveying a range of meanings and often highly contextualized within specific cultural and social contexts (Lionberger, 2021). Symbolic aspects in meaning of tattoos are unambiguous and often reflect cultural values, beliefs and identities, on top of serving as symbols that communicate cultural a shared understanding of significance, personal expression and narratives as well as identity (cf Hill, 2020; McCandish, 2023; Maloney & Koch, 2020 and Mascali & Krutak, 2020). Metaphoric aspects in tattoos are used to represent a deeper meaning, as Ortony (1993) observes that a metaphor in language is a figure of speech that uses a comparison between two things that are not alike, but share a common characteristic. He attributes this ability to the fact that language, knowledge and perception are 'inextricably intertwined' and as Patterson and Schoeder, (2010) look at the double-sides of the skin in line with ambiguity and ambivalence, mostly termed as 'utilizing the skin metaphors', the skin can bear an image to express the intended as well as not intended message.

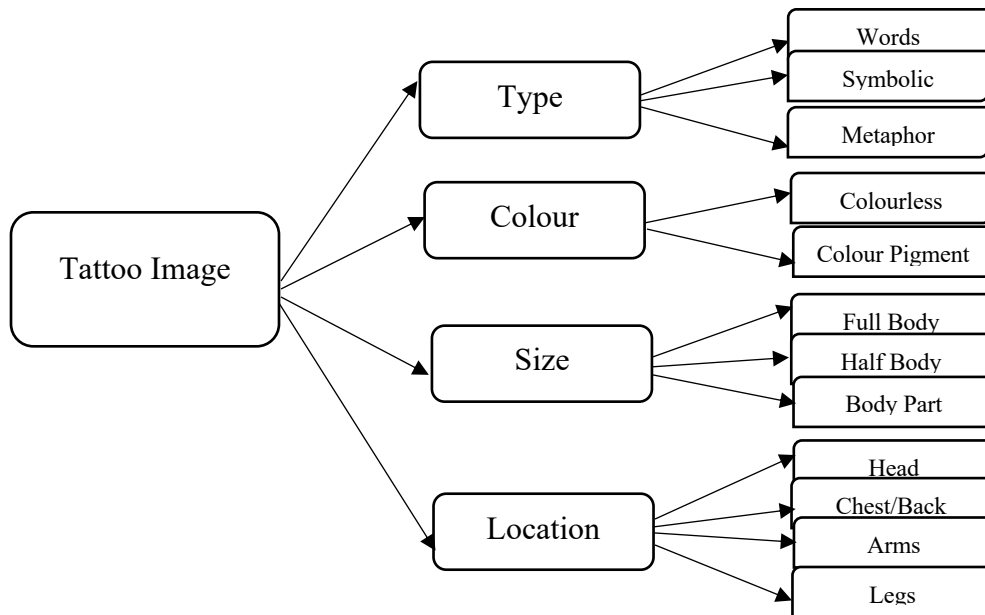
### **Methodology**

The study examined a collection of eighty (80) tattoo images, twenty (20) tattoo images collected from each of the four East African cities of Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, Kampala and Bujumbura, which were interpreted based on factors such as tattoo type, colour, size, and location. All these factors were important in determining what each tattoo signified. The interpretation was carried out using a non-animated visual display of information typology developed by John Grady. This framework provided a

comprehensive modal of understanding the interconnectedness of tattoo images, mode of language aspect, their meaning and nature in their contexts of use. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study on which this paper is based delved into the diverse range of tattoo designs, symbols, and textual elements prevalent in East African tattooing practices, exploring the underlying linguistic features embedded in these tattoos, including language choice, script preferences, and semantic symbolism in the images. The linguistic aspects included the textual, symbolic, metaphoric and textual semantic representation and interpretation of tattoos images. By conducting interviews with the bearers, extensive review of existing literature, and analysing visual data, the study aimed to uncover intriguing patterns and similarities in the linguistic aspects of tattoos across East Africa.

**Visualisation and the Spectacularisation of Research Findings**

Grady (1996), in his study about the scope of visual sociology states that a visual image or icon is a ‘functional prerequisite’ to any mode or kind of analysis. This, he continues to observe, is necessary as several consequences follow the existential centrality of an image because firstly, the existence of images presupposes that they will be seen and sight is a significant aspect of our lives. Secondly, that images are known to communicate information that is intelligible and understood in their context of use and thirdly, that the properties of the image make certain affordances or uses possible. In his subsequent discussion of visualisation in social analysis, Grady (2011) suggests that visualizing data is a craft, and an essential element for social researchers, as it allows them to draw on what he calls ‘the cognitive competency of the eye’ (Grady, 2011: 495). The typology is illustrated in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: A Modified Typology of Non-animated Visual Displays of Information.** (Grady 2011: 496)

Grady (2011) suggests that using and turning quantitative data into pictures allows the researcher to see patterns that enable to make discoveries about data that would have, otherwise, remained obscured, therefore, advocating for visualising data as a means of analysing it more effectively (Rose, 2022). This paper used the typology by Grady to analyse the tattoo images collected.

**Results**

The results from the cities of Kampala- Uganda, Nairobi-Kenya, Dar es Salaam- Tanzania and Bujumbura- Burundi were presented independently. The tattoo images found, the linguistic categories of the image, colour size and location of the tattoo images are all presented.

***Tattoo Images from Kampala, Uganda***

Tattoos in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, have become an increasingly popular form of self-expression and identity. While traditional body modifications and scarifications have been practiced in various cultural communities for centuries and especially among the Karamojong, contemporary tattooing practices have taken root and evolved into a dynamic form of expression, especially in the city. Tattoos found in Kampala reflect a diverse range of influences and messages, from traditional Ugandan motifs to like animal symbols and local language texts to modern global trends. Many individuals choose to adorn their bodies with symbols and designs that hold symbolic, metaphoric and textual language aspects, representing their beliefs, experiences, and affiliations. In Kampala, it became uncommon to find a blend of indigenous Ugandan symbols alongside more contemporary images, reflecting the city's cosmopolitan atmosphere. The tattoo images collected were coded with plate numbers (1-20) for easy presentation and reference.



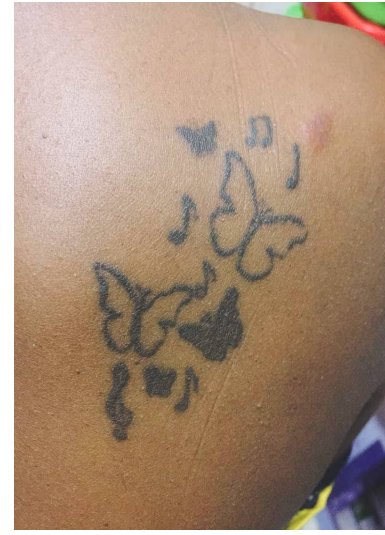
*Plate 1: Butterfly Field data*



*Plate 2: Eye brow. Field data*



*Plate 3: Faces. Field data*



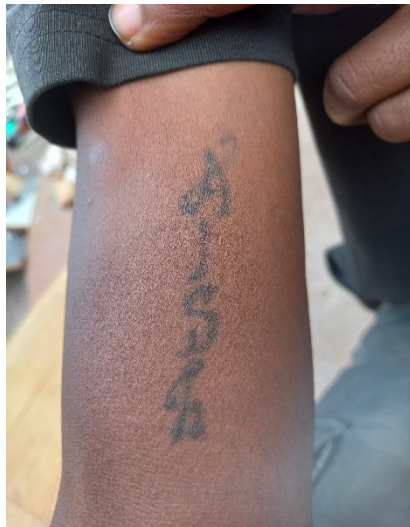
*Plate 4: Butterflies & music notes. Field data*



*Plate 5: Text (Unruly). Field data*



*Plate 6: Name (Kaviri). Field data*



*Plate 7: Name (Aisha). Field data*



*Plate 8: Text (Faith. Hope. Love). Field data*



*Plate 9: Clef & star. Field data*



*Plate 10: Feather & birds. Field data*



*Plate 11: Star. Field data*



*Plate 12: Crescent. Field data*



*Plate 13: Stars. Field data*



*Plate 14: Dragon. Field data*



*Plate 15: Flower. Field data*



*Plate 16: Butterfly & flower. Field data*



*Plate 17: Cross. Field data*



*Plate 18: Face & cigarette. Field data*



*Plate 19: Text & birds. Field data*



*Plate 20: Name (Jackline). Field data*

**Figure 2: Tattoos Found in Kampala. Source: Field data**

**Table 1: A Summary Table for Visualisation and Spectacularisation of Tattoo Images in Kampala**

Image No	Type			Size	Location	Colour
	No	Symbolic	Metaphoric			
Plate 1	Feather			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 2	Eyebrow			Small	Head	Colourful
Plate 3		Faces		Small	Back	Colourful
Plate 4		Butterflies, music notes		Small	Back	Colourful
Plate 5			<i>Unruly</i>	Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 6			Name ( <i>Kaviri</i> )	Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 7			Name ( <i>Aisha</i> )	Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 8			Faith. Hope. Hope	Small	Back	Colourful
Plate 9	Clef & star			Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 10	Feather & birds			Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 11		Star		Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 12	Crescent			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 13	Stars			Small	Head	Colourful
Plate 14	Dragon			Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 15		Flower	Text	Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 16		Butterfly & flower		Small	Leg	Colourful
Plate 17	Cross			Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 18		Face and Cigarette		Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 19	Birds		<i>Queen</i>	Small	Chest	Colourful
Plate 20			Name ( <i>Jackline</i> )	Medium	Arm	Colourful

**Source:** Primary data



***Tattoo Images from Nairobi, Kenya***

In Nairobi, art is a prominent form of self-expression and artistic representations are seen on buildings, on perimeter walls, inside city public transport buses and the popular trends of body modification, including tattoos on human bodies. Nairobi, as this study found out, in all East Africa, stood out as the most vibrant and diverse community of tattoo enthusiasts as both locals and visitors were found to adorn their bodies with meaningful designs and symbols. Another notable trend in Nairobi's tattoo scene was the use of large intricate patterns as seen in Plate 24, Plate 29, Plate 31 and Plate 40, whereby bearers enjoyed owning something unique, and not just a plain symbol or text. These trends were seen to influence the practice of tattooing in Nairobi, which was found to be gaining popularity for several other reasons, including adding an element of mystique and personal significance to tattoos, creating personal unique brands and communicating through applying significant dates, names and owning tattoos with cryptic messages and symbols onto the bodies of willing bearers. As language elements, the tattoo messages were considered to be mostly symbolic, metaphoric and textual. More so, the tattoo images collected in Nairobi were coded with Plate numbers 21-40 for easy presentation and reference.



Plate 21: Hands together. Field data

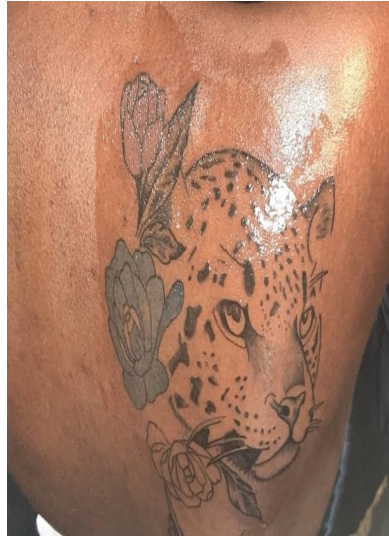


Plate 22: Leopard. Field data



Plate 23: Cartoon. Field data



Plate 24: Intricate pattern. Field data



Plate 25: Biohazard. Field data

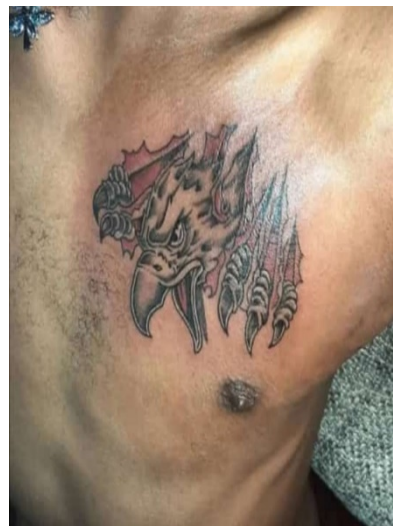


Plate 26: Vulture. Field data

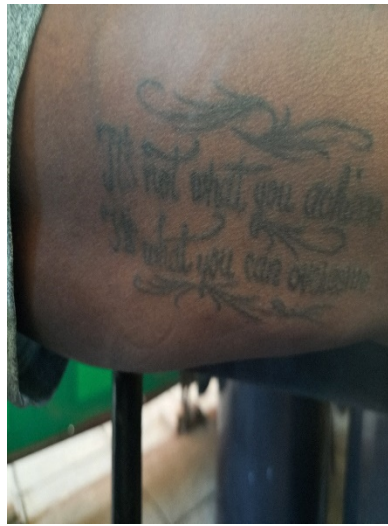


Plate 27: Text (quotation). Field data



Plate 28: Name (Flourence). Field data



Plate 29: Intricate pattern. Field data



Plate 30: Hands together. Field data



Plate 31: Intricate pattern. Field data



Plate 32: Text (Arabic). Field data

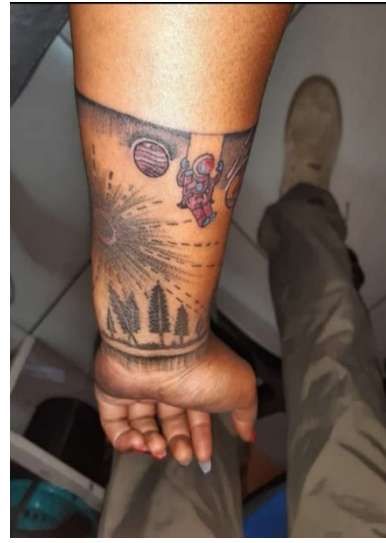


Plate 33: Portrait. Field data



Plate 34: Phoenix. Field data



Plate 35: Guitar. Field data



Plate 36: Minimalist symbol. Field data



Plate 37: Portrait. Field data



Plate 38: Butterfly & flower. Field data



Plate 39: Portrait. Field data

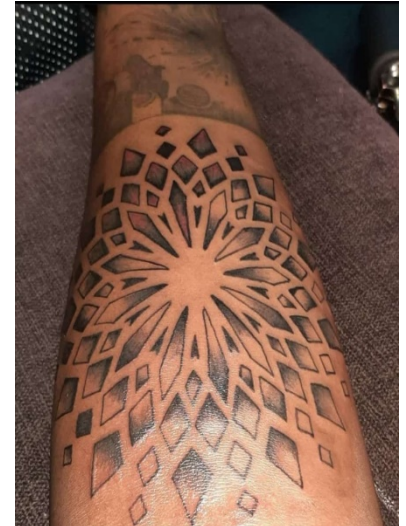


Plate 40: Intricate pattern. Field data

**Figure 3: Tattoos Found in Nairobi. Source: Primary data**

**Table 2: A Summary Table for Visualisation and Spectacularisation of Tattoo Images in Nairobi**

Image No	Type			Size	Location	Colour
	No	Symbolic	Metaphoric			
Plate 21		Hands together		Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 22	Leopard			Medium	Back	Colourful
Plate 23		Cartoon		Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 24		Intricate		Large	Arm	Colourful
Plate 25		Biohazard		Small	Leg	Colourful
Plate 26	Vulture			Small	Chest	Colourful
Plate 27			Quotation	Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 28			Name ( <i>Flourence</i> )	Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 29		Intricate		Large	Arm	Colourful
Plate 30	Crown			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 31		Intricate		Large	Leg	Colourful
Plate 32			Arabic (This storm will pass)	Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 33	Portrait			Large	Arm	Colourful
Plate 34	Phoenix			Medium	Back	Colourful
Plate 35	Guitar			Medium	Back	Colourful
Plate 36		Minimalist		Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 37	Portrait			Small	Leg	Colourful
Plate 38	Butterfly, flower			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 39		Portrait		Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 40		Intricate		Large	Arm	Colourful

**Source:** Primary data

*Tattoo Images from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania*

In Dar es Salaam, tattoos hold a distinctive place in the realm of personal expression and identity. As the largest and port city in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam serves as a vibrant hub where various cultural influences converge. With a general subtle display of graffiti in the city, Dar es Salaam had a growing number of individuals choosing to adorn their bodies with meaningful tattoo designs that were, mainly, plain symbols and texts which were generally small and medium in size rather than intricate large patterns. Whereas the traditional body modification scene in Tanzania is primarily associated with certain tribal practices and rites of passage and reflecting a deep-rooted cultural significance like among the Maasai, the Makonde and henna coastal tradition in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in perception, with tattoos increasingly being viewed as a form of individual expression and artistic creativity. In this dynamic urban city, the convergence of tradition and modernity was evident in the evolving perceptions of tattoos as language aspects of symbolism, metaphors and texts became noticeable in the body art that bearers use to express themselves and also communicate. The tattoo images collected in Dar es Salaam were coded with plate numbers (41-60) for easy presentation and reference

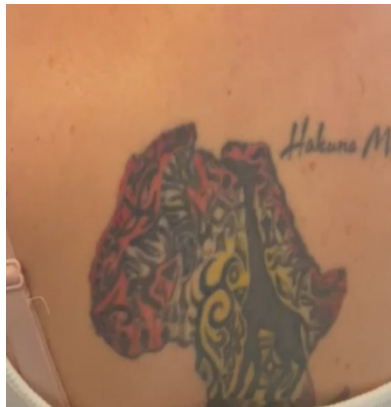


Plate 41: Map of Africa. Field data



Plate 42: Text (Royalty). Field data



Plate 43: Name (Kwame). Field data



Plate 44: Lips. Field data



Plate 45: Cross & text. Field data



Plate 46: Cross and text. Field data



Plate 47: Crown. Field data



Plate 48: Text & symbol. Field data



Plate 49: Flower. Field data



Plate 50: Butterfly. Field data



Plate 51: Lion. Field data



Plate 52: Gorilla. Field data

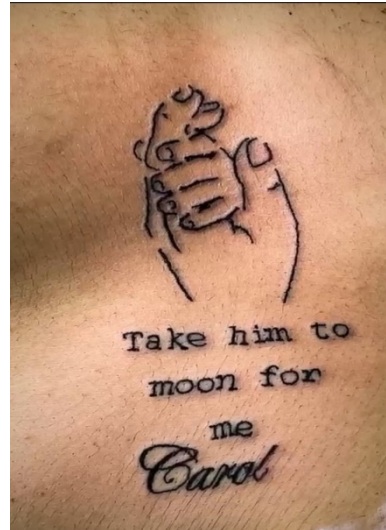


Plate 53: Hands & text. Field data



Plate 54: Hands stretching. Field data

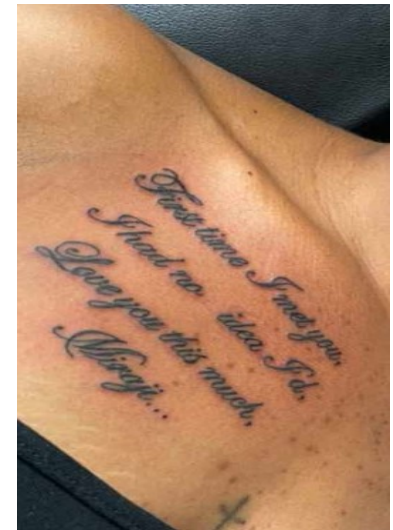


Plate 55: Text. Field data



Plate 56: Hands stretching. Field data



Plate 57: Text (Swahili). Field data



Plate 58: Stars. Field data

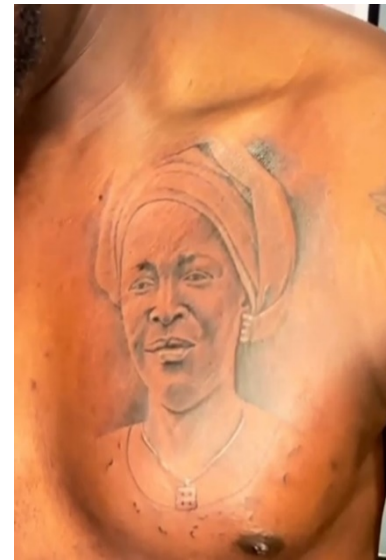


Plate 59: Face. Field data

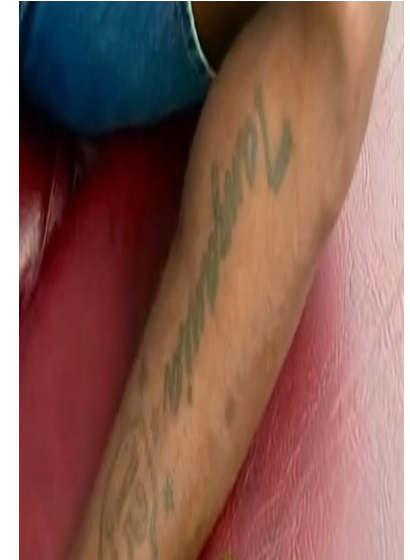


Plate 60: Text (Tanzania). Field data

**Figure 4: Tattoos found in Dar es Salaam. Source: Field data**

**Table 3: A Summary Table for Visualisation and Spectacularisation of Tattoo Images in Dar es Salaam**

Image No	Type			Size	Location	Colour
	Symbolic	Metaphoric	Textual			
No				Small/medium/large	Head/Chest/Back/Arm/Leg	Colour/Colourless
Plate 41	Map of Africa			Medium	Back	Colourful
Plate 42			<i>Royalty</i>	Small	Back	Colourful
Plate 43			Name ( <i>Kwame</i> )	Small	Chest	Colourful
Plate 44	Lips			Small	Leg	Colourful
Plate 45			Phil 4:13	Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 46	Cross		Isiah 43:2 Text	Small	Back	Colourful
Plate 47	Face			Small	Chest	Colourful
Plate 48			<i>Good vibe</i>	Medium	Leg	Colourful
Plate 49	Flower			Medium	Back	Colourful
Plate 50	Butterfly			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 51	Lion			Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 52	Gorilla			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 53	Hands		Text	Medium	Chest	Colourful
Plate 54	Hands stretching			Small	Chest	Colourful
Plate 55			Text	Medium	Chest	Colourful
Plate 56	Hands stretching			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 57			Swahili ( <i>POTEZA</i> )	Large	Arm	Colourful
Plate 58	Stars			Large	Leg	Colourful
Plate 59	Face			Medium	Chest	Colourful
Plate 60			<i>Tanzania</i>	Medium	Leg	Colourful

**Source:** Primary data

***Tattoo Images from Bujumbura, Burundi***

Tattoos in Bujumbura, the capital city of Burundi, held a distinctive cultural significance deeply rooted in the country's history and ancient traditions. Burundi is a distinctive cultural society and strongly upholds its traditions where body modification is not a cultural practise amongst most communities. The near to the cultural practice of body modification in Burundi was the inscription of the initial letters of a person's name. This practise was largely practised amongst teenagers as an indication of bravery, identity and initiation into teenager hood, which has since become unpopular. As it becomes less popular, modern tattoos were found to be gaining popularity in Bujumbura and serving as visual expressions and communication aids to tell stories, convey status, and symbolize belonging within, especially, the slum community. The tattoo images collected in Bujumbura were coded with plate numbers (61-80) for easy presentation and reference.





*Plate 61: Music clef. Field data*



*Plate 62: Letters. Field data*



*Plate 63: Text (name). Field data*



*Plate 64: Tree. Field data*



*Plate 65: Falcon. Field data*



*Plate 66: Intricate. Field data*



*Plate 67: Name initials (U.D). Field data*



*Plate 68: Intricate. Field data*



*Plate 69: Name Initials (N.B). Field data*



*Plate 70: Cannabis plant. Field data*



Plate 71: X. Field data



Plate 72: Intricate. Field data



Plate 73: Text (Mommy I love you). Field data



Plate 74: Hearts. Field data



Plate 75: Tree and bird. Field data



Plate 76: Text. Field data



Plate 77: Intricate. Field data

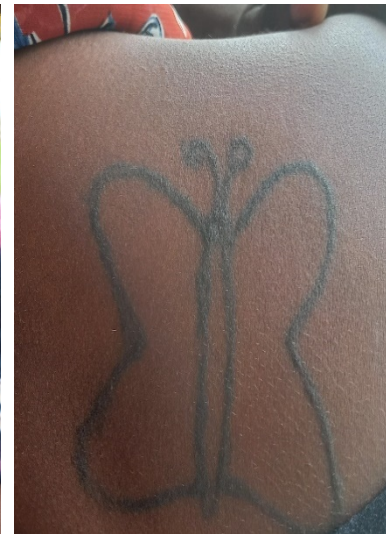


Plate 78: Butterfly. Field data



Plate 79: Broken bone. Field data



Plate 80: Name initials (VR). Field data

**Figure 5: Tattoos found in Bujumbura. Source: Field data**

**Table 4: A Summary Table for Visualisation and Spectacularisation of Tattoo Images in Bujumbura**

Image No	Type			Size	Location	Colour
	Symbolic	Metaphoric	Textual			
No				Small/medium/large	Head/Chest/Back/Arm/Leg	Colour/Colourless
Plate 61	Music clef			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 62			Letters	Small	Arm	Colourless
Plate 63			Name	Small	Arm	Colourless
Plate 64	Tree			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 65	Falcon			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 66		Intricate		Small	Arm	Colourless
Plate 67			Name Initials (UD)	Small	Arm	Colourless
Plate 68		Intricate		Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 69			Name Initials (NB)	Small	Arm	Colourless
Plate 70	Cannabis Plant			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 71	X			Small	Head	Colourful
Plate 72	Cannabis Plant			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 73			<i>Mommy I love you</i>	Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 74	Hearts			Small	Arm	Colourful
Plate 75	Tree & bird			Large	Leg	Colourful
Plate 76			<i>Believe in God Anvil</i>	Medium	Arm	Colourful
Plate 77		Intricate		Large	Arm	Colourful
Plate 78	Butterfly			Small	Back	Colourful
Plate 79	Broken bone			Medium	Leg	Colourful
Plate 80			Name Initials (VR)	Small	Arm	Colourless

**Source:** Field data

## Discussion

The discussion was guided by Grady's three logically related fields in visual analysis of the role of sight, seen in meaning construction, how the information conveyed by the communicative image is used to manage relationships in society and the techniques of producing and decoding the images for psychological processes, social organisation and cultural meanings. To enable this, photograph analysis typology and all the tattoo images collected were categorised by type, colour, size and location as discussed according to city, as showed in the figures and tables above and explained below.

### *Tattoos in Kampala, Uganda*

The tattoos found in Kampala were mostly symbolic and textual. According to Fig.2 and Table 1 showing data from Kampala, 40% of the tattoo images analysed were found to be symbolic, 35% were textual and 25% metaphoric. The bearers shared the need for their tattoos to communicate to other people, to establish an interpersonal meta-function. A tattoo bearer of a cross (Fig 2, Plate 17), said, 'The symbol of the cross preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people, without disturbing or interrupting them. This method of preaching is effective because everyone who knows the cross is reminded of how Jesus died for them'. Another bearer with a text tattoo *Unruly* (Plate 5) said, 'I am directly communicating to the police. They should know that I am not controlled by anyone and I don't fear them'. From the discussion with other tattoo bearers, it was evident that their intention was to clearly communicate their messages without being divertive and metaphorical, further evidenced in the many symbols with plain symbolic meanings shared, as well as the text tattoos found. More so, the majority, 65% of the tattoos were found to be medium sized (covering a big surface on the body part) as 35% were considered small (covering a small surface of the body part) and there was no large sized tattoo (covering the whole surface of the body part) found. Also, as established, small sized tattoos were mostly preferred by tattoo bearers as well as medium sized images. This, according to one tattooist, was the average size preferred by majority of tattoo bearers in Kampala as they did not wish to own very large and pronounced tattoos. He said;

The people who come for tattoos always come with specific designs and tell us where they will need the tattoo on their body. We know that the type of image will influence its location on the body, but our clients always prefer small sized tattoos. One of the reasons is the little time takes to draw the tattoo but most of them fear having large tattoo images. They say their tattoos would look ugly. What we see here is that many people like small and also medium sized tattoo images since they are not so large...somehow, it is like music to me. Most people do not like very loud music playing. People normally like things in minimal or average state, like most tattoos.

With the location of tattoos on the human body, 65% of these tattoos were located on the arm, 15% located on the back, 10% located on the head and 5% on the leg and the chest. The arm being the most preferred location, tattooists and bearers agreed that this was due to the fact that the arm was the most conspicuous body part and was also a relatively neutral location for any message. And with colour, 100% of the tattoos were colourful, to make the tattoos visible. With regard to colour, a tattooist observed that, 'Having a tattoo without colour is like not having a tattoo at all or simply owning a scar. Tattoos need colour to be seen and to effectively communicate what the owner wishes to'. The type, size, location and colour of the tattoos found in Kampala

clearly indicated the intention of the bearers to reach out and express themselves using the symbols available to them, a practice that was on an increase (Akinkurolere & Masereka, 2019) and the messages continue to be sent, in spite of the fact that tattooed persons were perceived as having negative character as well as being believed to be more deviant than people without tattoos (Awai, 2022). Relating to linguistic aspects, the symbolic and textual aspects were more realised in tattoos, with less tattoos found with metaphoric aspects, in Kampala.

### ***Tattoos in Nairobi, Kenya***

The tattoos found in Nairobi were more symbolic and metaphoric than textual. Fig. 3 and table 2 indicate that 45% of the tattoos found in Nairobi were symbolic, 40% were metaphoric and 15% were textual. This trend speaks a lot on how tattoo bearers in Kenya, generally, prefer intricate ideas and expressing themselves in no plain way (Lownik, 2006). A tattooist interviewed in Nairobi agreed on this. This is what he said:

Kenyans love art. Their love for art has gone beyond mere symbols to intricate designs. Look through Nairobi, for example. Most things have graffiti on and in them like the buildings, the *matatus*, walls and interior places. Some time back, people used plain symbols but these days, the designs are hard to interpret. This culture has eventually caught up with tattoo designs as well. Few clients now come for plain words or plain symbols anymore, say a butterfly. There are now new intricate symbols and patterns that clients are demanding.

Further, the majority 45% of the tattoos were considered small (covering a small surface of the body part), 30% were considered to be medium (covering a big surface on the body part) as 25% were considered large (covering the whole surface of the body part). In Nairobi, and with the presence of graffiti on walls, buildings and *Matatu*, tattooists noted an increasing demand for tattoos that cover whole body parts as seen with Plate 29, Plate 31 and Plate 48. On the issue of visibility, a tattoo bearer said:

The arms are the perfect spots for tattoos because they have enough visible skin and can be stretched, if need be. Besides, the way we swing our arms makes them the perfect billboards since we make use of them while using gestures, as well as intentionally hanging them in positions of visibility.

To enhance visibility, 65% of these tattoos were located on the arm, 15% on the back and leg, as 5% on the chest. Interestingly, 100% of all tattoos were colourful. The analysis of these tattoos and other body modification trends indicated how the bearers had a strong desire to showcase their art and ensure it is conspicuous (Onyango, 2006; Lownik, 2006; Awili, et al., 2020). In Nairobi, tattoos with symbolic elements were mostly noticed and a steady increase of tattoos with metaphoric elements, with a few text tattoos. For that reason, tattoos were expressive as they represented bearers' feelings and memorable aspects of life; some being sad, happy and yet others being nostalgic.

### ***Tattoos in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania***

The tattoos found in Dar es Salaam were mainly symbolic and textual, with none said to have had metaphoric aspects. As shown in Fig. 4 and table 3, 65% of the tattoos found were symbolic as 35% were textual. There was no tattoo said to be metaphorical, a likely indicator that in Dar es Salaam, tattoo bearers aim at conveying easy to read and interpretable symbolic and text messages through tattoos. An interview with a tattooist shed more light on this issue as the tattooist, using Swahili, said:

Kwa ujumla, jamii ya Watanzania huishi maisha ya kawaida na ya kijamii. Hawapendi kufanya maisha kuwa magumu. Badala yake, wanapenda kuyafanya yawe rahisi. Hii inaonekana hata katika sanaa ya michoro ya mwili (tattoo) ambayo watu wanachagua. Ingawa miundo ya michoro ya kisasa ya tattoo yenye utata si jambo la kawaida sana nchini Tanzania. Mwenendo huu umeanza kuonekana katika miji kama Dar es Salaam, hususani kutokana na athari ya kuwa na ufikiaji wa mtandao, wageni kutoka nje kama watalii, na mitandao mingi ya kijamii. Haya yamechochea mabadiliko katika mwelekeo wa Watanzania kukubali haraka mienendo mipya. Hata hivyo, watu wanaopenda kuchora michoro ya mwili (tattoo) bado wanapendelea alama na maandishi ya kawaida. Ni nadra kupata mtu anayetaka muundo wenye utata, lakini mambo yameanza kubadilika sasa hivi. Kwa hiyo, ni suala la muda tu, miundo tata itakuwa itaongezeka kuwa maarufu katika jiji la Dar es Salaam na Tanzania kwa ujumla.

**Translation:** People in Tanzania generally live simple lives at a social level. They do not complicate life. In fact, they like simplifying life. This way of living is now visible even in the art of tattoos that bearers look out for. Modern complicated tattoo designs are not common in Tanzania yet, but the trend is picking up in cities like Dar es Salaam, and mostly due to the influence of exposure to internet, foreign visitors like tourists and the many social media platforms available, which exposure has also made us know how Tanzanians quickly adapt to new trends. But even then, the people who come for tattoos prefer plain symbols and text tattoos. It is rare to find a person who needs an intricate design but with the continued trend of exposure, we are starting to see the change in preference. It is only a matter of time and a wave of intricate designs will trend in Dar es Salaam and Tanzania as a whole.

Another interview with the bearer of a text ‘GOOD VIBES’ (Plate 48) revealed how the intention to own a tattoo was to communicate and be understood. He said, ‘I am telling people to be positive about life. That is why I used the words ‘GOOD VIBES’. Notably, the prevalence of tattoos is on an increase in Dar es Salaam (Chacha & Kazaura, 2015; Mgema, 2023). Even though tattoo bearers did not seem to prefer intricate patterns or abstract symbols, they all believed that communication should be as easy as it can be so that symbols can easily be interpreted. With the tattoo size, majority of the tattoos, 50% were small sized, 40% were medium and 10% were large. The preferred size of a tattoo is still the small size, which, according to bearers is not too conspicuous and inconspicuous, as one said:

Ukubwa wa tattoo unaweza kutoa ujumbe wa kina zaidi hata kuliko picha yenyewe. Tattoo yenye ukubwa mdogo au wa kati inaweza isitambulike au ujumbe wake usichukuliwe kuwa muhimu wakati tattoo kubwa inaweza

kufasiriwa kama kuzidi kwa ujumbe ... Ndiyo sababu nilichagua ukubwa mdogo wa ua, ambao tatoo yake si kubwa sana.

**Translation:** The size of a tattoo may communicate even more than the image itself. A small or medium sized tattoo might not be seen or the message might not be taken seriously while a large tattoo might be considered an exaggeration of the message... That is why I choose a small size of a flower, which tattoo is not too large.

With location, 30% were located on the arm and the chest, 20% located on the back and the leg, with none on the head. The location of a tattoo, according to one tattooist, has much influence on the message it conveys and eventually communicates. He says, 'Most clients prefer having tattoos on their arms and on the chest, but generally on the visible parts of the body... most will however prefer the arms because arms are easily seen parts and mobile.' And still, 100% of the tattoo images were colourful. With this visibility and average size of the easily recognisable tattoos, their communicative effect was unavoidable, enabling site and meaning generation that enhanced the communication process. With Dar es Salaam, tattoos having symbolic and textual aspects were mostly noticed and barely tattoos with metaphoric aspects.

### ***Tattoos in Bujumbura, Burundi***

In Bujumbura, the tattoos seen mostly had symbolic and textual elements with few tattoos said to have metaphoric aspects. According to Figure 5 and table 4, 50% of the tattoos were considered symbolic, 35% textual and 15% metaphoric. Just like in Dar es Salaam, tattoos in this city were more symbolic and textual than metaphoric because of the way of life in the city, as tattooists in Bujumbura observed that many people in Burundi are not so much into art of body modification. One tattooist, using Kirundi, said;

UburuRundi ni igihugu kigizwe n'abantu bubaha imibereho y'ubuzima bwabo bwa kera aho kwijukira imyuga igezweho nk'akarorero tatuwaje. Nico gituma utabona inzu n'imwe yubatswe mu buryo bw'utugenegene canke ibimeze nk'utugenegene ku miduga canke ku mabarabara. Ariko bakeya bafise tatuwaje babikora na canecane mu kwiyerekana abo ari bo canke mu kugaragaza ivyiyumviro vyabo. Abantu benshi bagira tatuwaje mu kwerekana urukundo ku bavyeyi babo n'abandi bantu bakunda. Hariho kandi uburyo bw'inyandiko butagira irangi ku ndome zitangura z'amazina yakoresha cane mu gihe bene yo bari bakiri bato kandi vyasaba ko bagira indome zitangura z'amazina yabo kugira bamenyekane vyoroshe, kwinjira mu gihe c'ubuyabaga canke nk'ikimenyetso c'ubuhizi. Ni gake ababa i Bujumbura bagira tatuwaje zifise ubutumwa ngereranyo. Ng'aha mubonye tatuwaje, ni uko ico mubonye kiba ari ico nyene.

**Translation:** Burundi is a country where the people respect their indigenous way of living than embracing modern art, like tattoos. That is why you barely see any building with art designs or even artistic impressions on cars or roads. But the few who have tattoos, do it, mostly for identity and self-expression. People will mostly own tattoos to express love to their parents, and other loved ones. There is also a trend of colourless texts of

name initials which were mostly applied when the bearers were young people and had to own name initials for easy identity, initiation into teenager hood and also as a sign of bravery. It is rare for people in Bujumbura to own tattoos with metaphoric messages. Here, if you find a tattoo, what you see is what it is.

The observation of the tattooist resonates with the view shared by a tattoo bearer who said that her tattoos are an expression of love, seen by the two hearts (Plate 74) and another text, *Mommy I love you* (Plate 73) owned by a male bearer. Still, key to note is that the intentions of most tattoo bearers were reported to be for more personal reasons than to communicate to the public, even when the tattoos were largely symbolic, textual and conspicuous. Further still, 75% of the tattoos were considered small, 15% considered medium, and a fraction of 10% large, which according to the bearers and tattooists expressed the desire to be simple in expression and not over exaggerate the image and message. With location, the majority of tattoos, 80% were located on the arm, 10% located on the leg as 5% were located on the head and 5% on the back. Whereas the trend of the arm being the preferred location of most tattoo bearers in Bujumbura was also due to the fact that tattoos on the arm were easily noticed and therefore bound to be easily seen, to most tattoo bearers, it was mostly for their convenience than for the public attention. Burundi, unlike the other East African cities presented a twist with their tattoo images where 70% of the tattoos found were colourful but 30% were colourless (without ink pigment). On the issues of colour, a tattooist using French, said:

La plupart des tatouages incolores sont des dessins réalisés lorsque les porteurs étaient des jeunes. C'était une pratique courante chez les jeunes garçons d'inscrire les initiales de leurs noms ou de petits symboles. Si, par exemple je m'appelais Iradukunda Léonce (non aléatoire) j'aurais écrit "IL" sur mon corps. Les garçons l'utilisaient comme signe de courage parmi les pairs et pour abrégger les noms comme mots de passe entre eux. Cela se produit encore dans certaines zones rurales, mais n'est plus aussi populaire qu'il ya quelques années.

**Translation:** Most of the colourless tattoos are designs made when the bearers were still young. It was a common practice among young boys to inscribe the initials of their names or small symbols. If, for example, my name was Iradukunda Leonce (random name), I would have written 'I L' on my body. The boys used this as a sign of bravery among their peers and to shorten their names as passwords among themselves. It still happens in some rural places, but no longer as popular as it was, years back

A tattoo bearer with name initials of VR (Plate 80), adds that the name initials were a sense of pride and show of maturity among young boys. It was, however, not a practise among the female counterparts. Another tattoo bearer, who had a coloured symbol of X (Plate 71) said, 'X is a letter but also a symbol. It means wrong person. The 'X' symbol is used in most cases to mean wrong, poor and dangerous. Mine means the same.' Still on colour, the lack of colour pigment and nature of tattoos in Bujumbura, as observed by tattooists and bearers eventually brings to surface that tattoos are mostly personal in Bujumbura and for personal gratification than for public consumption, even when they might be conspicuous. Females were found to be embracing the modern colourful trend of tattoos and as observed, symbolic and text tattoos were most commonly observed in Bujumbura, with few tattoos considered metaphoric.



John Grady's work explored the intersection of visual analysis, communication theory, and psychology. In the context of East Africa, visual analysis referred to the examination of tattoo images, while understanding their meaning and significance. The communication of information looked at how messages were conveyed and interpreted, while the psychological aspect delved into the mental processes underlying perception and cognition. 'Seeing', 'Iconic Communication' and 'Doing Sociology Visually' (Grady, 1996) were the three key areas that enabled the analysis of tattoo images. Firstly, seeing, also termed as the role of sight and vision aided in meaning construction. Tattoos found to be permanent markings placed on the body, their placement, design, and colour were found to hold specific influence and various meanings within a particular contexts and cultures. By analyzing tattoos through the lens of "seeing," Grady's framework encouraged the consideration of how these tattoos contributed to the construction of cultural identity, social status, religious beliefs and even personal narratives in East Africa. The sight of tattoos was also recognised as a form of self-expression, which by examining them through the concept of "seeing", enabled the exploration of psychological motivations behind getting tattooed.

Secondly, iconic communication that deals with how images are used in society looked at how tattoos helped in managing relationships. In this regard, tattoos in East Africa were found to function as social markers, indicating belonging to a specific nationality, age group, social class, religious affiliation and specific cultural significance. Also, by analyzing the recurring symbols and icons, Grady's framework allowed the decoding of deeper personal motivation through the meanings embedded within tattoos by identifying what the tattoo images stood for and how others reacted towards them. For example, certain tattoo symbols of animals were found to represent strength, ambition, and life experiences. By analyzing tattoos through iconic communication, it was found out that individuals can understand how tattoos are used to navigate social interactions and relationships within East African societies.

Lastly, the techniques of producing and decoding images were found to hold symbolic meaning. The symbolic, metaphoric and textual decoding of tattoo meanings, including the tattooing techniques themselves were found to aid meaning making. This was possible due to the choice of tools, the pain endured, and the specific circumstances surrounding the choice and practice of the tattoo. Further, text tattoos incorporated written text, often in local and foreign languages that aided a deeper understanding of the specific messages the tattoos were meant to convey as well as appealing not just to the audience in East Africa but also beyond.

In summary John Grady's framework for visual analysis provided a comprehensive approach to understanding the interplay between sight, meaning-making, and social interaction in the context of East African tattoos. By examining tattoos as visual elements, the social context, and the production techniques, it was possible to interpret tattoos by type, colour, size and location, which aspects led to a richer appreciation of the symbolic, metaphorical, and textual aspects of tattooing as a practice.

## **Conclusion**

The study on which this paper is based revealed that the use of tattoos is on an increase in East Africa as a new language used to communicate. As they increase, so does their communicative effect and varying messages they convey. Generally, the tattoos found in the four east African majorly had symbolic and textual language elements, and tattoos with metaphoric elements were reported to be on the rise. Tattooists in Dar es Salaam, Kampala and Bujumbura also observed that tattoo bearers preferred symbolic and text tattoos that easily communicate and are easily understood while tattooists in Nairobi observed a sharp increase in demand of intricate patterns and metaphoric imagery that became hard to decipher in meaning and messages. Even then, global trends and access to internet was quickly influencing other cities in changing the trend of owning plain tattoos to something intricate. More so, the size of the tattoo image influenced its message in that the size of images acted like a sound pitch in verbal communication where by the larger the image, the more pronounced the intentions of the bearer to communicate were, likewise with the smaller the image. The arm on a human body was also realised to be the most preferred location of a tattoo for most bearers in all the cities. It was also discovered that whereas all tattoos in Kampala, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were applied with the use of colour pigment, Bujumbura had many traditional tattoos that were applied without any colour pigment, which tattoos had mostly been applied when the bearers were still young, for easy identification and a sign of bravery among peers. Another feature of these colourless tattoos was that whereas they were conspicuous, they had more personal value to the bearers, away from the intention to communicate to the public.

Therefore, language aspects of symbolism, metaphors and texts among tattoos found in East Africa were effectively utilised and embraced by bearers. It however was a challenge to know the metaphoric aspects of a tattoo until the bearer was interviewed. Yet, as Grady (2011) said, photographs enable 'the cognitive competence of the eye', which enables interpretation and the conclusion that tattoos are linguistic aspects and become proponents of communication, sending messages and receiving feedback. Consequently, the image type, colour, size and location are bound to influence the linguistic appreciation of a tattoo, its interpretation and message.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declared that this research was privately funded and that they had no conflicts of interest to declare with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author declares that he received no financial support from any organization for conducting the research and writing this article.

### **References**

Akinkurolere, S. & Masereka, D. (2019). A Cultural-Pragmatic Investigation of Tattoos among the Youth in Kampala. *Agathos*, 10(18): 191-200.

- Armstrong, M. L. et al. (2008). Motivation for Contemporary Tattoo Removal: A Shift in Identity. *Archives of Dermatology*, 144:87984.  
<https://doi.org/10.1001/archderm.144.7.879> PMID:18645139.
- Arp, R. & Allhoff, F. (2012). *Tattoos Philosophy for Everyone*. John Wiley & Sons inc, UK.
- Awai, B. (2022). *Body Art: Application and Perception of Tattoos in Selected Tattoo Parlours in Uganda*. Unpublished Undergraduate Dissertation.
- Awili, H. O., Gitao, G. C. & Muchemi, G. M. (2020). Seroprevalence and Risk Factors for Hepatitis B Virus Infection in Adolescent Blood Donors within Selected Counties of Western Kenya. *BioMed Research International*, 2020(1): 8578172.
- Bell, S. (1999). Tattooed: A Participant Observer's Exploration of Meaning. *Journal of American Culture*, 22(2): 53-58.
- Chacha, C. E. & Kazaura, M. R. (2015). Body-Art Practices among Undergraduate Medical University Students in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 2014. *Indian J Dermatol*, 60(2): 212.
- Cobley, P. (2010). *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*. London: Routledge.
- DeMello, M. (1993). The Convict Body: Tattooing among Male American Prisoners. *Anthropology Today*, 9: 10-13.
- Doss, K. & Ebes Hubbard, A. S. (2019). The Communicative Value of Tattoos: The Role of Public Self Consciousness on Tattoo Visibility. *Communication Research Reports*, 26(1): 62-74.
- García, O. & Rivas, S. (2016). "I Want to Get my Message Across": Language Ideologies and Language use in Chicano Tattoo Narratives. *Language in Society*, 45(4): 501-524.
- Grady, J. (1996). The Scope of Visual Sociology. *Visual Studies*, 11(2): 10-24.
- Grady, J. (2011). Numbers into Pictures: Visualization in Social Analysis. In E. Margolis & L. Pauwels (eds.). *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*. London: Sage, pp. 494-529.
- Govenar, A. (1993). *The World Book Encyclopaedia*. World Book, Inc.
- Hill, K. (2020). Tattoo Narratives: Insights into Multispecies Kinship and Griefwork. *Anthrozoös*, 33(6), 709-726.
- Hunter, D. (2021). The History and Origin of Tattoos. Retrieved from [https://www.aotruritytatoos.com/history\\_of\\_tattoos/](https://www.aotruritytatoos.com/history_of_tattoos/)
- Irwin, K. (2001). Legitimizing the First Tattoo: Moral Passage through Informal Interaction. *Symbolic Interaction*, 24, 49-74.
- Islam, P. S. et. al. (2016). Medical Complications of Tattoos: A Comprehensive Review. *Clin Rev Allergy Immunol*, 50(2):273-286.
- Jackson, J. (2018). Bilingual Tattoos as Transcultural Language Practices: A Study of Tattooed Bilinguals in a Multicultural Community. *Linguistics and Education*, 45, 34-43.

- Lionberger, E. (2021). The Construction of Identity through Tattoos: A Semiotic and Performative Exploration of Trauma. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Duquesne University.
- Lownik, E. (2006). "Beauty" as a Public Health Concern: An Analysis of the Internalization and Effects of the Western Beauty Ideal in Nairobi, Kenya. *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 260. [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/260](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/260)
- Maloney, P. & Koch, J. (2020). The College Student's Religious Tattoo: Respect, Reverence, Remembrance. *Sociological Focus*, 53(1), 53-66.
- McCandlish, C., & Pearson, M. (2023). Tattoos as Symbols—an Exploration of the Relationship Between Tattoos and Mental Health. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice*, 18(3), 217-227.
- Mgema, E. E. (2023). Tattooing as a popular Form of Body Art in Ascendancy among Urban Youths in Tanzania. *Umma: The Journal of Contemporary Literature & Creativity*, 10(1).
- Onyango, Raymond. "Unhealthy Exercise." *Daily Nation*, 14 October 2006.
- Ortony, A. (ed.). (1993). *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Patterson, M., & Schroeder, J. (2010). Borderlines: Skin, Tattoos and Consumer Culture Theory. *Marketing Theory*, 10(3), 253-267.
- Piombino-Mascali, D. & Krutak, L. (2020). Therapeutic Tattoos and Ancient Mummies: The Case of the Iceman. Purposeful Pain: *The Bioarchaeology of Intentional Suffering*, 119-136.
- Rose, G. (2022). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. SAGE.
- Xu, X., Prasad, S., Cheng, K. & Kin Kong, A. W. (2022). Using Double Attention for Text Tattoo Localisation. *IET Biometrics*, 11(3), 199-214.

### Author Biographies

**David Masereka** is a PhD student at the University of Dar es Salaam, exploring the world of non-verbal communication. His research interests lie at the intersection of gestures, semiotics (the study of signs and symbols), and social linguistics, exploring how meaning is conveyed beyond spoken words in different social contexts. His attention has lately been on tattoos as semiotic resources, with a recent publication of *A Cultural-Pragmatic Investigation of Tattoos Among the Youth in Kampala-Uganda*, (Agathos, 2019; with Susan Akinkurolere).

**Dr Nicholous Asheli** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics at the University of Dar es Salaam. His areas of research interest focus on Semantics, the study of meaning; Cognitive Linguistics, which mainly explores the link between thought and language; Onomastics, the study of names; and Bantu Linguistics, the vast family of languages spoken across much of sub-Saharan Africa.