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## Marks of Devotion: Tattoos as Means of Subordination and Emancipation among Caribbean Hindu Women



Godna Tattoo of a  
Surinamese  
Woman,  
Nickerie/Suriname,  
2018  
Photo: Sinah Kloß

Different types and styles of tattoos are visible in contemporary Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad. A particular type of tattoo can be found among senior Hindu women who identify as descendants of Indian indentured laborers. Indentured laborers were shipped to the Caribbean to work on plantations in the British and Dutch colonies between 1838 and the 1920s, after the emancipation of enslaved Africans. A fraction of these women were registered in the colonial "Immigration Records" with the note that they were tattooed. Oral history interviews and the remaining senior Hindu women with tattoos in the Caribbean point to the fact that the so-called godna gained in significance and popularity among female Hindus in the course of the twentieth century. Godnas are religious tattoos that were inscribed before or after a Hindu woman's marriage for various purposes. Motifs consisted mainly of the husband's initials, the name of a deity, or specific religious symbols such as the Aum. In the contemporary Caribbean, the dominant interpretation links godna to the status of wifehood, and to the subordination and dependence of wives on their husbands and in-laws. Although to some degree godnas may be considered marks of oppression, some senior Hindu women also interpreted them as marks of ritual purification and as indicators that a woman had conducted a gurmukh ritual and become a guru's disciple. Godnas hence may be perceived as emancipatory or even subversive, not only in the context of the Christian colonial society but also in relation to Hindu orthodoxy, for they enabled women's spiritual birth and education. In this talk I analyze how godnas and their related narratives recreate and challenge the relational and dynamic positionalities of Hindu women in Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad, and how they may or may not embody levels and experiences of dependency.

**Sinah Kloß** is visiting professor of Anthropology of the Americas at the University of Bonn. She holds a PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology from Heidelberg University. Since 2020 she is leader of the research group "Marking Power: Embodied Dependencies, Haptic Regimes and Body Modification" at the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies. Her current research discusses the sensory history of body modification and touch, and focuses on the interrelation of religion and biopower in Hindu Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad. She is also interested in sensory and medical anthropology, concepts of birth and pregnancy, ethnographic methodology and intersectionality, New Materialist and feminist theory.

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