

Traditional Tattoo Motifs As A Symbol Of Social Status Of The Women In Orang Ulu (Kayan-Kenyah) Community In Sarawak

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Abstract: This research is about the traditional tattoo motifs of the Orang Ulu community namely the Kayan and Kenyah. Indigenous people in Sarawak have a unique art, which is the tradition of tattooing the body. This tattoo activity has been practised for centuries. For the Orang Ulu community, they call tattoos as “tedak” (Kayan) and “betiek” (Kenyah). Tattoos on some parts of their body are not merely decorative but have a very deep meaning. For them, tattoos are a part of the tradition and symbolise the social status of a person in the society. This research focuses on the symbols, tattoos, and hierarchy of the women's social status in the society.

Keywords: *symbol, types of tattoo, hierarchy of women's social status*

INTRODUCTION

The Kayan-Kenyah community has the same traditional cultural distinctions about tattooing their bodies. In the Kayan language, tattoos are called *tedak* while Kenyah people call tattoos as *betiek*. *Tedak* and *betiek* are only counted on the aristocratic body in the social status of the Kayan-Kenyah community, which is called *Maren* (Kayan) and *Paren* or *Keta'u* (Kenyah). In the community, only women are allowed to get tattoos on their body, however, for men, they can only have a tattoo when they are involved in a war and successfully beheaded the enemy's head. The tattoo will just be counted on the lower part of their thumb.

A woman of the Kayan-Kenyah community can start having a tattoo on the body at the age of ten. The process of finishing a complete tattoo will take four years. However, it depends on one's enduring level to withstand the pain. Tattooing activity will be carried out in a cosmology cycle within nine days after the full moon called *butit halap* in the Kayan language, which means halap fish's belly phase. In addition, the tattoo is considered as a symbol of beauty within the Kayan-Kenyah community. The more tattoos on the body, the more beautiful the woman is. Although tattooing process is very painful, after completing the process, it becomes a symbol of their pride. Their beauty will be more prominent after having a complete tattoo. The Kayan-Kenyah community also believes that the shaded tattoos are the light

that would shine along the dark paths when they are about to go to *Alo Malau* heaven. In heaven, they will meet with their ancestors who would also have a complete traditional tattoo [1].

LITERATURE REVIEWS

The traditional tattoo motifs of the Kayan community that have the best artistic views on the Borneo Islands. Kayan's motifs and tattoos are mostly imitated from other societies. However, only women have tattoos on their body along with some related rituals. The Kayan women will take four years to complete all types of tattoos on the forearm (from elbow to toe), on the soles of the feet, calves, and thighs. The tattoo sculptor is also a woman who is an expert in the art of tattooing. Also, explained that the women of the Kenyah community are also obliged to have tattoos before marriage and the tattoos to be counted should follow their offspring status. This type of tattoo is a dog motif known as *aso* in the Kenyah language and it is broken like a bracelet on the calf. While for Kenyah people, their men rarely get tattoos and have no obligation to get a tattoo even if the man had cut off the enemy's head [2]. These status levels are commonly regrouped into two broad ritual categories. For the Kayan community, there are the *Kelunan Jia* (superior or refined people) comprises of *Maren* and *Hipui Ok* while the *Kelunan Ji'ek* (inferior or bad people) comprises of *Panyin* and *Dipen*. The first category is entitled to use some

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tattoo designs and ritual elements that are forbidden to others and are spiritually more powerful [3]. Among the Kenyahs, there are *Deta'u* (those of the right) and the *Kelunan Kado* [4].

The culture all over the world uses tattoo arts as a self-adornment. Someone who wishes to decorate their body with a tattoo will have to colour the material onto the skin to produce the desired design pattern. According to him, the tattoo pattern of the studied tribes is in an abstract form but it is created based on the objects found in the environment of the owner [5].

Tattoos are used to decorate the owner's skin but there are also tattoos that symbolise the religious beliefs or beliefs associated with fear. In addition, tattoos also symbolise the status and rank of the wearer. While for women, tattoos are symbols of marital status or nobility. Meanwhile, the fishermen in Southeast Asia use snake tattoo motifs, dragon motifs, and other aquatic animal motifs. They believe that the motifs of the tattoos can protect them from danger and threats while looking for sustenance from the sea.

The legend above comes from the Kayan, a tribe in Borneo (modern-day Kalimantan). Their tattooing style has become famous worldwide as a popularity of New Tribalism. The elegance geometric pattern of the Kayans and later the Iban, inspires the abstract monochrome shapes that characterise New Tribalism [6].

In this study also, Marteen only explains about tattoos as a symbol of self-adornment, culture, and belief in a race. Therefore, there are few areas that are not being explained about the types of tattoo motifs that are counted on the body of the Orang Ulu community according to their social status.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the research methodology used was qualitative studies since this study focused on data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation. Furthermore, the targeted groups in this study are veterans aged 45 and above as well as individuals who are experts in tattooing. The following are the study sites for the Kayan-Kenyah community.

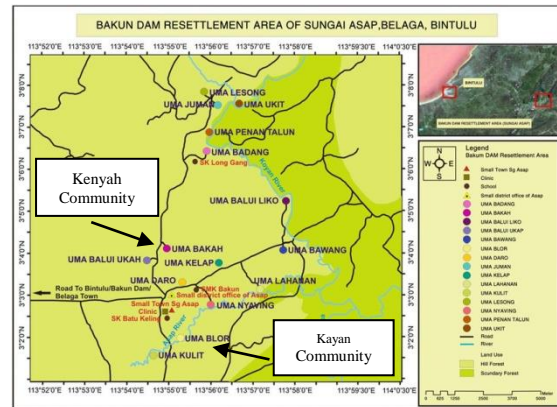


Figure 1: Map of the Kayan-Kenyah community field survey
(Source: Sg.Asap,Belaga District Office, Bintulu, 2010) [7]

RESULT ANALYSES AND DISCUSSIONS

All the motifs that have been mentioned and discussed symbolise the representation of the traditional culture of the Kayan society and the Kenyah community from ancient times. Tattoos symbolise the identity, courage, beauty, and social status of a person. Each tattoo has a chronology and is closely interrelated with the belief of animism, myths, taboo, and agricultural work. In fact, tattoos also work as a protective mask against any spirit or evil spirit that tries to disturb the person. The changing modernisation era has largely changed the traditional tattoo motifs but there are a few individuals who prefer to choose personal and contemporary tattoo motifs.

While conducting the field research, there are many Ibanese young generations involved in the art of living as their source of income and manage to generate a lucrative income. In contrast to the Kayan and Kenyah communities, only an 86 year old Kenyah tattoo artist woman that still exist and she has stop tattooing for almost 40 years. This is due to the young generation is incapable of enduring the pain, and the knowledge is not been passed down because it is being rejected by the next generation. As a result, the traditional tattoo designs of the Kayan and Kenyah people is no longer exist.

The activities of tattooing on the body of the Kayan and Kenyah communities are the cultures, symbols, and identities that have been practised over the years. This tattoo culture is learned by generations to keep it as a cultural symbol in the society. Each of the motifs is represented by the symbol of either flora or fauna. There are studies on the culture of tattooing and the results showed that there are similarities between the motifs. The two communities have made tattooing as a culture that can be shared in a community in order to ensure that this art does not extinct. The following

are the discoveries of the tattoo motifs, which symbolise their social status and still exist in the study area in *Uma Belor* (Kayan) and *Uma Bakah*(Kenyah).

i) Kayan and Kenyah tattoo motifs

Kayan women start having tattoos as early as the age of ten. For starters, the tattoo is done on the fingers and parts of *kassa* (on the soles). After that, within a year, *usuu* (hands) section from the wrist to the elbow will be completed. While the part of *anah hapii* (thigh) and *itet* (calf) will begin to enumerate in the second year until the fourth year according to the survival rate of the woman.

In the art of treating the Kayan community, there are three main categories which are *usuu*; tattoos made throughout the hands, *kassa*; covering the entire foot, and *anah hapii*; across the thighs. The time of Kayan women start having a tattoo should be in accordance with the cosmological cycle on the ninth day after the new moon phase. This phase is called *butit halap* that carry the intent to the *halap* fish. In addition, Kayan women will try to complete the tattoos before they get married, especially before they get pregnant. It is considered bad to get a tattoo after being a mother because the baby in the mother's womb will get a birthmark resulting from the tattoo counted on the mother's body during pregnancy. Pregnant women are encouraged to relax and do light work.

The *tedak* used by women of Kayan society covers everything or universal. They believe that motifs on the body function as a light that will lead them to the life after death. In addition, the light can illuminate them through the dark paths along the longhouse area built by their ancestors. The expertise in the art of tattooing in the Kayan society is inherited only by women through heredity. For example, a woman will teach her daughter about ways of having a tattoo so that she can really master the knowledge. If her daughter refuses to pursue this heritage, only then the mother will inherit this tattoo art. In this regard, if any other woman who is not her own blood wants to inherit the art of tattooing, the woman will be given a custom and shall pay with long beads, gongs, or pots to the person who gives her the knowledge. Moreover, every tattoo has a goddess protecting it, which is called the *Bua Kalung* Goddess. However, there is a sacrificial ritual to be held before performing the tattooing activity as a gift to *Bua Kalung* Goddess.

The main motif of the art of the Kayan arts community is *aso* or called as "dog-dragon", an unseen creature combination of a dog and a dragon and is believed to climb a vineyard in the forest. In addition to remove dangerous spirits, *aso* also serves as a status symbol. Aristocrats (*Maran*) are the only eligible people to decorate their traditional

clothes and tools with full *aso* motifs or a certain number of people, for example, *Panyin* people only show *aso* motifs or human heads, while the *Hipui* are limited to geometric motives.

ii) Tedak motif in Kayan society:

a) Tattoos on *anah bukong*(knee)



Figure 2: *Tedak aso* tattoo on the knee (*anah bukong*)
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])



Figure 3: Tattoos are shafted across the whole hand (*usuu*)
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])



Figure 4: Tattoos on the foot (*kassa*)
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])



Figure 5: Tattoos on the entire thigh (*anah hapii*)
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])



Figure 6: Tattoos on the calf side (*tedak itet*)
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])

iii) **Betiek motif in Kenyah community**

The Kenyah people are categorised into the Orang Ulu community. Despite having similarities with the Kayan community in terms of customs, culture, and settlements, the selection of the tattoo designs used are different. In the tattooing arts, the Kenyah people use the *kalong ulu* motif (human mask) and *tefayau* motif (dragon). *Kalong ulu* motif is believed to have a very brave spirit.

Kalong ulu art motif is influenced by the old myths presented with the elements of the motif or carved arts that often adorn the space of the longhouses of the Kayan and Kenyah people. The origin of this *kalong ulu* naming is from the story associated with *batu kalong* (carved stone). The Kayan and Kenyah communities call it *batu kalong* because the stone's surface has various motifs, patterns, carvings, and traditional artworks left by the people moving through the rocks. *Batu kalong* is located at the border of Kalimantan-Sarawak and still exists until now [9].

Symbolically, this *kalong ulu* motif or motif of a human figure is used as a symbol of the upper classes of the Kenyah community. In addition, this motif is also referred to as *kalong kelunan*. This motif symbolises the power, wealth, and manner of leadership that is respected by ordinary Kenyah people. There are many types of *kalong* motifs in the Kenyah community. For example, *kalong kelunan* (human motif), *kalong kelawit-ukit* (carved link), *kalong tebeggang* or *tingang* (motif of the Kenyalang bird), *kalong kayu aren*, and *kayu udip* (the tree of life).

However, all of these motifs cannot be used indiscriminately. For example, the *kalong tebeggang* motif and *kalong kelunan* motif can only be used by aristocratic descent, *Keta'u*. At Uma Bakah, only the *Keta'u* or the *Paren* will be tattooed with the motif of the *kalong ulu* on the lower part of the knee and the hand. This motif is believed to have a power of being enclosed and can protect itself from being hit by evil forces. In addition, this motif is also widely used as an ornament on the walls of the longhouse's head, *ba'* (baby-carrying tools), and the traditional clothes.

a) **Betiek Kalong Ulu**

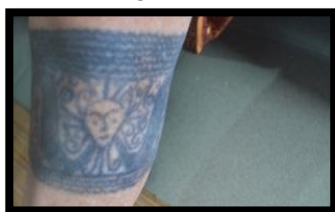


Figure 7: *Kalong ulu* motif
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])

According to Juna Liau's informant, the number of *kalong ulu* motifs also affects the social

status of the Kenyah Uma Bakah community. The *Keta'u* or *Paren* has four *kalong ulu* bracelets while *Panyen Tia* and *Panyen Jaat* have three *kalong ulu* bracelets. In addition, the *Ula'* does not have any tattoos on the body. These *kalong ulu* motifs can be seen and identified on their calf.

b) **Betiek Tefayau**



Figure 8: *Tefayau* motif
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])

Meanwhile, *tefayau* (dragon) motif is a feared animal by humans. It can be a guardian to the wearer rather than a bad spirit or any kind of spirit. It is believed that this motif can make a person strong and brave when dealing with the enemy who is trying to threaten the community and their longhouse area. This is due to their enthusiasm along with *Bungan Malan*.

In addition, aristocratic women with tattoos on the body have the power to determine the day of rice cultivation. This group will be given priority to plant rice first followed by the *Panyen Tia* and *Panyen Jaat*. These activities will usually begin on the third or fourth day in July each year after burning the rice paddies activity. However, before the *nu'gan* activities are carried out, other plant food such as chillies, eggplants, cassava, and corn will be planted around the paddy fields first. Vegetable food that has been declared will be planted by the *Ula'* who works with the aristocrats [10].

After completing the tattoo on the body, the Kenyah community will hold a confrontation day according to their respective social status. For the *Paren*, they will abstain for seven days while for *Panyen Tia* and *Panyen Jaat* will abstain for four days. They are forbidden to leave the house and are prohibited from doing any housework. They are advised to relax so that the wounds of the tattoos can fully recover. If the abstinence is being denied, it will get a *parit* (plagues) and is believed to have no personal protection from the *Bungan Malan* God. The pictures of the *betiek* type according to the social status of the Kenyah people at Uma Bakah are as follows:



Figure 9: The *Keta'u* or *Paren* groups have four *kalong ulu* bracelets
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])



Figure 10: The *Panyen Tia* have three *kalong ulu* bracelets
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])



Figure 11: The *Panyen Jaat* have two *kalong ulu* bracelets
(Source: Fujica A., Field Study, 2013 [8])

CONCLUSIONS

From the ancient times, the women of the Kayan and Kenyah communities will have tattoos on the hands and toes, and from the toe to the thigh. Unfortunately, when studying the Belaga area, the young generation women in that area are no longer tattooing. The reason is that it is painful to them and they have no courage, unlike their parents. Furthermore, the tattooer is a person who has knowledge inherited from generation to generation and they are the minorities in the tribe and most of them have died.

We are now in the new millennium along with the sophisticated technology. The existence of the new art ideas is able to make the younger generation forget about their traditional art. Even their thoughts, interests, and knowledge of the traditional tattoo designs are continuously fading. For example, the existence of counterfeit machines allows the individuals who want to have the tattoo on their body to choose the machine rather than the traditional knocking or hand tapping methods that have been practised ever since. This is due to the hand tapping method is more painful and takes a long time to finish completely rather than using an enumerator.

Unfortunately, the new generation prefers contemporary and personal motifs. They prefer to copy their own names or motifs that have been designed according to their taste. This has led to the perspective of other societies on the traditional tattoo designs to turn negative. The symbols of grandeur, identity, staminate, beauty, and expertise of the Kayan-Kenyah community have turned into an impression of being a symbol of gangsterism and crimes. Traditional tattoo designs must be kept from being extinct and eventually forgotten by the future generations. Through this study, it is hoped that the traditional tattoo motif arts will continue to be preserved and cherished by the community inside and outside of the country, especially the generation of the Kayan-Kenyah community itself in the future.

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