

Survival on the Skin: Communicating, Continuity and Preservation of the Iban Tattoo

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Abstract

Tattoo has been an integral part of the cultural identity of Iban in Sarawak. Every stroke, line and design of the tattoo communicate meaning for the Ibans, which they relate to mystical power to protect them. Jumbo and Bebit (2019) ascertained that these tattoos denote strength, achievement, spiritualism and a deep sense of aesthetic, all at once. With the pervasiveness of technology and globalization, tattoo has now become a piece of modern art on the skin sans the history and meaning to these motifs. Since 1960s, researchers continue to express concerns on Iban tattoo preservation, despite being skeptical on the authenticity of the Iban tattoo. Using a qualitative method, it determines the concepts and variables that could describe and support the phenomenon. Informants to the in-depth interview were selected using the purposive, non-probability sampling. It is hoped that this paper in progress will become primarily significant to the Iban community as it explores the ways the Iban intend to communicate its cultural identity to the younger generation; and at the same time, identifies the practices that ensure the continuity and preservation of its cultural heritage.

Keywords: continuity, cultural identity, Iban tattoo, preservation

Introduction and Background

Iban is the major ethnic group totaling 30.3% of 2.81 million populations in Sarawak (Department of Statistics, 2011). They are described as fearless, ethnocentric, and historically, these fierce warriors are known for their head-hunting customs (Schwenk, 1975). The Iban carries with them a cultural heritage that has been passed on from generation to generation through oral literature—the Iban tattoo. Much concerned about the fragility of the oral literature has been raised by Osup (2019, p. 132), when she states that “oral literature must be preserved in order to maintain its roots to the past as well as their dignity and provides information about the traditional Iban life.”

The loss of oral literature would significantly mean the loss of Iban tattoos. This is because tattooing in Iban community relies on storytelling by the older generation. Kiyai and Tugang (2020) describe the Iban’s culture by its two elements that have great significance until today: its heritage and heirloom. They posit that heritage refers to the local skills, belief and aesthetic bestowed by the *Petara* (God) to the Iban; while heirloom is the materialistic things that belongs to an individual such as inheritance. The Iban tattoo is considered by Iban as the prominent cultural heritage. Having a strong belief on the Iban tattoo, it represents their identity that places them in a higher position in the community. It also translates into meaningful depiction of stories of their forefathers that remain in the memory of the elder Ibans.

Tattooing is not a new concept. In fact, its existence can be traced back to 1771. This practice becomes popular among British Lieutenant Cook and his men when they were travelling to the South Pacific (Bailey, 2012). Oxford Learners Dictionary (n.d.) defined tattoo as a picture or design that is marked permanently on a

person's skin by making small holes in the skin with a needle and filling them with coloured ink. This description is supported by De Mello (2014) when he posits that tattooing is the insertion of pigment into the skin to form a decorative design and it is a permanent art on the body. The art of tattooing consists of the artist and the body as the canvas for motifs.

Tattoos and afterlife are related to many cultures globally (De Mello, 2014), and this includes the Iban culture. Sellato (1992, as cited in Tagie et al., 2020) explained that the Iban strongly believe the spirits live in them; and the tattoo motifs on their body are a powerful energy that will protect them. To the Ibans, tattooing involves mythical, ritual and social elements. The hand tattoo is described to represent the social status in the Iban community culture, and it is also an important element after death. For the Iban, the hand tattoos illuminate, and it serves as a guide to the hereafter (Scheinfeld, 2007). *Maligang*, the spirit guarding the river of the dead, would check for the tattoo that gave to the soul the right to cross the river of the dead. According to Sandin (1980, as cited in Tagie et al., 2020), this mythical element is transcended through the story of *Gendup*, an Iban who was taken to the spiritual world. *Gendup* was so fascinated by the spirit tattoos that when he was released, he brought back this knowledge of tattooing and started this art.

The process of tattooing as explained by Kalum, (as cited in Sarawak Tourism Board, 2020), that historically the ink used was made from soot and mixed with sugar cane juice and left to ferment. Today, the modern ink is used in tattoos; however, Kalum reiterated that the hand tapping method remains the same.

Every stroke and line represent a story in the life of an Iban (Sarawak Tourism Board, 2020). The life journey of one man is embedded in the tattoo that he has on his body. Only when he dies the story of his life dies with him (Robinsonmike, 2014). According to Robinsonmike, the Iban tattoo can be described as a 'body jewellery' and not everyone can obtain a tattoo. Further, it is sacred, and you must earn it. He also posits that every design and motif tell a story of great achievements.

Krutak (2012) also agrees on the "body jewellery." He describes the Iban tattoo as articulation of symbols that transcribe the ideologies of the existence of human on a living canvas of a human flesh. He explained that the *tengulun* motif is exclusively for men who have taken heads and the motif is tattooed at the bottom thumb. He further explained that tattoo for Iban women is a motif *Kala Tumpa* and its symbolises their capability of weaving the *pua kumbu* or *tikai buah*. *Kala* (scorpion motif) and *kemebai* (centipede) is tattooed from the wrist almost to the elbow, both motifs are known as *Kala Tumpa*. However, girls with a *Kala Tumpa* tattooed have a higher social status than the regular Iban women because this tattoo symbolises the knowledge of weaving *pua kumbu* that is passed down from generation to generation.

The '*Bungai Terung*' which translates to egg-plant flower motif symbolises the *bejalai* custom among the Iban community. *Bejalai* means 'to go on a journey.' The *Bungai Terung*, the first tattoo for the male Iban symbolises coming of age which marks the passage of a boy into manhood. The *Bungai Terung* has a spiral at the centre of the eggplant flower, known as *Tali Nyawa*, which means the rope of life and is identical to the underside of which it represents the beginning of a new life. According to Jumbo and Bebit (2019), the *bejalai* tattoo is worn on the shoulders before he goes on his *bejalai* or walkabout. Schwenk (1975) described the *bejalai* tattoo as a very important institution socially and economically. He posits that this tattoo can only be prescribed to a man if he has accomplished the *bejalai*. When a young male reach puberty, he is expected to leave his home on an adventure. Today, the *bejalai* for the Iban symbolises their globe-trotting adventure.

In a YouTube documentary *The Vanishing Tattoo* (2014), Iban tattooist Eddie Simon has raised a concern among the younger generation's preference of tattoos. He believes the traditional Iban tattoo must be instilled among today's generation as it signifies the pride of the people. His documentary video questions this generation's modern and westernized preference of tattoo, which is indicative of lack of interest in traditional tattoo motifs. Accordingly, people choose to be tattooed for cosmetic, sentimental, memorial, religious reasons to symbolize their belonging to groups, including criminal gangs, ethnic groups or specific subcultures (Moorthy et al., 2015).

Tagie et al. (2020) also expressed his concern by pointing to urbanisation that could pose a threat to the tattooing culture. Accordingly, the new generation no longer practices the traditional way of life. Another concern is the society's stigma on tattoo. In an interview with Berita Harian (2016), Kalum mentioned that many consider tattoo as a negative influence towards the society. He reiterated that this perception must be altered so that the younger Iban generation can understand and appreciate Iban's tattoo as heritage and identity.

Statement of Problem

This descriptive study investigated on the diminishing of Iban's tattoo and how, if at all, the Iban community intend to communicate, continue and preserve their tattoos. In this investigation, two research questions were advanced:

1. How do the Iban community intend to communicate this cultural identity to the younger generation?
2. What are the efforts being made to ensure the continuity and preservation of this cultural heritage?

Research Objectives

This study determined the Iban community commitment in ensuring the significance of their cultural heritage is communicated, continued and preserved by the younger Iban generation.

1. To identify the determination by the Ibans in transmitting cultural heritage of the Iban Tattoo.
2. To determine if at all, there are efforts made by the Iban community to continue and preserve this cultural heritage.

Theoretical Framework

This research factored the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) in discussing the research findings. Hecht (1993) developed the Communication Theory of Identity by as part of a study to consider identity as a social phenomenon. This theory looks into the role of communication in the formation and maintenance of cultural identity. CTI's main focus is on the relationship between communication and identity. Hecht based his viewpoint on the notion that "identity is a *communicative process* where it involves the exchange of messages in which individual and the social environment interacts. Hecht has taken the position that communication is the process in the development of identity." (Hecht, 1993).

It is noted that the most important contribution of CTI, is its layered perspective of identity. The originator of CTI, conceptualised identity into four layers: personal, enacted, relational and communal. Other scholars in their research, described personal frame as "individual's self-concepts or self-images" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Eura Jung & Hecht, 2004). It is concerned about how one feels about and defines the self. This would be applied in this research when identifying oneself—as an Iban is a personality frame. While other theories describe the effects of communication on identity and how identity shapes communication and its interpretation, CTI posits that communication itself is identity. Hecht explained that the enacted frame is expressed through identity and social behavior. The enacted identity exhibited by the Iban community, i.e. communication about their tattoo heritage to the others namely the younger generation will be examined in this research. The cultural settings confirmed the relational frame. CTI describes this frame as co-created through roles and social interactions with others i.e. how people view them (ascribed relational identity). Lastly, the communal frame is described as a group of people that collectively bond together. It is a general or collective agreement of what defines a group of people in a society (Hecht & Lu, 2014). This research hopes to identify if the tattoo heritage binds the Iban community as 'one' communal identity.

Methodology

This paper investigated this social phenomenon using qualitative design. Employing an in-depth interview instrument, this study investigated into the informants' self-expression and how this community will communicate and preserve the tattoo heritage. To ensure consistency, a single enumerator conducted the interview separately using the same set of self-made questionnaires. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the same enumerator. Eight respondents were interviewed; two of them are traditional Iban tattoo artists. Using non-probability purposive sampling, the participants are individual Iban or with Iban lineage. The interview took place in Kuching, Sarawak.

Summary of Findings

All informants expressed themselves to be an Iban first then only Sarawakian. All, except one informant, agreed that traditional art of tattooing and tattoos represents the identities of Iban. One informant felt very strongly that there is other cultural heritage that represents the identity of Iban. While two informants described tattoos as an art, not culture. Other Ibans strongly felt that tattoo is a culture that describes the life achievements and status of the Iban community. Both tattooists stated strongly that they were very passionate towards this culture. They couldn't imagine doing anything else apart from tattooing. One tattooist mentioned that he does tattooing of traditional Iban designs out of nostalgia and to carry out the tradition of the elders. All informants except one, agreed that Iban tattoos are significant to the Iban community. One informant mentioned that if he meets a person overseas who has Iban Tattoo, he will approach the person and they will have a conversation in Iban language.

Three of the respondents did not have body tattoos. Two of the three mentioned that they were not ready and felt that it is not time for them to get the tattoos. They felt that to carry Iban tattoos you must have done some significant achievements in your life. One informant mentioned that you must know the meaning and message of the intended tattoo before you wear them. However, they reiterated that they will be one day, when the time comes and when they are ready, have at least one Iban motif tattooed on their body. They would prefer to have the *bejalai* tattoo i.e. *bungai terung*. The other non-bodied tattoo informant has no opinion on this matter.

Among the respondents, only one had no clue of the history of the tattoos. She said that she decided to have tattoos because she likes the designs and motifs. She reiterated that she was also inspired by her father's tattoos. She grew up observing the many tattoos that her father had on his body. However, she said that she is clueless what Iban tattoos represent.

Six informants felt that the art of Iban tattooing and tattoos are dying. One informant mentioned that even in longhouses only the elders have tattoos. The younger Ibans do not carry with them meaningful tattoos, but only modern tattoos which do not represent the Iban identity. Agreeing with this, another informant posited that the tattoo culture will die if no one practices it. He reiterated that this culture is transmitted through oral culture. Both tattooists also felt that it is "dead". They both voiced their concern that "as long as the person lives, this heritage will remain alive but once they die, they will carry this heritage with them. This is because there are no documented literatures on this cultural heritage." Kalum and Unau (personal communication, January 10th, 2020)

They posited that "in order for Iban tattoo to survive, generation to generation must be tattooed to continue our identity." Kalum and Unau (personal communication, January 10th, 2020) And this according to them is what they are trying to do to keep the culture for the younger generation. Hence, all the informants agreed that this cultural heritage should be preserved to allow the continuity of this culture to the younger generation.

Conclusion

The Iban community is proud of their traditional tattoo as their tattoos represents their identity. The knowledge of this cultural heritage is important to them as it expresses their status and great achievements. The personality frame is reflected in the way they take pride to be identified as Iban through the tattoos. They are united on their willingness to preserve this cultural heritage. It can be seen here that efforts to preserve and continue this identity is reflected in the intention of the Iban community. The younger generation is encouraged to ink Iban tattoo through observing their parents or elders' practices. However, the new generation is only willing to ink tattoos when they have achieved something significant in their lives. The determination to transmit this culture can only succeed when the Ibans themselves are willing to accept and carry forward this tradition.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, below are some recommendations that can be observed towards the preservation and continuity of the Iban Tattoo as the cultural identity of the Iban community.

1. There must be a clear policy by the Sarawak government to create awareness among the younger generation on Iban tattoo. This hopes to eliminate the stigma that people hold on tattoos. It must emphasize that the referred tattoos are essential to a living yet dying culture of the Iban community that greatly needs support for it to survive.
2. Heads of the longhouses need to play a more significant role in preserving Iban's identity by educating and encouraging the younger generation to wear the Iban tattoos that have been handed down by family ancestors.
3. An 'apprenticeship' must be encouraged among the young and potential Ibans to practice the art of tattooing identified with the culture. It is hoped that this practice is capable to communicate and preserve the Iban identity.

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