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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A SCIENCE OF SIGNS STUDY ON THE IBAN *BUNGA TERUNG* AS: A CULTURAL IDENTITY

*Sonny Anak Jumpo and Mohammad Puad bin Bebit

Universiti Malaysia Sabah

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*Corresponding author:

Sonny Anak Jumpo

ABSTRACT

Tattoos add a perceived aesthetic value to the body of the wearer. In instances where tattoos are worn – by choice – to enhance the outer appearance of the wearer, they are a vivid expression of artistic freedom, individualism and even a mark of belonging. For the same reasons that their appearance becomes conspicuous, tattoo wearers are vulnerable to receive negative first impressions. Tattoos are broadly divided into three types: those that are of tribal origins, those that are linked with criminal communities, and those that are forcefully given to mark prisoners or given as punishment. A well-known example of tribal tattoo are the ones worn by Borneo Ibans. This paper will explain the importance of semiotics studies by looking at the cultural value of a particular tribal tattoo. The *bunga terung* is an Iban tattoo that a man will get when he goes for *bejalai*, a journey comparable to a walkabout. The theory of semiotics and representation by Charles Sanders Peirce will cover the knowledge process towards understanding the *bunga terung*. This research will enable us to differentiate between a tattoo that represents a particular indigenous community and a tattoo that represents a criminal one.

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INTRODUCTION

Tattoos are used for different purposes, such as tribal markings, symbols to pay tribute to the loss of a loved one, or to wear symbols with criminal connotations. Interestingly, cosmetic tattooing has become popular in recent years. This permanent makeup can be used for eyebrow enhancement, outlining or filling-in of the lips, and as a permanent form of eyeliner. In today's popular culture, tattoos have had a resurgence in popularity among all types of people in all different levels of society. Although tattoos are more widely accepted in our culture today than in the past, there is still room for change. The reasons why people get the tattoos can be a very interesting topic of conversation – especially when the tattoos portray portraits of people, popular culture, or are of non-English words like Sanskrit or Japanese, or even Latin. Both tattooing and body piercing go back centuries but was not universal. Tattooing exists today very much as an artform, with highly skilled artists easily accessible and able to tattoo just about anything the wearer desires. The skill and craftsmanship are often outstanding. Take Borneo tattoos for example. Both men and women both sport intricate and beautiful tattoos on their bodies, denoting strength, mysticism, spiritualism, and a deep sense of aesthetics all at once.

A sight of an elderly Borneo tribe member today in tattooed glory is a magnificent sight to behold. A unique rosette motif of Borneo deserves to be put under thorough investigation, and that is the *bunga terung*, or eggplant flower. The *bunga terung* has become synonymous with Borneo tattoo, and tattoo enthusiasts the world over travel specifically to Borneo to be tattooed (using machine or traditional methods) by indigenous artists at traditional longhouses. The *bunga terung* is the Iban version of the Kayans *mata aso* (EB Haddon, 1905). Even though the tribe with the richest culture in tattoo, and is also the tribe with which the other Borneo tribes owe their tattoo culture to, the Kayans have been taken over by the Ibans: in terms of top-of-mind awareness about Borneo tattoo, and in terms of beautiful works of art. There are a few reasons for this. The Ibans, have over the years improved upon, and in a way, altered the designs of the Kayans. In this process of 'commercialization', Iban artists have improved their skills as tattoo artists and carvers, where both men and women have proven to be masters of their art. Combined with them assimilating neighboring longhouses or villages and imposing their newer forms of art, their artistic influence have spread out to other smaller tribes.

The origins of the *bunga terung*, new designs based on that understanding can be innovated to populate the growing demand for *bunga terung* tattoos. Also, because the *bunga terung* is such an iconic Borneo motif, there is a lack of understanding about its evolution. It is human nature to wonder about a tattoo design seen on another person's skin, and most often an opener for a conversation. While settling the asker's curiosity, new knowledge is transferred from the tattoo wearer to the asker. If the wearer is correct in his knowledge of his own tattoo, then the asker would receive accurate information, and would possibly disseminate the same information. However, if the wearer is ignorant or misinformed about the significance of his own tattoo, then the wrong information will be disseminated. It is a growing problem today for fast and easy information pulled from with the vast, yet polluted, source that is the internet. Tattoo wearers obtain exotic tattoo motifs too casually, mostly for aesthetic reasons. There is a danger that widespread wearing of the *bunga terung* in the wrong context will dilute its original significance even more, and this motif is at risk of becoming just another cliché tattoo motif of the new generation. The society at large has fearful feelings towards a person with visible tattoos. A tattoo wearer is perceived to have gang relations, has a criminal background, is into the occult, or has anti-social tendencies. Wearers of tribal tattoos, especially if the wearers are of indigenous origins, wear tattoos for cultural and preservation reason, and not any other. Even so, there are many from the younger generation today who wear tattoos for self-expression, individualism, artistic expression, and for cultural appreciation. These wearers should not be viewed in a negative light. The stereotype of people with tattoos having villainous qualities appears in the movie *XXX* (2002), with Vin Diesel playing the main character of Xander Cage. There was a scene where Agent Augustus Eugene Gibbons (Samuel L. Jackson) at 29'5" of the movie referring to criminals as "dangerous, dirty, tattooed, uncivilized.

Your kind of people". There is no criticism towards the movie but at that line that connotes people with tattoos are linked with bad people or bad behavior. In the comedy movie from Hong Kong, *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), it portrays the exclusivity and fearsomeness of a particular crime gang who have a pair of crossed axes on their chests. A main plot point in that movie involved the main protagonists sporting fake axe tattoos so that they can extort and bully a group of apartment dwellers. Another example movie is *Eastern Promises* (2007). In this movie Viggo Mortenson's character sport Russian star tattoo motifs to denote his rank in the Russian mafia. Biker gangs also contribute to the impression that wearing a tattoo is a sign of bad behavior. For example, the Hell angels, they are known for organized criminal activities like extortion, arms dealing and drug trafficking according to britainca.com. In the *Wild Hogs* (2007), when William H. Macy's character mentions that he can fit into the biker community because he has a tattoo, at 18'30" in the movie. This paper will explain the importance of semiotics studies by looking at the cultural value of a particular tribal tattoo. The *bunga terung* is an Iban tattoo that a man will get when he goes for *bejalai*, a journey comparable to a walkabout. The theory of semiotics and representation by Charles Sanders Peirce will cover the knowledge process towards understanding the *bunga terung*. This research will enable us to differentiate between a tattoo that represents a particular indigenous community and a tattoo that represents a criminal one. The objective of this paper is 1) to explain semiotically the meaning and significant of *bunga*

terung, 2) to explain the value of *bunga terung* to the readers and 3) to make sure to the public that *bunga terung* is a cultural identity with no link with crime gangs whatsoever.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of linguistic unit of Sign, Signifier and Signified can be explained as thus: a Sign is comprised of a Signifier (word or image) and the Signified (mental concept from interpreting the Signifier). The relationship of the Signifier and Signified is subjective in nature, where the Signifier may produce varying forms of the Signified. In turn, the Signified meaning can be derived from varying forms of Signifiers.

The objective of this research is:

- To explain semiotically the meaning and significant of *bunga terung*.
- To explain the value of *bunga terung* to the readers.
- To make sure to the public that *bunga terung* is a cultural identity with no link with crime gangs whatsoever.

The data was gathered through surveys conducted at 3 areas. The first data collection was made in Kuching during the World Rainforest Music Festival 2010. The data was collected during the first and second day of the event. The second location was at George Town at Komtar complex and this collection was done for 2 days in December 2010. The third location was at Kinta City, Ipoh, taking 2 days in December 2010.

The questions were:

- Is tattoo bad? Yes/No
- Do you know what tribal tattoo is? Yes/No
- Do you know tribal tattoo is good tattoo? Yes/No
- Do you know the difference between Tribal and Gang tattoos? Yes/No
- 5. Are you aware that tribal tattoo has its ritual and has a good meaning? Yes/No
- 6. Tattoos are bad when it is worn by a convict. Agree/Disagree
- 7. Tattoos that we know today have significant links with gang/clans. Agree/ Disagree
- 8. Tattoo is a form of self-expressive art today. Agree/ Disagree
- 9. Tribal tattoos are no longer exclusively a ritual tattoo.
- 10. In your opinion, how will tattoo have a good image in the society?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the ground research, the response was not so encouraging in 2 locations (Penang and Ipoh). Most of the people interviewed were shocked there is someone like the researcher conducting research on the impact of tattoo in their society. A man, who introduced himself as Wan, told the researcher "for sure tattoo is negative in the Malay society". The research in Ipoh also provided a negative result where the people had the same negative thought. Results differed wildly in Sarawak. They welcomed the research idea, much like how Lars Krutak was welcomed when he did it before at the Sri Aman Division.

SEAPUMS2020



Picture 1. Clips from XXX when Xander Cage getting a new task from Agent Gibbons



Picture 2. Clips from Kung Fu Hustle (2004) when axe gang come to help



Picture 3. Clips from Eastern Promises (2007) New rank tattoo of a Russian gang



Picture 4. Clips from Wild Hogs (2007) when William H. Macy shows his tattoo and claims that he is a biker.

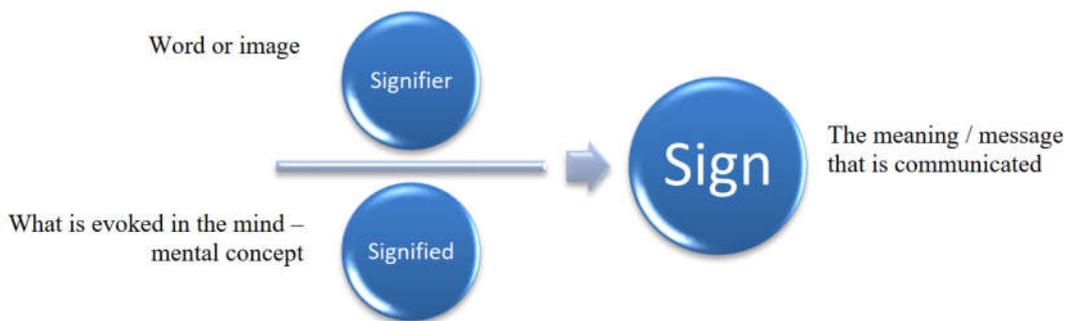


Diagram 1. Ferdinand De Saussure's Theory of Sign, Signifier and Signified (Saussure, 1959)

 Signifier	Is a sexually matured Iban male who is ready for new quests Sign
Is Iban Young man who has gone on <i>berjalai</i> Signified	

In Kuching Sarawak, the response was good with 60% of people view tattoos in a positive light. To question 1, they have answered that tattoo is not bad. To question 2-5, they have answered yes, showing that they have clear understanding of tribal tattoos, and their difference from gang tattoos. Answering disagree to question 6 & 7 (tattoos are bad when it worn by a convict, tattoos that we know today have significant link with gang/clan), they understand that tattoos act as life stories on one's body, with no other criminal meaning. Because of their exposure to the various forms of tattoos on the bodies of Kuching population, they answered 'agree' to questions 8 & 9 (tattoo is a form of self-expressive art today, tribal tattoos are no longer exclusively a ritual tattoo) signifies their acceptance and understanding that tattoo has become part of everyday, and is not something to be afraid of, but rather something that has become a heritage.



Diagram 4. A common Bunga Terung design

For the last part of the questionnaire, most were of option that the other population plus to Sarawak should be taught the significance of tribal tattoos and their difference from gang tattoos. With Penang being one of West Malaysia's center of arts and culture, one would expect the reaction to tattoos to be more positive. The result shows that up to 80% of tested subjects do not view tattoos and their wearers highly, linking tattoos with criminal activities and anti-social behavior. While in Ipoh Perak, the result show that 90% respondents are not open to tattoo wearing at all. It will be an uphill challenge to bring education to tattoo appreciation to this region.

The results that show that big majority of people from 2 places in peninsular Malaysia are not very aware of the tribal tattoos that we have in Borneo particularly. They look at tattoo as a synonym to gang or clan obligations for a person. Their knowledge level about tattoo is not very high when compared with those in Kuching. Tested people in Kuching already take tattoos in general for granted and rightly thinks that the tattoo is a ritual and gives supernatural power for an individual. The *bunga terung* is given to an Iban male who is considered old enough to go through a certain rite of passage. This rite of passage is the '*berjalai*', which means going on a journey to the next village. If we look at Saussure's theory of Sign, Signifier and Signified, the *bunga terung* Signifier is the black 8-petaled flower, and wearing it as a pair on both shoulders has the Signified meaning of going for *berjalai*. The *bunga terung* thus, is a Sign of an *iban* male who is *bujang* (attained adulthood). The *bunga terung* comprises 3 elements - the petals, the sepals, and the double spiral. According to J. Franken and S. Torfinn (1998) the leaves vary number from 4 to 9 according to the size of the tattoo. Instead of the sepals, Franken and Torfinn said they are thorns placed in between the petals. The double spiral is located in the middle as the heart of the *bunga terung*, where Franken and Torfinn identified as the '*tali nyawa*', or rope of life. According to Lars Krutak, the double spiral is a representation of the tadpole belly. An *iban* wearer of the *bunga terung* communicates to his community that he is sexually mature and is able to take care of himself. As such, he is also putting on display his readiness and eligibility to find a suitable companion or wife. The *bunga terung* is a unique symbol that represents the *iban* culture. For the wearer, it is akin to getting a badge for a new skill or achievement. The spiritual aspects of Iban tattoos are not delved into in this research. The various motifs and symbols that make up the beauty of Iban tattoo is a treasure trove of mystical lore and spiritual beliefs. Replete with rituals that make up its unique cultural heritage and identity, the Iban tattoo culture merits deeper investigation and study. The growing popularity of getting tattoos is because of many reasons. From genuine beliefs of endowing oneself with protective powers, as charms, as a mark, or as a means of posturing, there is a hunger for new tattoo designs.

The *bunga terung* therefore, is a perfect opportunity to innovate new designs. There are 3 things involved; 1) to take advantage of a segment of target audience who are unable to tell the different *bunga terung* designs apart and entice them with new designs, 2) to educate them at the same time about the true meaning of the *iban bunga terung*, and 3) to seize the opportunity to create a business to profit from the growing tattoo industry. Supported by the literature review, there are various rosette designs which can be found on the Kalimantan side of Borneo. A thorough study has not been conducted yet on those motifs, and there is opportunity to extend research area to Kalimantan, Indonesia to study the tribal tattoos within that area to gain new tattoo knowledge to innovate more *bunga terung* designs. By extending the research area to Kalimantan it is hope there will be a chance also trace the path of tattoo motif evolution from an anthropological-historical viewpoint. In the process, there is a goal to include discussions about the psycho / socio-psychological connotations and motivations of other tattoos that are not of Borneo tribal significance that are found to be worn by Borneo tribal people. Since tattoo has a very bad image on its meaning and application among the demographic selected in Peninsular Malaysia, the results of this study could be used to educate about the origins, history and appreciation of *bunga terung*. Online media will be implemented to propagate the popularity and knowledge of the Bunga Terung, along with a most welcomed side effect of further diffusing the extreme reactions of non-tattoo appreciators. From this study, it is confirmed that the most well-known Borneo tattoo motif today is the *bunga terung*, and from the literature review have found out the Bunga Terung is the Iban version of the Kayan 'Mata Aso'. As the tribe with the richest culture in tattoo, they are the ones who are lords of tattoos but sadly the Iban have taken the precedence because they are more numerous, accessible, and enterprising.

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