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PANTANG IBAN: A DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF IBAN TATTOOING¹**Steve Kurzman**

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INTRODUCTION

A noticeable upsurge in the popularity of tattooing has occurred in the Western world during the past decade. Many of the newer designs are monochromatic, abstract in shape, and more integrated into the body's musculature than 'traditional' Western flat plane tattoos. These are characteristics of what has been termed 'neo-tribalism', an avant-garde style which has enjoyed some of this recent popularity (Hardy, 1988). The new tribal designs come from a variety of sources but much of their original inspiration and influence was borrowed from the tattoos of the Iban and other Bornean peoples such as the Kayan and Kenyah.

While a study of the cross-cultural appeal and translation of the neo-tribal tattoos (and the current popular fascination with neo-primitivism) is certainly worthwhile, I was drawn to questions concerning the role(s) of the original tattoos in Bornean cultures. Do the Iban still tattoo? What is or was the significance of the designs which was lost with the cross-cultural translation? With these thoughts in mind I conducted fieldwork in Sarawak, East Malaysia for ten weeks during the winter of 1990-1. What I found, in short, is that the Iban no longer tattoo themselves with what we call 'traditional' Iban designs. In fact, if they tattoo at all, it is with Western designs. I met very few men younger than sixty years old wearing *pantang Iban* (Iban designs), and I expect that these designs will die with their wearers.

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This article has two objectives. The first is to provide a document of pre-Western Iban tattoos and the practice of tattooing through descriptive means. I realize that this appears to be pure Boasian salvage anthropology. I also acknowledge that the motives behind this mode of anthropology are questionable (Clifford, 1986: 112-113). But I do not claim to document authentic traditional Iban Culture in the form of their tattoos precisely because there is no concrete authenticity or tradition. According to Iban informants the practice of tattooing was borrowed from the *Orang Panggau* (Panggau people), a group of super-human culture heroes who reside in an alternate reality space called *Pangggau Libau* in Kalimantan, Indonesia. According to Western historical accounts the practice was borrowed from the Kayan and Kenyah peoples in the mid-19th century (Hose & McDougall, 1912: 273; Haddon, 1905: 114). So by any account Iban tattooing is not an anachronistic state of tradition, but a cultural discourse in transition. My second objective is to illustrate this point. I argue that Iban tattooing is the outcome of specific reasons and strategies that identify it as a cultural discourse. Furthermore, the changes occurring in Iban tattooing are discursive, and speak to us of changes in the aspects of culture related to the tattooing.

Ethnographic Background

The majority of Iban live in community structures called *rumah panjai* (longhouses), each composed of a series of *bilek* (family apartments). Longhouses

were usually elevated on stilts and constructed from wood in the past — ground level concrete and zinc roofed structures are now increasingly popular. Subsistence usually involves swidden (slash-and-burn) rice farming in hill, dry padi fields.

Tattooing was, and is, almost always done while on *bejalai*, a quest for adventure modeled after those of *Keling*, the best known and favorite of the *Orang Panggau*. The *Orang Panggau*, and especially *Keling*, are culture heroes in that they are the "Iban value system incarnate" (Sutlive, 1978: 100). *Keling* and his wife *Kumang* are the subject of many Iban stories and the basis for many Iban cultural traits. He taught them how to tattoo and how to find charms so they would be successful in hunting and warfare. Iban behavior is partially modelled after the *Orang Panggau*. Although Methodism and Roman Catholicism have largely replaced the pagan religion, the modern Iban pantheon includes aspects of both. Just as *Keling* left *Panggau Libau* to go *bejalai* in search of adventure, many Iban men leave after rice planting season for their own mortal version of *bejalai*.²

Technical Procedure of Tattooing

The most basic difference between the Iban and Western methods of tattooing is the technology utilized: the Iban use a pair of tapping sticks rather than an electric machine. The process is extremely painful, and braving the pain is an integral aspect of receiving a tattoo. The method described below is rarely used now — younger informants named the painfulness of the operation as the main deterrent. Western style tattoo studios in the cities provide faster, less painful services with a wider selection of designs. My description is largely based upon my own experience of receiving a pair of *bungai terong* (eggplant flowers), but also upon interviews with the tattoo artist and tattooed men.³

The instruments used are two wooden sticks: a shorter, thicker striker and a slightly longer, more slender stick for holding the needles. In the past, thorns were used for needles, but they have been replaced with steel sewing needles; the number of needles required varies depending on the size of the design. The needles are wrapped together using sewing thread, placed in a carved notch in the needle stick at a right angle, and then tied in place with thread.

The pigment used in tattooing has changed little over the years. The soot collected from burning *damar* (resin) has been replaced by soot collected from kerosene lamps. The soot preserves the integrity of the design and keeps it from 'bleeding' (spreading under the skin). It is sometimes mixed with Chinese ink to create a darker shade of black. The last ingredient added to the mixture is sugar water, which acts as a base and produces a paste-like consistency.

Formerly, the Iban used skillfully carved wooden blocks as stamps to place the design on the body of the recipient. The pigment was spread onto the wood block and then stamped on the body to provide a guiding stencil for the tattooer and facilitate the application of pigment. Whereas Western tattooers periodically dip the machine needles into the pigment to replenish the pigment resting in between the needles, the Iban method places the pigment on the body initially and then taps it into the recipient. The latter method is still used but ball point pens have replaced the wooden blocks as the method of stencilling the design. The blocks can now be seen only in art and souvenir shops in Kuching and in the Sarawak Museum.

The pigment is tapped into the recipient's body by steadying the needle stick on a cushion or pillow and rapidly, consistently tapping it with the striker. The needles ricochet into the skin, effectively hammering in the pigment. For larger designs,