

The Inked Life-Modern Dayak Tattooists

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Abstract

Tattoos and tattooing have a long history in Borneo. Much has been written about the uniqueness of Bornean tattoos and this is rightly so, for it is an important part of indigenous Dayak culture in Borneo. However, while the focus has mainly been on the traditional designs and preservation aspects of tattooing, not much is written about modern Dayak tattoo artists and their world. In this preliminary research paper we will look at the lives and experiences of contemporary Dayak tattooists, to explore what tattooing means to them-what motivations do they have in pursuing the art and how do they see themselves and the impact of the art that they created on their clients and ultimately themselves. Oral interviews were conducted to record and document the professional life and experiences of the tattoo artists. The preliminary data that was obtained indicated that far from dying, the art is still alive and there is a niche area of female tattooists, both Dayak and non-Dayak which should be explored.

Keywords: Tattoo,Dayak,Sarawak,Urban,Tradition

Introduction

The tradition of tattooing in Borneo goes back centuries. Amongst the Dayak peoples of Borneo tattooing was an important part of their cultural values. Amongst the Dayaks of Sarawak, the Iban, Kayan and Kenyah tribes were once the most heavily tattooed tribes. Tattoos denote a person's acceptance or initiation into a community, a sign of nobility (particularly amongst the women of the Kayan and Kenyah tribes, traditionally two of the most stratified societies in Sarawak), for curative or medicinal purposes, as marks of personal achievements and last but not least for aesthetic reasons. Much has been written about the art and tradition of tattooing in Borneo and most of these tend to focus on the "inevitable demise" of the tradition. While there has been concern that the art of tattooing amongst the Dayaks, there has been a resurgence of tattooing amongst the young generation of Dayaks, particularly those in the urban centres of Sarawak. These young urban Dayaks in essence continued with their tribal traditions not only

as part of their identity but also as a form of bonding. The rural to urban migrations amongst the Dayak groups in Sarawak have resulted in communities being formed in the urban areas that in a way mirror their tribal communities. Most young Dayaks today are urbanised because of this migration. In the 1980s, French sociologist Michel Maffesoli coined the term "urban tribes" to describe small groups of people defined by shared interests and lifestyle preferences around which modern societies are organised. He stated that:

“...the tribe in the strict sense of the term was a way of struggling together against the many forms of adversity so generously provided by the jungle. The area which a tribe had managed to tame was therefore an assurance both of survival and solidarity. Surely something similar is going on in those concrete jungles of the postmodern megapolis!” (Maffesoli, 2016)

There is a gradual shift of probable acceptance within the wider community that tattooing is a tradition and an art form that needs to be preserved and promoted. Much has been written about the uniqueness of Bornean tattoos and this is rightly so, for it is an important part of indigenous Dayak culture in Borneo. Lars Krutak through his writings and television appearances made the general public become aware of the uniqueness of Borneo's tribal tattoos. However, while the focus has mainly been on the traditional designs and preservation aspects of tattooing, not much is written about modern urban Dayak tattoo artists, their clientele, their world and their urban tribe. How does identity of an individual influence his/her perception over tattoos?

How do young Dayak individuals "consume" tattoos (what is the story behind getting tattoos)? This research in progress paper will try to examine modern urban Dayak tattooists in the city of Miri. Due to the Covid19 pandemic it has been impossible to conduct extensive field work and interviews due to the limitations put in place by the various Movement Control Orders (MCO) that had been implemented by the State and Federal authorities. However, before the MCO was implemented, interviews with three Dayak tattoo artists were done and this set of interviews will form the basis of this initial research in progress paper. One of the reasons why interviews are important for this project is because we want to orally record and preserve not only the experiences of the tattoo artists but to also let their literal voices be recorded for posterity and in essence, we want to continue the Dayak oral tradition, but with the assistance of modern technology to record the tattooists' oral testimonies. To this end it was decided to preliminarily focus on members of the Sarawak Body Arts Association (which was formed in 2013) and Kenarau Tattoo Community due to the ease of identifying tattoo artists who might be willing to participate in this research. There are of course tattooists who are independent, with no affiliations to any tattooing organisations and these will be looked at in the future.

Methodology

For the purposes of this paper, it was decided that the oral interview method would be used to record and document the life and experiences of the tattoo artists. The aim is for the artists themselves to speak, to talk about their experiences as tattooists. Because it is a primary source, an oral interview is not intended to present a final, verified, or "objective" narrative of events. For the purposes of this research paper a preliminary research on the tattooing environment in Miri was done and it was decided to focus on members of the Sarawak Body Arts Association, and three members of the association agreed to be interviewed. Before the interviews were conducted, the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the interviews, the general subjects and topics that would be covered, the time and venue of the interview and in what format would the interview be held. For the purposes of this research paper, an audio recorder and camera was used to record the sessions. A set of questions was prepared in advance and

was shown to the interviewees before and during the interview (to refresh their memories). Handwritten notes were also taken to supplement the audio-visual recordings.

Preliminary results

From the initial three interviews that had been completed before the MCOs took effect, we have learnt a few things. The three tattooists are undoubtedly proud of the fact that they are continuing an old tradition. Although there had been doubts from family and society about the longevity and success of their undertaking, the three artists have persevered in their art, with Thomson Sim being the most senior amongst the three. Thomson had been tattooing for over thirty years and he describes how public perceptions about not only traditional tattooing but also modern tattooing had changed significantly in the time period that he had started his career. He remarked that in the beginning when he first started his occupation as a tattooist in the 1980s, the sole tattoo studio in Miri consisted of only one studio located at Wisma Pelita or otherwise known as “Electra House” by Mirians. Most tattoo artists of that time period according to Thomson had to make do with home studios to operate their businesses. There were no professionally made tattooing machines available back then according to Thomson, with most tattooists relying on their creativity to create home-made tattooing machines using parts from remote controlled toy cars and disposable ink pens to create the machines.

It would be probably be a matter of interest to follow up if possible at a later time, about the processes of constructing these home-made tattooing machines to record these processes on film because these can also be regarded as a material culture of an urban sub culture. All three respondents also highlighted the fact that in the past, urban Dayaks with tattoos tend to hide their tattoos from the public, due to misconceptions society had about people with tattoos then. Tattoos were associated with backwardness, criminality and an underground sub culture back then. Religion and the authorities also frowned upon people with tattoos and to fit in most tattooed persons at the time hid their tattoos to improve their chances of employment and to avoid being ostracised by society. That perception has changed over the past twenty years, with tattooing and tattooists being largely accepted by mainstream society. Part of the reason could be due to exposure to the popularity of tattoos in other countries which then filtered back to Malaysia and Sarawak. Dayak youths are now proud of their tattoos and there is a resurgence of pride amongst the young about their tattooed Dayak identity. We also see the emergence of female Dayak and non-Dayak tattoo artists and the original intention of this research paper was also to interview them so that the views and opinions of tattooing amongst young urban Dayak youth would be inclusive in nature. Traditionally a male dominated field, it is interesting to see young Dayak and non-Dayak female tattooists plying their trade in Miri and other Sarawakian urban centres. What are their views on tattooing? How has been the communities’ response at seeing the presence of female tattooists? These are but two questions that we have and we hope to find answers for as the research progresses. It is important to us when we embarked on this research is to see this tradition to continue, to record the experiences of urban Dayak tattoo artists and not fall into the Orientalist view that romanticises the end of an ancient Dayak tradition the so called “these are the last tattoo artist” view that we see on television documentaries beamed through satellite television and the internet.

Conclusion

Tattooing has a long history amongst the Dayak peoples of Borneo. Even though there has been periods whereby the culture might seem to be in danger of being lost, this has not been the

case, because there have been groups of people who continued on the practise of tattooing, albeit hidden from mainstream society. The reasons for this is simple-public perceptions on tattooing thirty years ago were different from public perceptions now, which are more accepting of tattoos and tattooists. The danger of the art dying away was mostly exaggerated by mainly Western and local media, who likes to romanticised about a “lost culture”. We are hoping that we can discover more about the tattooing sub culture amongst urban Dayak youth and adults once conditions allows us to continue with our research and field work.

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Appendix A. Sample of Interview Questions

Inked Life interview questions

1. When did you start your career as a tattoo artist?
2. Were there many Dayak tattoo artists who were plying their trade when you first started?
3. Who or what influences you?
4. What has been your favourite moment in your career, so far?
5. What is your favourite part of being a Dayak tattoo artist?
6. Where do you see yourself in five years?
7. If you could describe your art in one word, what would it be?
8. Why did you get your tattoo(s)?
9. What is your tattoo of?
10. Does it have meaning to you? If so what meaning does it have?
11. Did you just get it to just get a tattoo?
12. Would you say that your tattoo is a way of you expressing yourself to the world, a way of communicating with the people around you to show who you are?
13. Are there any taboos linked to doing tattoos?
14. How do people usually react to seeing your tattoo(s) for the first time?
15. Do you feel criticised or shunned because you have a tattoo(s)?
16. Does your family and friends except them or no? Or do you not care how they feel about it in truth?
17. When getting a job have you been looked down on for having a tattoo(s)?
18. Do you feel accepted in public when people see you have a tattoo(s)?
19. Do people question your morals or character because you have a tattoo(s) to your face?
20. How do you view the recent renaissance of Dayak tattooing and tattoos?