

Tattoos: Art, Symbol, and History in Dayak Salako

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It is the product of qualitative research with a phenomenon approach that covers several stages of observation, deep interviews, and documentation. This qualitative work is done in the large Sajingan district, Sambas. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the meaning of tattoos worn by the Salako Dayak community in Sebunga Village, Aruk Hamlet, Sajingan Besar District, Sambas Regency. In the Dayak, tattoos get important attention inside, where the value and meaning behind the tattoo motif adorns the body of the Dayak. The tattoo on the dayak has a long history. Especially the traditional tattoo that is commonly known to the dayak people as the flower of eggplant, it is one of the tattoos in dayak Iban. In Dayak Salako's own well-known tattoos are a form of transcultural interaction with others who have tattoos. Views have also been given to tattoos in which the study includes two types of tattoos found in the Dayak Salako, it has a traditional motif and contemporary tattoos. According to the Salako Dayak group's history, there is no tradition of tattooing the body, but many Salako Dayak people now wear tattoos with various interpretations and perspectives on these tattoos. The tattoos worn by the Dayak Salako people are considered as people who have supernatural powers. And also, the traditional tattoo motif has a meaning that is believed by the Dayak tribe. Then, the contemporary tattoo motif also has a more subjective meaning for the Salako Dayak people. Contemporary tattoos are also considered a means of self-expression for the Salako Dayak people.

Keywords : dayak salako, meaning, symbol, tattoo

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INTRODUCTION

Humans will always be subjected to a variety of social and cultural phenomena that attempt to captivate their attention through various forms of creativity. Many people have recognized art life globally in the current digital era through information media, and one of the art products that has penetrated in various circles today is tattoos. Further investigation reveals that tattoos are regarded as works of art by celebrities in the United States and Hollywood artists. Given their public figure status, it is not surprising that they have a large influence in the introduction of tattoos to the general public ([Nabila, 2015](#)). In this case, the presence of celebrities makes tattoos a growing trend and raises new perspectives, namely tattoos as art.

The human body frequently employs several communication languages, with gestures attempting to express both verbally and nonverbally. Various intentions are communicated not only through words but also through body symbols such as tattoos. Some tattoos attempt to convey messages by engraving meaning on a person's body with painting specific motifs on it ([Sakulok, 2018](#)). This demonstrates how tattoos are used by the body to reveal a hidden message or story behind the motif. Tattoos are now described as an identity, a trend, a sign of community, and even a way of life ([Surachman & Nurdiansyah, 2020](#)). With all the freedom to express their opinions, Every tattooed body has a unique and different perspective. Tattoos, when viewed from a cultural standpoint, are the result of human culture as material objects that can be seen directly ([Zulaihah, 2021](#)). Within the tattoo, motif is hidden a game of art, sacred, and psychology to the body owner's identity. In its application, the tattoo motif serves the dual purpose of leaving an impression on the eye and conveying a message to each person who sees the tattoo. Tattoos are part of an explicit thing, where to find out in-depth meaning inside of it, one must communicate with tattoo owners, because simply looking at it is not enough.

Individuals from various backgrounds who have tattoos now dare to appear in public places, participate in activities, and socialize with the community without being concerned about the state of their tattooed body ([Irmayani, 2015](#)). The presence of a tattoo on a person's body causes certain impulses that influence social gestures, such as increased self-confidence. Tattoo motifs painted on a person's body have a different history; some consider it art, memories, or even an important

history that is immortalized through motifs based on the body owner's wishes and desires ([Gita, 2021](#)). In this case, the tattoo is a motif that implies a story within it, which becomes a memory that is immortalized and stored in the body in the form of certain motifs depending on what events have occurred to the owner of the body. Regardless of the various perspectives and judgements about tattoos in today's digital era, the Dayak people have their own distinctive motifs and perceptions about the tattoos on each part of their bodies. Not limited to just artistic, but there are values and meanings contained behind the paintings on their body parts, and there is always a specific intention why a tattoo is carved, and on which part of body the tattoo is carved ([Susanti et al., 2017](#)). In this case, it demonstrates that tattoos are not placed randomly, but rather on specific parts of the body. The choice of where the tattoo is carved and what motifs are carved determines the value of the tattooed body's owner. Tattoos with specific motifs found on a person's body have different meanings and methods of obtaining them depending on the struggles and experiences undergone. Because of the different meanings of each motif, it is not permitted to install tattoo motifs carelessly; instead, the meaning and motif must be synchronized. [Raihan \(2022\)](#) explains the significance of tattoo placement and motif selection, as each motif has a unique meaning and its placement has different values.

Dayak is a tribe in Indonesia that lives on the island of Borneo and whose life is closely related to customs and culture. Tattoos are mentioned in several Dayak sub-tribal traditions. Tattoos are considered sacred in the Dayak Iban culture ([Raihan, 2022](#)). The tattoo motifs used vary as well, it is said that the tattoo itself has existed since the time of the ancestors, the making of ancient tattoos is known to use tools and materials that are adapted to what is available in nature, all of the motifs that appear in Iban tattoos are a manifestation of nature and the spirits of ancestors. In the Dayak Iban culture known as Ngayau, the Ngayau perpetrators will be rewarded in the form of tattoos. In the Iban people, tattoos represent the meaning of struggle, where the acquisition of tattoos is obtained not in a freeway but hard work ([Fakhri & Kahija, 2015](#)). For the Iban people tattoos are not only used for aesthetic reasons, but tattoos are part of tradition, religion, and social status and or as a tribute to one's special abilities ([Pradita, 2013](#)).

This establishes a line between tattoos, which are currently defined differently by different levels of society. It is obvious that the tattoos engraved on the bodies of celebrities obtained only by visiting a

tattooist with motifs taken from nature or abstract portraits differ from the Salako Dayak tattoo motifs that exist with the use of traditional and modern motifs. Having a tattoo on a body part provides an interpretation of who a person is; tattoos reveal a specific identity that is obtained through a person's struggle in order for them to be recognized and awarded. Social life is constantly changing in society, particularly among the Salako people; now, the use of tattoos on Salako people is divided into two groups, namely those who use traditional motifs and those who use modern motifs. The phenomenon of tattoos in communities with no tattoo tradition are an example of external cultural adaptation. According to the Salako Dayak group's history, there is no tradition of tattooing the body, but many Salako Dayak people now wear tattoos with various interpretations and perspectives on these tattoos. The goal of this paper is to reveal the meanings of tattoos from the Dayak Salako people in Sebunga Village, Aruk Hamlet, Sajingan Besar District, Sambas Regency.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is the result of a qualitative study conducted in the Sajingan Besar sub-district of Sambas district in West Kalimantan province. To investigate socio-cultural phenomena, qualitative research is used. Researchers use qualitative research to describe something that occurs in detail and depth in a natural setting (natural) in accordance with the context, situation, and phenomena observed ([Wekke, 2019](#)). According to [Burhan Bungin \(2005\)](#) data collection techniques in qualitative research can be carried out in several steps, including observation, interviews, and documentation, all of which will be used as primary data.

First, data collection was carried out by participant observation, by direct observation of the socio-cultural life of the Salako Dayak group. In this study, participant-observation focused on tattoos worn by people from the Salako Dayak group in Sajingan Besar District.

In this study, researchers observed the phenomenon of the Salako Dayak community with tattoos by contacting several Salako Dayak communities in Sajingan Besar District and confirming that there are still people with tattoos in the area. Furthermore, researchers conducted interviews with three key informants. First, Mr. Abelnus, who is active as an environmental and cultural observer, to obtain information about the lives of Salako Dayak people who wear tattoos and Salako Dayak tattoos. Secondly, the Dayak Salako traditional

administrator, Mr. Sanjoyo, as *tuha kampong binua bantanan* to obtain information about the history, stories, and myths of tattoos in the Dayak Salako group. Finally, Mr Edus as one of the Salako Dayak people who wears tattoos with the aim of knowing the views of tattoos in his life. The researcher then conducted documentation to support the data obtained from the interviews. The tattoos worn by the Salako Dayak community were documented by researchers in the form of pictures.

Secondary data in the study is obtained through a literature review, which aims to supplement and strengthen the field data obtained ([Marzali, 2017](#)). Data from relevant previous research results, books, and research journals are used in the literature review ([Zakiah et al., 2019](#)). The data analysis in this study then went through several stages performed by researchers. According to ([Mustafa et al., 2020](#)), the stages are as follows:

1. In the first stage, researchers collected data by conducting in-depth interviews with three different informants. The first informant the researcher interviewed Mr Abelnus as an observer of Dayak Salako culture. Second, the researcher interviewed a traditional leader who is the leader of the traditional group of the Salako Dayak Tribe, namely Mr. Sanjoyo. Third, the interview was conducted with a tattoo user, Mr Edus.
2. The second stage of data reduction, researchers summarised, sorted, and focused the data from the interviews to fit the substance of the research. The data reduced in the form of tattoo history, tattoo motifs, and the views and meanings of tattoos in the Salako Dayak Community.
3. The third stage of data validation and interpretation, at this stage the interview data that has been reduced is then checked again for truth and validity to the informant. In this process, the results of traditional tattoo motifs worn by Salako Dayak people were checked for truth and meaning at the Institut Dayakologi Pontianak. This process is done so that the interpretation does not get out of context.
4. The fourth and final stage of data presentation. Researchers present data in narrative form after data validation. The writing is formatted to meet the requirements of scientific article

publication.

Researchers also used a phenomenological approach to further investigate the phenomenon of tattoos in the Salako Dayak community. Researchers can analyse the experiences of cultural actors that appear in the perpetrators' consciousness using the phenomenological approach ([Raco & Tanod, 2012](#)). Especially in this study, which looks at the phenomenon of the Salako Dayak community with tattoos, being a study that has its own place, it is intended to look at the tattoos worn by the Salako Dayak people on the current day.

When discussing modernization in a social and cultural context, the concept of "*social change and culture*" is very appropriate. The reason for this is that cultures change over time, allowing the essence of their purity to be increasingly eroded in meaning and philosophy. In particular, the phenomenon of tattoos in the Salako Dayak community, with some tattoos originating from other Dayak subgroups. The influence of modernisation and socio-cultural change is also inextricably linked to humans as cultural producers. In his book, [Tylor \(2014\)](#) defines culture as a complex whole that contains knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, abilities, and habits acquired by humans as members of society. This means that modernisation is a type of human culture in which more complex humans adjust to their own needs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

History and Story of Tattoos for Dayak Salako

Sajingan Besar District is geographically adjacent to Malaysia, and many socio-cultural phenomena occur there. [Praptantya and Listyaningrum \(2018\)](#) study, Dialectics of Tradition in the Dayak Bakati' Community of Sebunga Village, Sambas Regency, is one of them. The findings revealed that the phenomenon of Dayak community identity in Sajingan Besar District on the Indonesia-Malaysia border is defined by local traditions and rituals that are still practised. In this case, the phenomenon occurs particularly in the Salako Dayak people as one of the border Dayak tribes, where the prevalence of body tattooing is obtained as a result of the association between the Dayak Iban and Salako Dayak communities. Tattoos, for the Dayak Iban, contain a deep philosophy of their ancestral beliefs and traditions. Tattoos are something that is required in order for Dayak Iban people to feel validated as Ibans ([Fakhri & Kahija, 2015](#)).

Community life in border areas that directly intersect with neighbouring countries' territory

frequently gives rise to phenomena that cross state borders territorially (transnational). The Salako Dayak tattoo phenomenon is the result of cross-cultural interactions with the Iban Dayak people (Malaysia), who traditionally have tattoos. Based on the results of interviews with informants, particularly Mr Abelnus (33 years old), a member of the Dayak Salako tribe. He stated that tattooing the body was not a Dayak Salako tradition, but that tattoos began to be recognized by the Dayak Salako community over time. Tattoos worn by Salako Dayak people are also considered to be part of their Dayak identity.

"Tattooing is not a tradition among the Salako Dayak people. We Salako Dayaks, on the other hand, are familiar with tattoos, and some of us have tattoos on our bodies. Dayak people are well-known for their knowledge (supernatural powers), and those who possess these abilities are often tattooed on their bodies." (Interview Abelnus 2022)

Mr Sanjoyo, who became one of the customary administrators in Binua Bantan (customary administrative area), also provided additional information about Salako Dayak tattoos. In his life, he is someone who understands the Salako Dayak customs and culture. Pak Sanjoyo is known as Tuha kampong by the Salako Dayak community, and he frequently served and participated in Salako Dayak rituals in Sasak hamlet. According to him, the Salako Dayak people wear tattoos for a variety of reasons, including those who believe they have magical/supernatural powers, as well as those who believe they are part of a trend or to express art and themselves.

"The tattoos popular among Salako Dayaks in this district (Sajingan Besar) are not indigenous to us (Salako Dayak). For example, I got this tattoo when I was young and often followed my friends out to look authoritative during gatherings. However, there are some people here who have tattoos as a symbol of their knowledge (supernatural powers)." (Interview Sanjoyo, 2022).

Humans and culture are inseparable foundations for ideas. The pouring of these ideas into a physical form that can be seen and become art is contained within cultural elements such as knowledge systems, religion, language, livelihood systems, social organisation, and technological systems ([Koentjaraningrat, 2016](#)). The tattoos worn by the Dayak people are undoubtedly works of art that are unique to the Dayak people. Tattoos are a tradition

in the Kalimantan Dayak community, according to [Santi \(2021\)](#), tattoos have significant meanings for their owners. Every tattoo painted on the body is a symbol of one's identity to the Dayak social stratification ([Raihan, 2022](#)). Tattoos are also a way for the Dayak community to recognise and honour someone who has made an effort.

One study that looked at Dayak tattoos was conducted by [Leonaldy, Ismunandar, Imma \(2015\)](#). In his study titled Dayak Motifs. The results show that the motifs popular among the Dayak tribe are immortalised in tattoos engraved on the Dayak people's bodies.

1. *bunga terong* tattoos. This motif is one of many that Dayak people in West Kalimantan have discovered and used. The *bunga terong* tattoo is thought to have originated in the Dayak Iban community. Tattoos of people with *bunga terong* are a source of pride for the Dayak Iban people ([Sepa et al., 2019](#)). It is said to be a symbol of pride because in ancient times, an Iban who had travelled or had done Pengayauan (head hunting) would wear it.
2. The *pakis* tattoo motif represents eternal life. The *pakis* motif represents a life philosophy for the Dayak Iban people, who believe that one must think clearly in order for life to move forward and that one should not be big-hearted or envious ([Leonaldy; Ismunandar; Imma, 2015](#)).

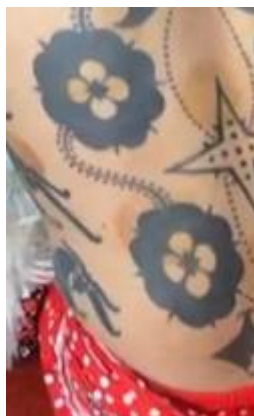


Figure 1. *Bunga Terong* Tattoos,
(Source : Research Documentation)



Figure 2. *Pakis* Tattoos,
(Source: Institut Dayakologi Pontianak)

Tattoos Symbolising Mystical Powers and Self Expression

Some Indonesian tribes still believe in supernatural powers. In Barru Regency, the To Balo tribe is known for being resistant to fire and sharp weapons ([Subair & Nur, 2022](#)). Banten debus art is also a form of human endurance against fire and sharp iron ([Hudaeri, 2010](#)). Beliefs in mystical things have existed since ancient times in relation to existing myths that continue to be believed in by some groups of people ([Wibawa et al., 2023](#)). Similarly, the Salako Dayak people believe that people with tattoos have supernatural powers. Mr Abelnus stated in the interview that in the past, Salako Dayak people who wore traditional tattoos had supernatural powers and were not careless about getting tattoos.

“Back in the day, old people's tattoos were known as yellow iron tattoos, so yellow iron would be planted in the body and then a motif would be created using Turih (traditional tattooing method). People who did not have the strength (supernatural power) did not dare to tattoo themselves in ancient times because if they had tattoos, they would be tested to prove their strength. “People who do not have supernatural abilities will not dare to get tattoos. So, if someone has a tattoo, he is not an arbitrary person, it means that something (supernatural) has been planted on his body.” (Interview Abelnus 2022).

In this case, it was discovered that traditional tattoos are regarded as a sacred symbol of a person's supernatural powers by the Dayak Salako people. The traditional tattoo motifs worn by the Salako Dayak people are from Dayak Iban. Motifs such as *bunga teorng* and *pakis* motifs are manifestations of nature, then for *kamang* motifs are manifestations of the spirits of Dayak ancestors. This demonstrates that tattoos have a connection between humans, the natural environment, and ancestral spirits. This

means that tattoos are a sacred form recognized by everyone in the group (ethnic groups). Tattoos have high aesthetic and artistic values in addition to representing the symbol of supernatural power. Tattoos are also a result of knowledge of art culture, which is a value to maintaining cultural progress (Wijayanti, 2019). Tattoos worn by the Salako Dayak people are a form of self-expression and art in this case. Mr Abelnus stated this during the interview.

“Another form of meaning in terms of tattoos for the Dayak Salako indigenous tribe is also a form of appreciation in art, as tattoos have become one of the characteristics of the Dayak community, especially in this modern era, where anyone can and may have a tattoo without having to migrate or have spiritual power” (Interview Abelnus 2022).

Tattoos, according to the findings of these interviews, are a form of self-expression and art because their use is subjective. In its meaning, a work created by someone using certain symbols is a manifestation of the meaning that the owner of the work wants to convey (Nuriarta, 2019). Tattoos worn by Salako Dayak people, in particular, show how tattoos have begun to transition from traditional to contemporary forms. This concept can describe the situation of Dayak Salako people who have freely worn tattoos because they like or are interested in tattoos but do not believe in their spiritual power. This phenomenon demonstrates that people are not bound by ethnic group symbols, meanings, and objects (community groups).



Figure 3. *Burung Elang (Eagle) Tattoos,*
(Source: Research Documentation)

The panorama that radiates from a person's body as a way for the Salako Dayak people to present themselves about what is in them, whether it's about travel, identity, artistic expression, or strength and charisma, and is then poured through tattoos. Migrants have a large influence on the existence of

tattoos in the Salako Dayak environment, where people who return from overseas have their bodies tattooed. Tattoos are also seen as a symbol of identity for those who have left the area.

Tattoos serve as a reminder of one's future life and the need to exist in society (Sia & Yunanto, 2019). Tattoos serve as a permanent record of Salako Dayak people's life experiences. There is also a desire to keep up with what is going on in society. Tattoos are worn by Dayak Salako people who used to migrate and travel to Malaysia. Mr Edus (47 years old) is one of those who recognized this. In his story, the tattoo on his body serves as a reminder that he once lived in Malaysia.

"When I was younger, I moved to a neighboring country, Malaysia, specifically the city of Kuching. While there, I photographed what I liked, which at the time was images of skulls, dragons, and other patterns. So I finally got these tattoos on my body. When I returned home from a trip abroad, I used to have a tattoo on my body as a reminder of where I had set foot in a particular location, because each motif engraved contained specific memories of my journey." (Interview Edus 2022).

"My tattoo was purposefully designed for inner fulfilment, and it contains no mystical power; I made it as a memory of my journey when I was younger. Where I lived abroad and the experiences I had while migrating" (Interview Edus 2022).

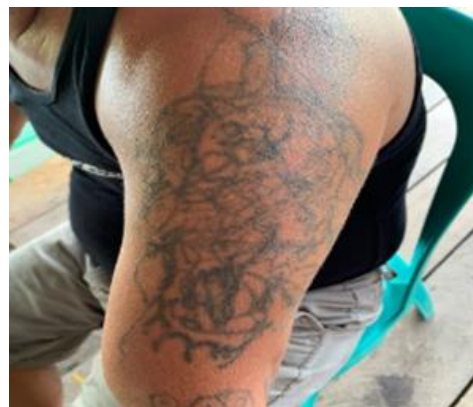


Figure 4. *Tengkorak (Skull) Tattoos,*
(Source: Research Documentation)

Tattoos Are The Result of Cultural Interaction

Previously, tattoos were used in the culture of the Dayak people as part of their traditions. As the times progressed, traditional tattoos experienced differences in meaning in the midst of society. But, as tattoos have evolved, so has their meaning, in addition to shifting motifs and meanings, there has

also been a shift in the tools and technology used in tattoo creation. Whereas the tools used are more modern and follow the times, using tattoo-making machines, it is difficult to find tattoos that still use traditional manufacturing techniques. Tattoos are now more adaptable, including in their meaning, depending on the person who is tattooed.

Being in contact with other Dayaks allows the Salako Dayaks to gain a broad understanding of other Dayak cultures. Salako Dayaks are open to other Dayak cultures and thus associate with Iban, Kenyah, and Bidayuh. Pak Abelnus explained that this interaction between fellow Dayaks has been going on for a long time.

"We know the Dayak Kenyah, Bidayuh, and Iban people. Since the Iban, Kenyah, and Bidayuh people know how we are, we know how they are and the various traditions that exist in them, such as the Ngayau tradition in the Dayak Iban people. Because of these traditions, the tattoos on the Iban have symbolic meanings about strength, rank/position." (Interview Abelnus 2022).

The differences between Salako Dayak and other Dayaks compel them to get to know one another and learn about the cultures that exist among them. This is evident in how they interact and are aware of each other's socio-cultural circumstances. It can also be seen how Salako people do not have tattoos but later recognized tattoos as a result of contact with other cultures.

"We know tattoos from the Iban, Kenyah, and Bidayuh people, but not from Dayak Salako. We learned how to make tattoos and how tattoos work from them, and we also learned how a person gets a tattoo. So we Salako people also use tattoos, and we can make and use tattoos by learning from Dayak Iban people and others." (Interview Edus 2022).

Interaction with Dayak Iban, Bidayuh, and Kenyah, as well as the Salako people's open attitude, exposed them to tattoo culture in their environment and inspired them to learn and paint tattoos on their bodies. This demonstrates that culture is acquired through learning and interaction.

CONCLUSION

The tattoos traditional worn by the Salako Dayak people are tattoos that follow the Dayak Iban tattoo motif, namely 1) *bunga terong* this tattoo means the struggle of those who have done pengayauan

(headhunting) and traveled far, 2) *pakis* this type of tattoo means that life is eternal, and 3) *kamang* with the meaning of the ancestral spirits of the Dayak people. These types of tattoos are from Dayak Iban. There are yellow iron tattoos that are made by turih and planted on the body. for the Salako Dayak people who use these traditional tattoos are considered to have mystical powers. The view of the Salako Dayak community shows that some of those who wear traditional tattoos are not random people because those with tattoos are considered to be related to the spirituality of the Dayak community.

Dayak Salako community tattoos also have modern nuances such as futuristic motifs or images. According to the findings of this study, contemporary tattoos worn by the Salako Dayak community are more subjective. This tattoo is a form of self-expression of a person against tattoos, where the purpose and meaning of the tattoo is made based on individual views.

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