



The Kayans: Ontology of their tattoos and its meanings

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Abstract

In Malaysia, the Kayans are just a minority group and have extensive traditional tattoos among the women folks. Anthropologists credited them as the pioneer of exquisite tattoos. The other tribes in Borneo got inspirations for their own body of art. This expansion of existing study attempts to make sense of the motifs and to address the intrinsic and extrinsic meanings of tattoo motifs and relate to their lives. Interviews among tattooed Kayan women folk provide the first-hand information about the implications of tattoos. The perspective of visual semiotics and semantics analysis ultimately shed light on the distant past.

Keywords: Kayan, Tattoo, Meaning, Motifs

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1.0 Introduction

In Malaysia, ethnic minority Kayan in Sarawak is known to have the most extensive traditional tattoo on the body; particularly women. Hose and McDougall (1912) in their book credited them as "the most and the best-tattooed tribe in Borneo, and it is to them that most of the other tribes in Borneo owe their knowledge of tattoo and the majority of designs" (p. 246). The rectified of the fact that the Kayans were the expert in tattoos. For them, the marking is their ties to their heritage (Ongie, 2012; Wong (as cited in Yuji, 2011)) and cultural identity (Mashman, 1989). Hence, they are very proud of their tattoos.

2.0 Literature Review

It was reported that there were approximately 15,000 Kayans in Baram basin (Marudi District Office, 2012) and another 10,000 in Belaga basin (Yussop, 2012). They are also synonymous with the term Orang Ulu; a term first introduced in Orang Ulu Customary Code of Fine (1950) published by Majlis Adat Istiadat Sarawak (Jalong, 2001, p. 4; Bibi, et al., 2009). The Kayan women covered themselves with a "complicated serial designs over the whole forearms, the backs of the hands, on the whole of the thighs to below the knees, and on the feet" (Hose and McDougall, 1912). This practice, however, was exclusively for the adult females only; never the

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men. In the olden days, tattooing amongst girl was common; every girl wanted to be tattooed (Hose, 1926; Lim, 1991). The design given by the artist was according to their social standing (Hose, 1926; Lim, 1991; Payne et al., 1994). Getting the tattoo was also to mark a girl's pubescence and her readiness to be an adult. Withstanding the pain was a source of pride to them. Failure to complete tattoo would be labelled a coward (Lim, 1991). According to the old Kayan belief (Hose and McDougall, 1912), they believed that their tattoos would be torches in the afterworld (Krutak, 2006b). A completely tattooed woman would have the privilege to bathe in the mythical river Telang Julan and be able to pick valuable articles in that river. Those without tattoo would remain in the dark.



Fig. 1: Subject with traditional design tattoo.

However, this form of art had ceased to exist (Thomas, 1968). Thomas (1968) stated that tattooing among them was quickly disappearing and no longer practised. Lars Krutak (2006) also concurred with the view and further indicated that they had stopped tattooing 50 years ago. One main reason was the prohibition by the church to discourage such practice (Krutak, 2006). Some also thought that having a tattoo is no longer apt these days (Lim, 1991). Lim (1991) also reported that many of the tattoo artists who were the 'gatekeeper' of this art had passed away without protégée; taking their art with them. Consequently, today only older women have these traditional tattoos (Lim, 1991). They will be the last generation to have such tattoos, as illustrated in Fig. 1 and 2.



Fig. 2: Kayan women with traditional tattoos on their hands.

On the other hand, there is a need to enlighten the public regarding traditional tattoos so as differentiate them from modern tattoos. There are negative perceptions of traditional tattoo. If one has the tattoo, and the tattoo is deemed backward and primitive (Kalum (as cited in Puthankattil, 2013). Jeremy also stated that Malaysian in general often misunderstood tattoos and tend to associate them to gangsterism, cult, or satanism (Arp, 2012). Wong (as cited in Yuji, 2011) believes that while the tattoo is taboo for many, the practice to be re-evaluated and studied with more emphasis on origins and ontology.

3.0 Methodology

In this research, a quantitative was favoured and heavily applied, where researchers conducted interviews to obtain information regarding the tattoo motifs. For sampling, due to the scarcity of Kayan women with the proper traditional tattoo, a snowball sampling was adopted where the initial interviewee, through their social contact, would nominate another one to be interviewed. Interviews conducted were unstructured interviews, where the direction of the conversation is determined by the respondent's initial reply to question (Collins, 2010). The crucial moment is because of the language barrier between interviewer and interviewees; and hearing complication of one interviewee due to old age. Therefore, during the interview, questions prepared changed based on the answers received. This procedure also allows interviewees to openly express their opinion more casually (Stuckey, 2013). A translator was used to overcome the language barrier.



Fig. 3: Interviewing one of the subjects, Ubong Emang, at her residence.

Visual analysis was conducted to study the tattoo motifs obtained from the interviewees by de-constructing the motifs from the design. Hence, a research plan was established in the grounded-theory structure, which requires strict procedures when analysing data. Grounded theory is by itself, a method where data collection and the process of coding data coincide through taxonomies (Scott, 2009; Collins, 2010). It allows researchers to postpone the writing on literature review until the data has been collected (Collins, 2010). This is a way to generate fresh perspectives on topic being researched, especially on areas of social life. Therefore, the process taken by the researchers requires a series of the systematic investigation by establishing a set of taxonomy.

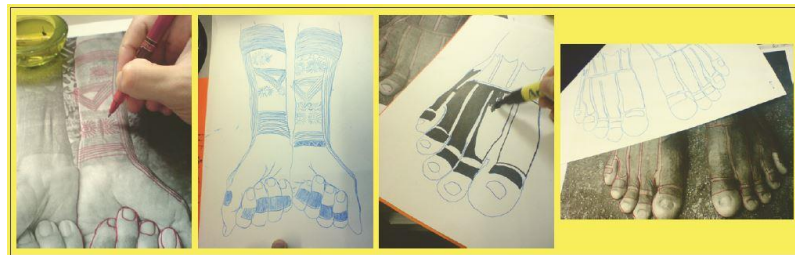


Fig. 4: Visual analysing the motifs by de-constructing the design.

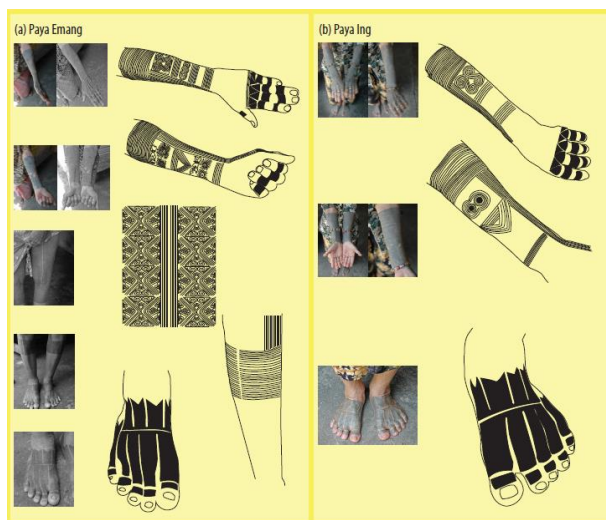


Fig. 5: Tattoo motifs were traced from photographs taken.

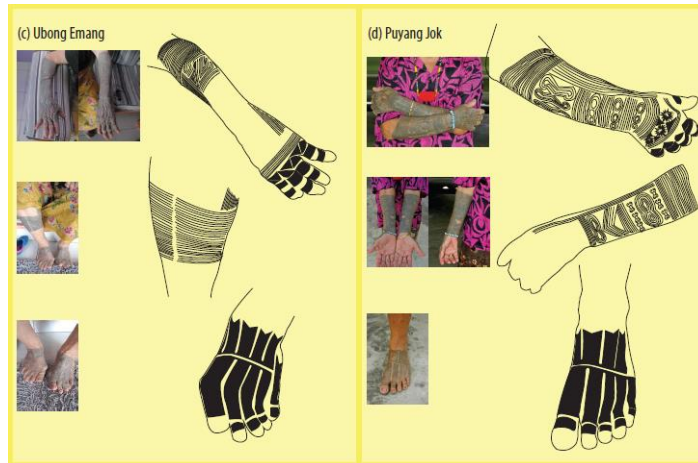


Fig. 6: Tattoo motifs were traced from photographs taken.

The next step taken was to categorise the samples according to parts of the body systematically and further de-constructed the tattoo into a smaller unit or motif. The aim is to look for similarity and difference among these motifs. This is also known as the pre-iconographic description (Collins, 2010).

4.0 Findings

The following are the results of the text-image-idea study, as shown in Table 1, 2 and 3. In Table 1, the wordings in native were translated to reveal the meanings. They were later analysed systematically through a structural-hermeneutical symbol analysis, in order to comprehend the image-text relationship as well as how they developed into tattoo motifs, as illustrated in Table 2 and 3.

Table 1: Translation and meanings

No	Motif (in native language)	Meaning (in the English Language)
1	<i>Selungan</i> (around the hands)	Band of rattan
2	<i>Song Irang</i>	Bamboo shoots
3	<i>Usung Dian</i>	The spike of durian fruit
4	<i>Tushun Tuva</i>	Bundles of Tuba Root; or <i>Derris Elliptica</i>
5	<i>Kalong Pakok</i>	Wild fern motif; or <i>Pteridophyta</i>
6	<i>Manok Wak</i>	An owl; or eyes of an Owl
7	<i>Dulung Haruk</i>	A bow of a boat
8	<i>Ji'an Manuk</i>	A bird's beak
9	<i>Beliling Bulan</i> (with two black spots)	Full moon, equinox
10	<i>Beliling Bulan</i> (with 3 round spots)	Regular full moon without equinox
11	<i>Butit Halap</i>	Belly of Halap fish; or <i>Barbus Bramoides</i>
12	<i>Akok</i>	N/A
13	<i>Ida Pat</i>	Four lines under
14	<i>Selingan</i> (around the shin)	Band of rattan
15	<i>Tedek Danau</i>	Muddy tattoo

In Table 1, the translation was done with the help of a translator and aided by cross-referencing with previous journals. Only motif no. Twelve could not be determined but was identified at an earlier study. Table 2 and 3 show images retrieved by utilising the translated words. In this process, only data with pictures could be processed; therefore, item 12, 13, and 14 could not be processed due to the absence of image reference. Table 4 is a semiotics analysis.

Table 2: The motif, the image and the concept. (Source: Google Images)

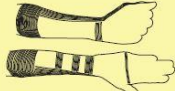


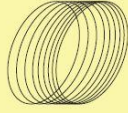


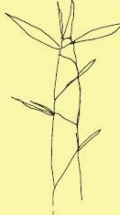





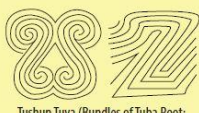


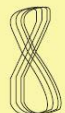

















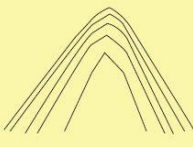





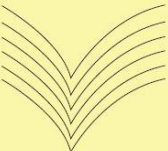

MOTIFS	IMAGES	IDEAS
 <p>Selungan (Band of Rattan)</p>		 
 <p>Song Irang (Bamboo shoots) (p. 247)</p>		 
 <p>Usong Dian (Durian pattern)</p>		 
 <p>Tushun Tuva (Bundles of Tuba Root; <i>Derris Elliptica</i>) (p. 256)</p>		   
 <p>Kalong Pakok (Wild Fern motif; <i>Pteridophyta</i>)</p>		     
 <p>Manok Wak (eyes Scops Owl) (p. 256)</p>		  
 <p>Dulang Harok (Bows of a Boat) (p. 256)</p>		 
 <p>Ji'an Manuk Coucal (p. 247) (a bird's beak) (<i>Centropus Sinensis</i>)</p>		   

Table 3: The motif, the image and the concept. (Source: Google Images)



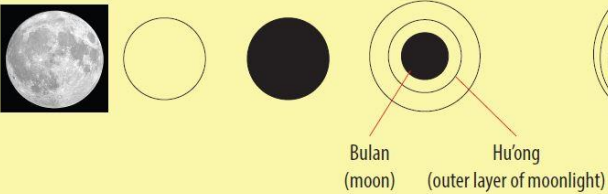
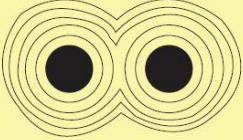

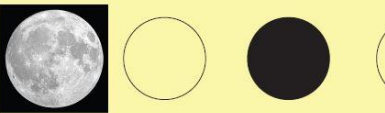
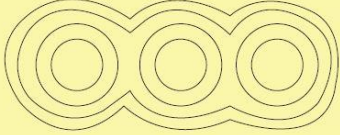
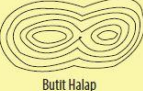

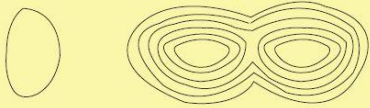
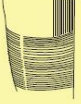

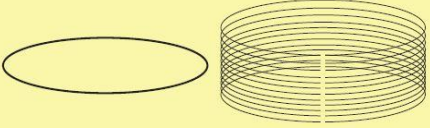



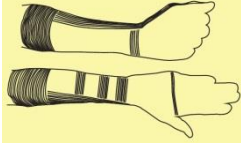



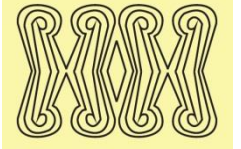


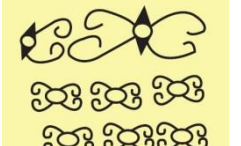

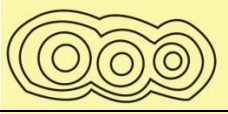

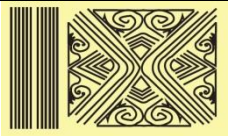


MOTIFS	IMAGES	IDEAS
		
 <p>Belling Bulan (Full Moons – Equinox) (p. 256)</p>		
 <p>Belling Bulan (Full Moons) (p.256)</p>		
 <p>Butit Halap (Belly of Halap fish; <i>Barbus Bramoides</i>) (p. 255)</p>		
 <p>Selungan (Band of Rattan)</p>		
 <p>Akok (unknown) (Thomas, 1968, p. 233)</p>		
 <p>Ida Pat (Four Lines) (p. 257)</p>		
 <p>Tedek Danau (Lake Tattoo) (p. 255)</p>		

Table 4: The motifs and the significances

	MOTIF	OBJECT (it refers to)	REPRESENTAMEN (sign)	INTERPRETANT (symbol)
1		<p><i>Selungan</i> or <i>Wei</i>; band of rattan</p>	<p>Tribute to <i>Asong Wei</i>, where the first human and female who married to <i>Anyang Tulang</i>, a man from the sky. According to the tale recorded by Sandin (1975), he found her at rattan vines. Rattan in Kayan dialect is called <i>Wei</i>. <i>Wei</i>, which is weaved into a tiny bracelet, is called <i>selungan</i>; commonly used by the Kayan males to be placed just below the knees. For females, their <i>selungan</i> is marked permanently.</p>	<p>It signifies a mature and hardworking woman with strong hands who can do house chores, making handicraft, helping in the farm, fishing and hunting. (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014).</p>
2		<p><i>Bung</i> or bamboo shoots</p>	<p>The first mark of maturity. Of all the motifs and body parts, this motif would be the first to be employed.</p>	<p>Mature and able as an adult. She who has this tattoo would be expected to share household responsibility and be countable to take care of the home in the absence of the parents. (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014).</p>
3		<p><i>Usong Dian</i> or thorns of durian</p>	<p>A tribute to <i>Anyang Tulang</i>, a man from the sky. According to Sandin (1975), he was sent to earth in the form of durian fruit that landed at Upper Kayan River in Indonesia. A local picked him up and named him <i>Laké Dian</i>. <i>Dian</i> later married to <i>Wei</i>. It is also a mark of origin, i.e. Upper Kayan River in Indonesia.</p>	<p>It signifies the descendant of Kayan aristocratic family who ruled the Kayans. According to Sandin (1975), all the noble families of the Kayan people today are the descendants of <i>Anyang Tulang</i> aka <i>Laké Dian</i> and his wife, <i>Asong Wei</i>.</p>
4		<p><i>Tushun Tuva</i> or Bundles of Tuba Root; or <i>Derris Elliptica</i></p>	<p>Poisonous plant. Tuba root is poisonous that it could be used to kill fishes in a stream, which to be collected for consumption. According to Ubong Emang, (Ngeu, personal communication (2014), consuming the fishes which were exposed to the tuba roots would not cause any harm to human.</p>	<p>It signifies Kayans' familiarisation and mastery of living in the jungle that they have sufficient knowledge to identify plants which aide their survival (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014).</p>
5		<p><i>Kalong Pakok</i> or fern motif; or <i>Pteridophyta</i></p>	<p>A staple edible ferns in Kayans' dietary. They had identified six other types of greenery which can be eaten, and they are <i>pakok bura</i>, <i>pakok paya</i>, <i>pakok danum</i>, <i>pakok unung</i>, <i>pakok hit</i> and <i>pakok pa'e</i>.</p>	<p>It signifies the Kayans as vigorous people, adaptive to changes and persistent growth. Ferns can grow even in the worst condition; and not easy to get rid of, not even fire. According to Jau (personal communication, 2014), a chopped fern will grow back in 3 nights time (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014).</p>
6		<p><i>Manok Wak</i> or an owl; or eyes of an Owl</p>	<p>Unidentified</p>	<p>Unidentified</p>
7		<p><i>Ji'an Manuk</i> or a bird's beak</p>	<p><i>Laké Neho</i> or a dark-brown hawk; coucal of <i>Centropus Sinensis</i> type. <i>Lake Neho</i> is the bringer of omens, and a messenger of God. In the past, the Kayans have high regard for coucal for it gives indications as well as a bringer of messages to <i>Laké Tenangan</i>, the supreme being of Kayan universe.</p>	<p>It signifies their ancient beliefs system which is worshipping God through omens where according to Sandin (1975), there were 12 types of omen birds to be observed, and <i>Laké Neho</i> is the of God, <i>Laké Tenanga</i>. Omen dictates everything in their life, from planting crops to planning for war.</p>
8		<p>Akok (Thomas, 1968)</p>	<p>Unidentified</p>	<p>Unidentified</p>

9		<p><i>Butit Halap</i> i.e Belly of Halap fish; or <i>Barbus Bramoides</i></p>	<p>An auspicious day. It is on the 9th day after the new moon or when the moon is about 2/3 in size. It is considered auspicious to conduct activities such as weddings, building a new longhouse, to begin a new phase of farming, and so forth; including getting tattoos.</p>	<p>It signifies their knowledge of astronomy and its application into their daily life, including farming. For example, according to Ngeu (personal communication, 2014) fruits like pineapples, papaya, banana, corns, rambutan, mangosteen, durian, jackfruits and other tropical fruits should be planted on this auspicious day. This window of planting is open until <i>bulan musit</i>; basically when the moon is in the shape of a crescent. All these to ensure the plants would grow better, produce many fruits, with larger fruits, and sweeter. Generally, any tropical fruits which grow above the ground are recommended to plant during this phase of the moon.</p>
10		<p><i>Beliling Bulan</i> (with 3 round spots); regular full moon without equinox</p>	<p>The 15th day after the new moon is sighted, that is roughly two weeks; and it lasts for three days.</p>	<p>During the <i>bulan musit</i>, i.e. crescent shape mood, tapioca, groundnuts and yam are recommended to be planted to ensure better productivity. However, if it is windy, one should not proceed, for this would result in imperfect produce, for example, smaller tapioca, or have a high ratio of smaller nuts or worse, empty groundnuts. Hence, it is wise to plant in the evening when it is not windy.</p>
11		<p><i>Beliling Bulan Jaya</i> (with two black spots); or full moon equinox</p>	<p>Full moon with equinox; happens twice a year, in March & September, at which the sun crosses the celestial equator when day and night are of equal length. They described equinox as when the moon is more significant and brighter than any other months, and it has <i>hung</i>, an outer ring circling the moon.</p>	<p>Planting fruits during <i>beliling bulan</i> should be avoided at all cost as it is known to affect the produce example, smaller fruit, or tasteless. The window to plant these would be until <i>bulan uli</i> or <i>bulan lidam</i>; a night without moon. (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014).</p>
12		<p><i>Ida Pat</i>, or four lines under</p>	<p>A commoner. Only a commoner or a free-woman would have the <i>Ida Pat</i> or the four-lines. Additionally, it also functions as a form of identification into family members. Example, if she has a brother(s), but without sister; some of her tattoo lines must not be joined together. If she has a brother(s) and sister(s) all lines can be joined. A serf would only be allowed to use three-lines known as <i>ida-telo</i>. It is a much simpler design whereas the daughter or wife of the chief would be employing <i>ida-lima</i> or five-lines, which is much more intricate and usage of specific motifs specially reserved for them.</p>	<p>Signifies the Kayans as the most homogeneous society via th layered structure consisting of three primary social strata, as stated by Hose (1926, Sandin 1975, Mashman, 1989). At the apex is the noble class known as <i>lpoi</i>, follows by commoner known as <i>panyin</i> and they form the majority. The commoners too are divided into two; the upper and lower. Theis are usually people with exceptional capacity valuable to the chief. The last and the lowest class is the serf who is made up of war captives or descendants of such. They were not treated as a slave but rather as a helper to the family and were treated almost as a family member.</p>
13		<p><i>Selungan</i> or <i>Wei</i>; band of rattan</p>	<p>A tribute to <i>Asong Wei</i>, the first human and female who married to <i>Anyang Tulang</i>, a man from the sky. According to the tale recorded by Sandin (1975), He found her at rattan vines. Rattan in Kayan dialect is called <i>Wei Wei</i>, which is weaved into a tiny bracelet, is called <i>selungan</i>; commonly used by the Kayan males to be placed just below the knees. For females, their <i>selungan</i> is marked permanently.</p>	<p>Signifies a mature and hardworking woman with strong legs cane to roam the jungle, walks long distances, and be adventurous (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014).</p>

14		Tetek Danau, or muddy tattoo.	Unidentified	Unidentified
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5.0 Discussion

The current collection of motifs obtained is slightly identical to some motifs derived by previous researchers, especially Hose and McDougall (1912), and Thomas (1968). This suggests some degree of consistency in term of the motifs among the Kayan women folks from Baram. Researchers find their journal very useful for cross-referencing as they published their papers with visual of the tattoo motifs, which is crucially important when investigating visual.

Referring to Table 4, motif *selungan* or *wei* (No.1 and No. 13) was identified by Hose and McDougall (1912) as just 'several lines' (p. 255, para 3:5). Thomas (1968) too documented a pair of hand tattoos but no discussion found regarding this motif. According to (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014), this motif is known as either *selungan* or *wei*. When *wei* is weaved into a tiny bracelet such as the one featured in Table 3, it is then called *selungan*. It is commonly used by the Kayan males to be placed just below the knees or arms. For females, the version is marked permanently in the form of the tattoo around the hands and just below the knee cap.

Song irang (No. 2) was mentioned by Hose (1912, p. 250) with no further information. However, the subject interviewed identified it as *bung*, which is, *shoot*. All four subjects interviewed stated that it is the mark of maturity, and it would be the first tattoo motif to be employed. This motif usually is on fingers and knuckles and rather than other parts of the body because it has to be visible to the public; signifying to the longhouse folks that she has matured. Therefore, this a very common motif among the Kayans and Kenyahs alike.

Hose and McDougall (1912, p. 249 – p. 266) described *Usong dian* (No. 3) as 'rosette or a star design', and they recorded that is derived from 'the eye in the dog pattern'. This is due to the fact known to both Hose and McDougall that the Kayans have high regards for dog and thus many of their handicraft's motifs were inspired by dog motif. According to interviewees (personal communication, 2014), it is called *usong dian*, which means, the spike of durian. This brought us to the writing of Sandin (1975) who had published a journal about the origin of Kayan peoples. Sandin mentioned that a prince named Dian came to earth from the sky and married a woman from the earth and the Kayan peoples were born. Hence, *usong dian* motif is a mark of remembrance of their origin.

Tushun tuba (No. 4) is actually a bundle of tuba roots. It was documented by Hose and McDougall (1912) and later by Thomas (1968). It has a few versions and visually speaking they all look slightly similar; basically, a bundle of angular lines except that some might have a distinctly human face. Hose and McDougall also mention about termed this degraded anthropomorphic for the human face is visible but almost unrecognisable. Based on samples obtained by researchers, they are a proper tuba root motif. The Kayans valued these roots as it is poisonous; which can be found growing wild in the wood along the riverbank. In the olden days, collected tuba roots would be used to catch fishes by releasing tuba's poison into the river. According to Ubong Emang, (personal communication (2014)), consuming fishes captured this way would not pose any harm to human. She explained that *tuba-fishing* is an old method of fishing and it had already been abandoned since the 70's or earlier when they realised that this method of fishing is not sustainable.

Kalong *pakok* or fern a new motif (No. 5), and this is probably a new motif; a much better aesthetics version from Thomas who first documented it in 1968. Thomas's copy of this motif is a bold stripe of line forming a reversed 'S' shape. This reversed 'S' should be distinguished from Hose and McDougall's copy (1912, p. 257-259), which has details surrounding the 'S' and it has the eye and a beak. It looks more like a dragon, as suggested by Thomas (1968) than a wild fern; while Hose and McDougall (1912) documented it as a hornbill design. It is certain that *kalong pakok* is fern motif (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014). The Kayans being a community residing deep in the Borneo jungle, their diets are mainly wild edible vegetation and as such are capable of finding food for survival and when it comes to edible ferns; they have identified six types of fern which can be eaten, and they are *pakok bura*, *pakok paya*, *pakok danum*, *pakok unung*, *pakok hit* and *pakok pa'e* (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014).

There is confusion with *dulang harok* and *jian manok* (No. 7) as both are identical but with different names. Hose and McDougall documented it as *dulang harok* or bow of a canoe (Hose and McDougall, 1912, p. 266, Plate 140, Fig. 1). Interviewee added that to her best knowledge of the Kayan language, the word *dulang* does not exist and added it might not even be a Kayan word; therefore, she dismissed the term used. She argued that bird's beak is more appropriate because in the ancient past the Kayans had a beliefs system which is based on omens represented by birds, and this was published by both Hose and McDougall (1912), Hose (1926), and Sandin (1975). Of all the birds in the omen system, dark brown coucal of *Centropus Sinensis* type is favoured. The Kayans named it *Laké Neho*, for it is believed to be the messenger to a supreme being of Kayan universe.

Motif No. 9, 10 and 11 are all inspired by moon shape and its phases known as *butit halap*, *beliling bulan*, and *beliling bulan jaya* respectively. Hose and McDougall's copy of these motifs are much clearer because they obtained them in the form of woodblock stamp (1912, p. 266, plate 140, item 1 and 2) known as *klinge* and therefore their copy of *beliling bulan* (No. 10) has perfect circle compare to researchers' copy. They described it as a 'band of concentric circles' and no further discussion about it. According to Ngeu

(personal communication, 2014), it signifies full moon which lasts for three nights, appears typically on the 15th day after the new moon is sighted, that is roughly two weeks' time.

Another motif is called *belling bulan jaya* (No. 11), and this has two black dots in the centre of the moon shapes. This signifies full moon equinox which happens twice a year, generally in March and September, at which the sun crosses the celestial equator when day and night are of equal length. They described equinox as when the moon is larger and brighter than any other months; and it has *hung* (umbrella), an outer ring circling the moon which is visible with naked eyes.

Butit halap (No. 9) which has an oval shape instead of circular; and it has yet to be documented before. The literal translation for it would be the 'belly of *halap* fish', a fish known in scientific as *barbus bramoides*. It is named so because the shape of the moon resembles the shape of the *halap* fish's belly. However, it was named so due to the absence of vocabulary to refer to oval shape; and so the only way to describe this phase of the moon is to adopt the shape of *halap* fish's belly. For the Kayans, this phase of the moon is deemed to be auspicious. It occurs on the 9th day after the new moon or when the moon is about 2/3 in size. It is considered auspicious to conduct activities such as weddings, building a new longhouse, to begin a new phase of farming, and so forth; including getting tattoos.

Motifs No. 9, 10 and 11 indicate that the Kayans are very observance of the moon, especially so in agriculture. According to Ngeu (personal communication, 2014), fruits like pineapples, papaya, banana, corns, rambutan, mangosteen, durian, jackfruits and other tropical fruits should be planted on this auspicious day. This window of planting opportunity is open until *bulan musit*; basically when the moon is in the shape of a crescent. All these to ensure the plants would grow better, produce many fruits, with larger fruits, and sweeter. Generally, any tropical fruits which grow above the ground are recommended to plant during this phase of the moon. During the *bulan musit*, i.e. crescent shape mood, tapioca, groundnuts and yam are recommended to be planted to ensure better productivity. However, if it is windy, one should not proceed, for this would result in imperfect produce, example, smaller size tapioca, or have a high ratio of smaller nuts or worse, empty groundnuts. Planting fruits during *belling bulan* should be avoided at all cost as it is known to affect the produce severely. The best time to plant these would be until *bulan uli* or *bulan lidam*; means night without the moon (Ngeu, personal communication, 2014).

Motif no. 12 is *ida pat* signifies social status, and for this particular motif, it is meant for a commoner. Only a commoner or a free-woman would have the *ida pat*, or the four-lines. Additionally, it also functions as a form of identification into family members. Example, if she has a brother(s), but without sister; some of her tattoo lines must not be joined together. If she has a brother(s) and sister(s) all tracks can be joined. A serf would only be allowed to use three-lines known as *ida-telo*. It is a much simpler design whereas the daughter or wife of the chief would be employing *ida-lima* or five-lines, which is much more intricate, and usage of specific motifs specially reserved for them. It goes to verify that the Kayans as the most homogeneous society with a stratified structure consisting of three main social strata, as stated by Hose (1926, Sandin 1975, Mashman 1989). At the apex is the noble class known as *ipoi*, follows by commoner known as *paryin* and they form the majority. The commoners too are divided into two; the upper and lower. The upper is usually people with exceptional capacity valuable to the chief. The last and the lowest class is the serf who is made up of war captives or descendants of such. They were not treated as a slave but rather as a helper to the family and were treated almost as a family member.

There are three motifs which researchers could not decode, and they are motif no. 6, 8, and 14 (Table 2), which are *manuk wak*, *akok*, and *tedek danau*, respectively. The interviewee stated that motif no. 6 is an owl (*manuk wak*) but could not recall why this particular bird was made into a tattoo. Furthermore, this bird is not one of the twelve omen birds discussed earlier. It would be interesting to know should this bird has significance to the life of the Kayans in the past. Motif no. 8, *akok*, is a similar motif documented by Thomas (1968); and none of the interviewees provides no clue to its importance. The same goes for *tedek danau*. The only discussion here is that this particular motif is prevalent and this is contrary to Hose and McDougall's remark that this motif is obsolete when they found out that Dr. Nieuwenhuis found this in the 1890s at Dutch East Indies (Hose & McDougall, 1912; p. 255). Based on the samples collected, these motifs still very much exist.

Although this might be polysemic, the researchers attempt to make sense of the meanings as close as possible. It also helps us comprehend the idea behind each motif and its' significance. The outcomes reveal the connection between the motifs and their *weltanschauung* in the past, which have not been explored before.

5.1 Limitations

It is rare to find Kayan womenfolk with a complete tradition tattoo, and that itself is a huge hurdle. There is also the issue of visibility of the tattoo due to exposure to the sun and old age. Bear in mind that the womenfolk are still very active in agriculture and exposing to the scorching sun is a norm. Most of these people are living in longhouses deep in the Borneo jungle, and there is no proper road to get there. It is definitely risky to visit any Kayan longhouses due to the distance and the poor road condition.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The motifs are inspired by nature and they are highly stylised without losing the essence of the design from the original sources. Many motifs are floral and a few zoomorphic. This is a testament that they are living very close to nature and they had identified certain plants or animal which have significant influence in their life socially and their spiritual beliefs. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to conclude that these tattoos are actually a form of coded messages recording tale of origin, social order, dietary, survival trick, their

ancient beliefs system, as well as their understanding of the solar system and how different phases of the moon would affect their crops. All these were recorded into tattoo motifs to be passed down to the next generation.

The intention of this paper is not to revive the tattoo practice but to learn, understand and appreciate the ancient knowledge embedded with the motifs. The researchers agree with Thomas (1968) that many Kayans' beautiful designs exist only in the medium of tattoos. Perhaps, as Thomas suggested in 1968, these motifs could be a great source of inspiration for creating meaningful creative works in the future. It is recommended that further research in this topic should be encouraged to document and decode the other motifs, especially the anthropomorphic type which is absent in this research. It has to be done sooner rather than later as those who have these types of tattoos are in their 80s.

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