The Depiction of Asian Tattoos in Popular Culture and the Mainstream media.

Sonny Anak Jumpo¹, Mohammad Puad bin Bebit²

¹² Universiti Malaysia Sabah


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. In the main stream media, the tattoos shown are often worn by antagonists or characters of a criminal nature. Recognizable Asian tattoos range from Japanese Horimono to Borneo tribal tattoos. 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.

Keywords: Bunga Terung, Gang Tattoo, Tribal Tattoo, Cultural Identity, Iban Tattoo