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## SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM ON THE CREATIVE MESSAGE ART OF MENTAWAI TATTOOS AS A SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY

By

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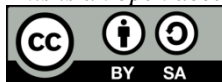
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### ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the interaction of the Mentawai people of Indonesia in communicating traditional Mentawai tattoo symbols, and how the construction of the meaning of these symbols in the young Mentawai generation as an effort to preserve traditional tattoo art culture in the midst of modern culture. Most young Mentawai generation spread throughout Indonesia has assimilated with modern culture by using modified creative content of Mentawai traditional tattoo symbols as their identity. This study uses symbolic interactionism theory and use a phenomenological method with a qualitative approach and a constructivist paradigm. The data collection technique uses in-depth interviews with the people who practice Mentawai tattoo culture. In this study, there were 3 informants who still practiced traditional Mentawai tattoos and 3 informants who were modifying Mentawai tattoo into creative content. Data analysis techniques perform horizontalization, clustering the invariant constituent into themes, individual textural and structural descriptions, composites, and synthesis. The study found that there was a change in the meaning of the Mentawai tattoo symbols in the creative messages of custom tattoos. Tattoos were used as a tool to communicate ethnic identity, social recognition, and professional identity, then tattoos norm have changed to aesthetics, tribal pride, self-identity, and self-expression of the love of art and traditional tattoos. The younger generation continuously reconstructing the creative messages and meanings of Mentawai tattoos that adapt to modern culture. Conclusion: the change in the dominant Mentawai culture into a subculture is caused by a social movement making tattoos creatively by the younger generation as the identity of the Mentawai cultural tribe from traditional to custom tattoos.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tattoos in Indonesia have undergone changes through a long history. Tattoos are actually a traditional culture practiced by various tribes in Indonesia, and were once considered the dominant culture before they were banned. The history of tattoo prohibition began when the Indonesian government in 1954 banned all the practices related to traditional beliefs and encouraged its people to embrace one of the recognized religions at that time: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. During the New Order regime led by President Suharto, there were a mysterious shooting where all the victims had tattoos. Besides other factors, these reasons contribute to negative attitudes towards people with tattoos in Indonesia. Until now, there are policies in certain government agencies that will reject new applicants with tattoos which are often associated with criminality and deviant behaviour.

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The phenomenon of tattoos in Indonesia did not stop at the history of the prohibition and rejection of tattoos. Tattoos became popular after the New Order regime. The popularity of tattoos began to skyrocket with the entry of popular culture when musicians, models, film players, and other idols of young people, both from abroad and within the country, had tattoos on their bodies. Tattoos later became a contemporary cultural art. Many Indonesian youngsters, particularly in urban settings, embrace tattoos as part of their fashion and lifestyle. Most of all, the reasons for using tattoos are to beautify themselves or just to have self-expression through certain symbols. The body is used as a medium to communicate their identity as well as a means of expression to the world.

In its development, the meaning of tattoos has changed, including the assumption that modern tattoo users are dominated by groups of "thugs". The news of tattoos being hated and loved is still rife in various media to this day. BBC.com online media, for instance, is still discussing the 'Story of social stigma against people with tattoos around the world' [1], where even though tattoos are no longer considered belong to the rebels, but the fact is in many countries, tattoos are still considered negative and taboo.

The Mentawai people, although few, are known to still carry out the tradition of tattooing, or what the Mentawai people call *titi*. For the Mentawai tribe, tattoos serve as a means to communicate their tribal territory [2]. For them, tattoos are seen as a traditional cultural communication tool used to communicate their identity using symbols and tattoo motifs. It is in accordance with what Michael Hecht [3] states that identity is the main link between individuals and society that allows a relationship to occur.

Nowadays, many traditional tattoo motifs, including Mentawai motifs, provide inspiration for modern tattoos. Traditional tattoo motifs are modified creatively to produce new motifs which then produce what are called neotribal tattoos or often also called *kustom* tattoos. In defining *kustom* tattoos, Hegarty [4] refers tattoos created from pre-existing sources and thereby distinguishing them from 'ready-made' or 'mass produced' tattoos. He also stated that the reason consumers get *kustom* tattoos is more for aesthetic self-expression, rather than aiming to claim membership in a particular subcultural identity. This article, in the case of Mentawai tattoos, argues that the younger generation of Mentawai who have now assimilated into modern culture and spread throughout Indonesia, even abroad, prefer to wear *kustom* tattoos rather than traditional tattoos to claim their membership as Mentawai people. Thus, these modified tattoos become their subcultural identity.

This article focuses on how the younger generation of Mentawaians see the meaning of traditional Mentawai tattoos and what they want to communicate through the new symbols in these *kustom* tattoos. The trend of this contemporary tattoo art practice is usually mediated through social media, such as *instagrams* and *facebook*, thus creating an online community. Williams & Copes [5] in their research found that the online community is a medium used by young people to express and create their subcultural identity. They interact with each other and thus create and negotiate their identities through these media to spread their ideology.

Furthermore, subcultures are also associated with youth movements and in the context of tattoos, then there is a shift in the meaning of tattoos from what was previously a traditional cultural communication to a subcultural identity. For Barnes [6] subcultural styles allow young people to express themselves in many ways by creating identities and expressing imagination through do-it-yourself (DIY) practices. The concept of subculture has always attracted attention in culture, society, and the media because it is considered not only different from the dominant culture, but also opposite. For this, Blackman [6] states that subculture is used to examine deviant behavior because it has cultural values and practices that are different from mainstream culture.

In order to conduct research on new meanings in *kustom* tattoos, it is also important to first have some knowledge of traditional Mentawai tattoos symbols and their meanings. Research regarding the meaning of traditional Mentawai tattoos in forming self-concept was previously conducted by Rumbiati & Putra [7]. This research specifically examines the *salio* tattoo motif and the results of this research show that this motif has a positive self-concept for the Mentawai people who have this motif, which influences their attitudes and behavior in social life. By wearing this tattoo, they show self-acceptance, high self-esteem, and self-confidence. Following Rumbiati & Putra [7], this article focuses on the meaning of modifications to Mentawai traditional tattoos for the younger generation of Mentawai people.

Tattoos for the Mentawai indigenous people are sacred because they are integrated with their belief, namely *Arat Sabulungan* [2]. Previous research on the meaning and function of traditional Mentawai tattoos conducted by Handani et al. [8] found that there are eight tattoo motifs, each of which had a different meaning. Tattoos function as a symbol of identity and an instrument of local community belief. In this regard, *kustom* practitioners creatively modify the tattoo motifs and the meaning of these motifs is the core of this current study.

This research only focuses on Mentawai tattoo symbols which are popular among *kustom* tattoos practitioners who are also the Mentawai youth generation. The theory of symbolic interactionism is used in this study to examine how the Mentawai people communicate with each other using these tattoo symbols today in a global society. In this case, the Mentawai people must adapt to outside Mentawai society and popular culture where the interaction process



occurs. How the next generation of Mentawai interpret traditional Mentawai tattoos in global society is the subject of this research. For Blumer, in the symbolic interactionism approach, human interaction is bridged by the use of symbols, interpretations, and certainty of the meaning of other people's actions where a person responds based on the understanding given to the action [9].

Theory of symbolic interactionism initiated by George Herbert Mead [10] states that humans interact all the time as a process of sharing meaning among humans in understanding terms, actions and events. The theory of symbolic interactionism is used by Mead in analyzing the phenomena that occur in society where humans are known as social beings who interact with one another, using certain symbols in order to form and realize self-existence.

Symbolic interaction theory is used as a basis in this study in understanding the symbolic meaning of the Mentawai tattoo which is formed through self-concept and social interaction, both actors, society, and the environment in this study. Mentawai tattoo is a symbol tradition that can be studied using symbolic interaction theory, in which this theory focuses on human interaction in using certain symbols.

In the process of social interaction, humans are required to be able to interpret the symbols that are present because symbols can never be separated from human activity [11]. This theory is then used to understand how the Mentawai people communicate with each other using these tattoo symbols. How to interpret the meaning formed from human interaction in the use of tattoo symbols based on interpretation and experience. The main concepts in this theory, as the title suggests, focus on the mind, self, and society.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The research approach that will be used to examine the tattoo art tradition is a qualitative research method. A qualitative approach is used to reveal the symbolic communication of the Mentawai tattoo art tradition which adapts to globalization to reveal the social reality that is formed regarding this tradition.

To describe individual experiences in this study, researcher used a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods. Phenomenology assumes that people actively interpret experiences and try to understand the world with their personal experiences, which pay more attention to one's conscious experience [12].

Using a constructivist paradigm that is social constructionism and a phenomenological method with a symbolic interactionism theory approach in this study is expected to discover the social reality of individuals in communicating the Mentawai tattoo phenomenon based on the experiences and views of the participants themselves as well as assessing the culture to be communicated. This experience then creates meaning for a phenomenon of the reality of life in society regarding the experience of the Mentawai people in maintaining the art of tattooing.

The nature of the research used in this research is descriptive. Sugiyono [13] explains that descriptive research is a research method for describing a research result but not used to make broader conclusions. This means that descriptive research can be used to reveal social phenomena that occur in society by validating or explaining these phenomena, or in other words finding facts with the right interpretation.

By using descriptive research methods, researcher try to describe the Mentawai tattoo phenomenon based on existing facts by describing it in accordance with existing conditions. As the name implies, the purpose of descriptive research is to describe or describe systematically, factually and accurately about the phenomenon being studied to then draw conclusions. Descriptive research presents data, analyzes it, and interprets it comparatively or correlatively.

In a phenomenological study, the criterion of the specified informants was "all individually studied representing people who have experienced the phenomenon" [14], so that in this study the selected participants were informants who carried out direct Mentawai culture. The technique for determining research informants in this study was determined by selecting informants using a purposive sampling technique in which participants with knowledge and experience of the Mentawai tattoo art tradition, as Creswell & Poth [14] said, participants must have experience of the phenomenon being studied. According to Moleong [15], participants are people who are used to provide information about research situations and conditions so that they can assist researchers in conducting in-depth research. Data analysis techniques perform horizontalization, clustering the invariant constituent into themes, individual textual and structural descriptions, composites, and synthesis [16].

As the determination of participants is done by considering participants who can communicate well and can work together so that this research can run well. Researchers here are outsiders who do not place themselves as part of the local community. In this study, participants were divided into two. There are 3 participants who still practicing traditional Mentawai tattoos who live in Mentawai, so they have these traditional tattoos. These participants are important to be able to explore the meaning of traditional Mentawai tattoos for them. The other 3 participants are those who have custom Mentawai tattoos who do not live in Mentawai and are the younger generation of Mentawai.

### 3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This research focuses on changes in the meaning of Mentawai traditional tattoos in the Mentawai people, how these meanings change in the next generation of Mentawai people as an effort to preserve the culture of tattoo art. The Mentawai indigenous people are one of many other indigenous peoples in Indonesia who are still trying to carry out their traditions and beliefs in their daily lives according to the mandate of their ancestors. However, they are also aware of the development of modern culture and for that they must adapt to the views of modern culture.

Symbolic interaction theory is a theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between humans and society in which human actions and interactions can only be understood through the exchange of meaningful communications or symbols [10]. By applying symbolic interaction to studying tattoos, researchers can gain insight into the diverse nature of tattoo meanings, the social dynamics surrounding tattoos, and the role of tattoos in establishing identity and facilitating social interaction. The three concepts of thought in symbolic interaction consist of mind, self, and society.

#### 3.1. Mind

Mind or thoughts arise when individuals interact with themselves and others. Mind is an awareness that arises independently which is the result of reflection from the outside world [17] and this concept emphasizes the individual stages in generating their thoughts. This study examines the aspects of gestures, symbols, meanings, and actions from the concept of thought.

Gesture is a movement in the first organism that causes a stimulus. Gestures evoke non-significant and significant responses where according to Mead [10], gestures have an idea behind them and then generate ideas in other individuals which ultimately produce important symbols, such as language. The gestures of the Mentawai indigenous people who wear loincloths and their accessories, have long hair and tattoos, when interacting with people outside the Mentawai often evoke negative responses in the form of discrimination. By contrast, in a modern society, along with the times and socialization through the media, people have an increasingly understanding of culture. This can be seen from the experiences of respondents who practice custom tattoos who have never received a negative response regarding tattoos in big cities.

As a social object, Mentawai tattoo symbols have undergone changes in custom tattoo motifs. Changes in tattoo symbols on custom tattoos in this study are in the motifs: *titi durukat*, *sibalubalu*, *liktenga*, *takep*, and *teyey*. In symbolic interaction theory, the most basic proposition is that human behavior and interaction can be differentiated because they are displayed through symbols and their meanings where the meaning of the symbol or symbol has been mutually agreed upon beforehand. The next generation of Mentawai who now live outside Mentawai, such as Jakarta, Bandung, Bali, and so on, consider Mentawai tattoos as something sacred. The desire to preserve it, without being able to carry out through rituals, makes them modify the tattoo based on their individual preferences. Modified tattoos or also called custom tattoos have motifs that are different from the original motifs.

Regarding changes in meaning, Mead [10] explained that meaning can change in the process of social interaction of individuals so that new objects can emerge. In this study, changes in the meaning of symbols for custom tattooists were found. If previously tattoos were used as a tool to communicate ethnic identity, social recognition, and professional identity, then for custom tattoos have changed to aesthetics, tribal pride, self-identity, and self-expression of love for traditional tattoo art. In custom tattoos there has been a modification of the tattoo symbols which then gives rise to the new meanings. However, according to Mead [10], the process of creating meaning occurs through a social process that involves communication where the process of creating meaning also continues in accordance with the process of interpretation in human social experience. *Titi* Mentawai has experienced quite a long historical journey and along the way experienced various interpretations for the individuals involved in it. In other words, the meaning of *titi* Mentawai has also changed according to the development of human evolution. For custom tattoo users, this change in meaning ultimately has a shared meaning as a visual symbol. In other words, new meanings in custom tattoos are the result of reinterpreting traditional tattoo symbols where the meaning itself refers to the original meaning of traditional tattoos. The changes in meaning can be seen in the table below.

Table 1: Changes of symbolic meaning in traditional Mentawai tattoos

| Symbol                | Traditional Meaning   | Kustom Tattoos |
|-----------------------|---|----------------|
| <i>Titi Teyey</i>     | The balance of nature<br>Maturity   | Creativity     |
| <i>Titi Durukat</i>   | Allowed to marry<br>Ethnic identity<br>Symbol of the upper realm<br>Courage and masculinity | Self existence |
| <i>Titi Liktenaga</i> | Ethnic identity   | Self existence |
| <i>Sibalubalu</i>     | Healer symbol   | Pride          |



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|                   |                   |                |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| <i>Titi Takep</i> | Economic symbol   |                |
|                   | Symbol of beliefs |                |
|                   | Symbol of skill   | Self-knowledge |

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In the aspect of action, Mead [10] said that although interactions occur between humans, humans actively shape their own behavior and humans are active creatures in shaping their behavior. Humans act motivated by desires (impulses) that come from themselves or from outside themselves (stimulation). This research found that for respondents whose knowledge about culture was not obtained from their families, the family was not the biggest stimulus, but rather the environment where individuals interacted to gain their knowledge. The perception of culture is obtained from interactions with the outside environment where they manipulate their minds based on stimuli so that symbols and meanings are born in subsequent actions.

### 3.2. Self

The process of emergence of self-awareness or identity according to Mead [10] is through experiences and social activities carried out by individuals. The process of self-formation then forms self-concept as "Me" and "I". As "Me" the respondent position himself as a member of the Mentawai community who carries out his duties according to the expectations of the community, for instance as a *sikerei* (shaman). As a child who obeys the wishes of his parents, and so on. As 'Me', they are conformists to the negative stigma of the Mentawai people who are seen as backward and primitive. One of the tattoo symbols for this concept is the *titi durukat* motif for men and *titi dapdap* for women. This motif symbolizes their tribal identity. In the concept of 'I', the respondents position themselves as individuals who are proud to be Mentawai people who show their identity through the symbols of their tattoos. Through the symbol on the special tattoo motif, it can be seen that the concept of 'I' is in the *sibalulu* tattoo symbol where this tattoo distinguishes him as a hunter. This tattoo is a special tattoo embedded for people who have hunting skills. The *sibalubalu* motif on the shoulder is a tattoo that signifies his position as a *sikerei* (shaman). This means that it can be concluded that these motifs symbolize self-esteem as a hunter and shaman, which can also increase his status in the Mentawai traditional community.

### 3.3. Society

On the aspect of society, Mead [10] emphasizes the importance of the function of communication in social interaction. Conflicts can be resolved by reconstructing the social situation and modifying the framework of social relations. In this case, researchers view that socialization through the media and the development of social media on the internet actually really help change people's views of traditional culture which were previously considered taboo and negative to become accepting. With a lot of reporting to informants through the media, people are starting to recognize the existence of Mentawai culture and are starting to accept the Mentawai tattoo tradition. For the Mentawai people who have interacted with people outside the Mentawai, a self-concept is actually formed in society. This is because knowledge is easier to obtain.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Based on this research on Mentawai tattoos, it can be seen that there has been a change in meaning from traditional tattoos to modern tattoos, which means that the construction of reality regarding Mentawai tattoo has changed due to social construction created by society. *Titi* Mentawai, which was once the dominant culture, has now turned into a subculture, where this change is caused by social movements carried out by the younger generation.

Through this research, it was found that there was a reinterpretation of the meaning of traditional tattoo symbols. The new meaning of traditional tattoos is the result of a reinterpretation of traditional tattoo symbols where the meaning itself refers to the original meaning of traditional tattoos by giving them new names, which Berger and Luckmann [18] call the typification process. According to them, 'signs' were born as a measure of subjective meaning, where through language humans create reality by giving names to what they see or feel. This new meaning then becomes a shared meaning for custom tattoo artists.

The change in meaning from traditional tattoos to modern tattoos occurred because the reality construction regarding Mentawai tattoos underwent changes due to social constructions created by society. Changing times have an impact on changes in the traditional culture of Mentawai tattoo art. With cultural changes that also give rise to new media, this actually provides opportunities. Mead [10] in the society aspect offers a journalism concept that can be translated into today's social media. New media can become a medium for popular socialization of traditional culture so that it can ultimately be accepted in society. Furthermore, Mentawai cultural institutions can actually be maintained with the presence of the government's policy in preserving traditional culture.

*Kustom* tattoos have become a separate identity for tattoo lovers. For this reason, it is necessary to socialize tattoo artists regarding the culture of Mentawai tattoos so that tattoo artists are expected to have knowledge of

traditional tattoo culture both in Mentawai and in other areas. This knowledge is expected to be passed on to customers or to other community members.

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