

*Religious Tattoos Symbols amongst the Underground Musicians and Fans in
East Java, Indonesia*

Constantius Tri Handoko, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

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Abstract

This research objective is to understand the functions of the tattoos amongst the underground musicians and fans by using ethnographic analysis. This approach is used to understand the context of tattoo production in its natural meaning since tattoos are the reflection of the wearers' life story and history (internal narrative). I also re-write informants' opinions from my perspective as a researcher by tracking and locating specific concepts within the scope of the underground music communities' life, in which I use tattoo as a means of looking into those conceptual dimensions (external narrative). The finding is the social and cultural dimensions have affected on how the underground musician and fans chose religious symbol tattoos and given meaning on them. The visual elements of tattoos: images, symbols, and typefaces have functions relate to religiosity/spirituality expressions and group identity.

Keywords: Religious, underground, tattoo, Indonesia

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Introduction

The term of underground music in Indonesia first appeared in *Aktuil* magazine in 1970. This term was aimed at extreme rock music style. However, the term of underground music as a movement emerged in the 1990s to the last years of Suharto's New Order regime. Styles of Indonesian underground music genres are divided into punk, hardcore, metal, and alternative. Each of these genres then evolves into several subgenres (Wallach, 2005:18). For example, the genre of metal has a subgenre of death metal, black metal, and grindcore. A blend of metal and hardcore became the metal core and the blend of ska and punk become ska-punk. Ideologically, the early years of Indonesia underground music were characterized as a form of resistance against the system that was not considered to rakyat (people). Wallach examined the role of underground musicians in bringing the discourse of suffering of rakyat through the lyrics of their songs, even before the 1998 reform that marked the fall of the Suharto regime as was the title of the song of Surabaya-based death-metal band Slowdeath Entitled "The Pain Remain the Same," which described the corruption, collusion, oppression, and propaganda that eventually afflicted the people of Indonesia.

The nature and attitude of anak bawah tanah (underground kids), according to Iverson was slengen (grungy), brutal (aggressive), vulgar, with all their untidy performance such as their dyed and spiked hair, tattoos and piercing (Iverson, 2011:67). For the majority of the people, the kind of appearance is associated with disorderly youth. Hence, tattoo and tattooing act among the conservative residents are not accepted since they are associated with delinquency or felony, especially if it is related to religion doctrine – that still can be debatable. For instance, in the end of December 2011, several punk rockers were caught by police since their untidy appearance of punkers that links with crime and un-sharia morality. Their appearance was in the spotlight, such as their style of dress, hairstyles, and for sure, their tattoos. The Banda Aceh Deputy Mayor argued that because of their tattoo they were not able to perform mandatory prayers. For this reason, the local police had frequently raided punk hangouts (Hotli Simanjuntak, 2011). Interestingly, through my field research, I found some of underground musicians and fans wore tattoos such as Jesus Christ, St. Mary, even the Arabic phrase of 'Allah' and 'Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim.' It rose the question in my mind what was the purpose of some youngsters in underground music community wore religious symbols as their tattoos? Did they know that tattoos are forbidden by religious scriptures, especially in Islam and Christian?

Interfaith Leadership Council Of Metropolitan Detroit (2014) on their website explained about the practice of tattooing amongst Hindu. In Hindu, there are scriptures called Vedas mentioned about the plant that was called Mendikha and Haldi (Turmeric) that used for marking the body (tattoos). The sun was the symbol that used to be popular that represented the "light within". Some other verdic symbols have been used to represent Peace, Strength, Divinity, and Chastity, fertility, royalty, and happiness. In the North-West part of India, amongst the Tribal Community tattoo is called Godna. Many Hindu men and women have the tattoo of Om on their hands or arms. It said that Om represents "the primordial sound of the universe and is the symbol of divine consciousness." This tattoo will bring Good Karma and protect them from evil forces. Many Hindus also tattoo their bodies with pictures of Gods or Goddesses and other religious symbols. In the South of India the art form is called *Pachaikuthikiridu*. The tribal communities in North-Eastern parts of India traditionally use tattoos to distinguish themselves from other tribes.

Amongst the Muslim, as in Christians, tattooing is prohibited. Yet, according to the history, Christian religious symbol tattoos used to be used by Christian during in the middle ages, Agnieszka Marczak (2007: 16) explained that a Dominican priest named Heinrich Suso (1295-1366 AD) tattooed the name of Jesus over his chest. In 1503 also appeared in the public a heavy tattooed German girl that according to Van Dinter (in Marczak, *ibid*) used to heal the girl from suffering/illness by using the power of religious symbolism. European pilgrims tattooed many Christian symbols as the proof of their journeys to the Bethlehem and Jerusalem. In the Middle East practice of tattooing amongst the Muslims existed, commonly for healing purposes (Göran Larsson). Most recently, Syria's civil war (that broke out in 2011), has revived tattoos in between religious and political issues, as shown in Lebanon, especially amongst the Hezbollah supporters. The most popular tattoos are '313.' In Shia, '313' is the number of the commanders of Al-Mahdi's army. The other popular tattoos are the name of Ali, who was Prophet Muhammad's son in law. Hezbollah members, like most Iranian people, belongs to the Shiite (Shia) Sect. Unlike the Sunni Sect, they consider Ali as extremely important. the most revered saint in Shiite Islam (Ynet news.com). The practice of tattooing is something that is opposed by almost of the Sunni Muslims, including the Sunni, muslims in Indonesia.



Figure 1: Tattoo on the body of Hezbollah Supporter.
(Ynet news.com, AP Photo)

According to Wohlraba, Stahlb, and Kappeler (2007: 89) in their modern Western literature research about motivational for getting tattooed and body pierced, there were ten functions of tattoos, namely beauty, art and fashion; individuality; personal narrative; physical endurance; group affiliations and commitment; resistance; spirituality and cultural tradition; addiction; sexual motivation; and no specific reason. In addition, tattoos also a signifier of disaffiliation with mainstream society (DeMello, 2000: 137; Adler and Adler in Irwine, 2001: 55), and a protection for the wearer as was shown in my research of tattoos amongst convicts in the city of Yogyakarta-Indonesia that tattoos in prison functioned as self-protection, especially for those who had a smooth/light skin for being a victim of sex abuse because their 'beautiful' body would attract other fellow inmates (Handoko, 2010: 113). Broadly, this paper describes the functions of the religious symbol tattoos and practice of tattooing among underground musicians and fans.

Research Method

My research is based primarily on participant observation fieldwork in Surabaya and Sidoarjo, East Java Province, Indonesia. To obtain preliminary information about the existence of tattoos among musicians and fans of underground music, I make observations and make friends with them. My encounter with Njet, vocalist of Njet Doesn't Cry opened the wider door of discourse to the underground music scenes/communities. He showed me where I could find and how to approach them. Then I started my adventure by visiting the studios where the communities of underground music used to practice and hang out, approaching them in a humble coffee shops, distros, their home and boarding house, music and tattoo studios and campus. Finally, I found 7 musicians of punk rock, hardcore, metal (metal core, death metal, black metal), and ska-punk (rude boy) that wore religious symbol tattoos. I recorded the conversations and occasionally I made small notes during the conversation. To obtain data about underground music, I visited gigs or local underground music events in Sidoarjo and Surabaya. During the show I had little time to chat with the musicians or the audiences because of the noisy condition of the show. However, from my visit to the gigs I can get the contact number of the musicians who performed that night. To get the atmosphere of underground music events as visual data, I took pictures of the musicians stage actions, audience behavior, the characteristics of the audience in terms of age and gender, and interesting incident during the gigs.

Interview approach in ethnography study, as is explained by Hammersley and Atkinson, is able to use by the researcher to know people's views, the larger subcultures, and cultures to which they belong. It can be a means of evidence and their perspectives and cultures will often become a crucial element of the analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 98). In my research, the use of interview is to find the answer related to the question of the factors that affect the existence of tattoos among musicians and fans of underground music in Surabaya and Sidoarjo and the functions of tattoos in terms of icons/symbols and typography that were portrayed on their bodies and what the tattoos mean to them. I also got interested in the concept of why they chose some particular locations on their bodies for their tattoos.

Analysing the Data

Fruh and Thomas in Allhoff (2012: 88) explained that tattoo could be both personal identity and social identity as people acquire tattoos as a way of sublimating their individuality, to further integrate their identity into a social group, alongside tattoos being connected to personal identity. To show those perspectives, I give an example of the use of anarchy tattoo symbol between two punkers, Gamble and Rifky. Both said that anarchy symbol was one of the symbols of anak punk (punk kids) but personally, an anarchy symbol tattoo on Gamble right palm, was a commemoration of the clash between anarcho-punk community, his group, with nazi-punk in the late of 1990s in Surabaya. For Rifky, his anarchy symbol on his right hand was a symbol of rebellion. In the other places, we may find many similar tattoo symbols of anarchy but with their own personal interpretations. Social and cultural dimensions, in this perspective, have affected on what, why, when, and how the underground musician and fans make their decision to be tattooed and how their tattoos have meaning. In the context of the social dimension, interaction of oneself within the group may lead him to adapt to a specific concept of living and ideology.

Findings

In many cases, the tattoo wearer using tattoos for special purposes. Gentong, a tattoo artist who is also a underground musician, revealed that his tattoos were a picture of his life's journey from adolescence to adulthood. In his adolescence time, he lived on the streets. Various acts of delinquency he did with his gang. He got his nickname *Jahanam*, means devilish. in Arabic it means a hell, which could then be interpreted as cruel. One day he talked with his friend who was also a member of the gang. He suggested him to tattooed a Jesus figure. The reason, he felt that both of them should leave the gang and live in a normal life. After thinking and feeling tired to live on the street, Gentong finally decided to return to home and back to school. His friend then became a catholic priest, while Gentong chose to study in the field of Visual Communication Design and now he is working as a tattoo artist. On his right and left arms there were opposite kinds of tattoos. Jesus, Mother Mary, and Cupid as well as a photo of himself along with his mother were tattooed on the right arm. On his left arm there were some tattoos of demons and skulls. These tattoos represent of life transformation. Currently, he has been more active to the church to attend a mass. His brother, who has a tattoo of Jesus on his right breast used to accompany him to the church every Sunday. Spiritual phenomena as shown here is a common feature when a sense of faith begins to appear. According to King (2003: 200) spirituality gives young people the opportunity to experience himself in a relationship with God, the community of believers, or the environment.



Figure 2: 'Blasted Gentong': Jahanam means devilish. Typographic tattoo that represents Gentong's past lives (Gentong is a nick name). He repented and chose to spend his lives devote to God will (symbolised with Mother Marry tattoo).

Ninik, a young mother. She has been active in the punk community since she was fifteen years old. She chose the community because she wanted to live a free life. Her family background was a broken home. At the age of 17, she tattooed the first time as the expression of her anger/emotion because of a broken home life and her dissatisfaction of the family rules. She poured her sadness through tattooing. The pain during tattooing process made her emotion subsided and for a while she was satisfied. The tattooing process had made her annoyance disappeared. Her first tattoo was a black cat, which she described as 'hell cat'. She then decided to drop out from high school and lived nomadic. She travelled to some cities in Java island such as Malang, Jakarta, Kediri, and Lumajang with her street punk group. She earned money by becoming a street singer. The money used to spend to buy some *topi miring* (a cheap and famous alcohol drink brand) and got drunk every day. Tired to live on the street,

she tried to deepen her understanding of punk ideology and its meaning. She went to city of Blitar in 2008 and stayed there within the 'positive' punk community to learn printing and design as well as how to recycle waste into eco-friendly products. Once, when she visited the island of Bali, she dreamt of being baptised by Jesus. It reminded her of the time in the high school when there was a question from her teacher about why the students in the class were Muslims. Her friend replied because their parents were Islam. Her teacher question and her friend answer rose question in her mind. She felt that every person had a right to choose her/his own belief. Two days later, after she dreamt of being baptised, she sent a message to the prayer service on the internet was called by CBM, questioned about the meaning of her dream. CBM said that God wanted to help her and used her as His 'tool'. Reading the CBM's reply, she was hitting by peace in her heart that never felt before. At the age of 18, she decided to tattoo her body of the Virgin Mary figure. After having this tattoo, her spiritual feeling grew rapidly and then she learned about Catholic and then was baptised. What happened to Ninik, is similar to what happened to Gentong that the religious symbols represent their spirit of becoming a new person and life.

Tattoo of a religious picture does not merely represent a religious feeling. As what happened to Sony. He has a tattoo of Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper,' a picture when Jesus in the midst of his disciples. This tattoo reminded Sony (21) of his missing in life, a father and a loving spirit in his family. He always longed for togetherness because he rarely spent his time at home and only went home when he needed money and clean shirts. A common thing in Indonesia, one lives with his/her parents until they decide to get married. Even sometimes, after marriage, they live with their parents. Not coming home to see the parents in a long period of times means there is a less harmonious relationship within the family.



Figure 3: The Last Supper.

Besides I found many of Christian symbol tattoos, I also found Arabic letter tattoo. As was found in Aji's chest. Lies over the picture of an eye in the centre of his breast, there is a holy verse of Qur'an of "Bismillahirrahmanirrahim". In English means "In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful." For Muslims who obey God, are encouraged to always read or say "Bismillah" before doing works or positive actions or deeds. Aji realised that the tattooing activity was forbidden in the religion of Sunni Islam. But according to him, his tattoo was a work of art and self-expression. As far as what he did was good and right in the eyes of God, then the act was blessed by him. What he experienced in his life at the moment was the best thing he achieved. Currently, he has been working as a staff engineer in the state-owned company. That is a very rare position because his body is full tattooed. In the selection process, the committee knew that his body was covered with tattoos but could pass

it and he was accepted working in the company. He said God was very kind to him as he mentioned as well that he conducted five times praying as an Islam follower. To note, the majority of people in Indonesia still see the practice of tattooing as an uncommon act that is not fit in accordance with existing social rules. This perspective especially amongst the conservative ones. Uniquely, Aji married a girl from a family of devout Muslim. It was a difficult thing to convince his girl friend's family, but finally he could do it by showing his seriousness and achievements in life. He and his girlfriend married according to Islamic custom.

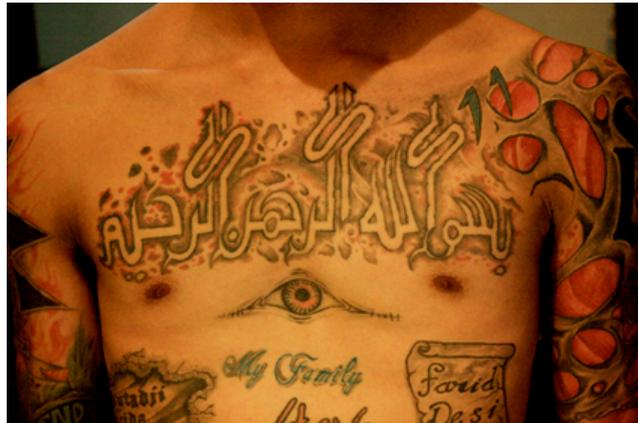


Figure 4: "Bismillahirrahmanirrahim" tattoo is a personal identity that also represents the tattoo owner as a devout muslim.

Tattoo Locations

There is specific locations to place tattoos relates to religious tattoo symbols. Tattoo of demons, skulls, naked women, and hells were placed on the left side of the body, while the illustrations that depict angels, Jesus, Mother Mary, and other common symbols of deities were placed on the right side of the body. These are representations of the world that splits between good and evil, heaven and hell. Dichotomy concept of left which is associated with sinister and right as a good one can be traced from the habits that are inculcated from childhood by parents to their children, which is prohibited from giving or doing good deeds with his left hand, because the left hand is used for wiping when completed defecation. This is the dominant habit prevailing in Indonesia relate to hands' using concept. Other reason why using right hand is recommended as explained in the religious teachings of Islam, the majority religion of Indonesia, as appeared in Saheeh Hadeeth which was narrated by Abu Dawud "That the Prophet used his right hand in the purification and eating. As for the left hand, is used to clean the dirt from the former shitting and matters that are najis (unclean)" as quoted by Musthafa in <http://almanhaj.or.id>. Other concept relates to good and evil meaning, also appears on the leather puppet (*wayang kulit*) show, where a good character is placed to the right of the stage, while the villain is placed opposite. Although these examples are not absolutely justify about the concept of profane and sacred related to left and right sides in the context of the local culture, it can be the common sense reason why most people in Indonesia associate the left as a symbol of evil and the right side as a goodness. However, in some other informants, there is disagreement about it as well. They put tattoos which are associated with crime in their right hands because all of their activities are done through the right hand even when they do something that is not good; they do it with the right hand.

Conclusion

Amongst the underground community, the religious tattoos are symbols of repentance, belief in the power of God, to remind the person of a force beyond human in life. Socially tattoos are showed as the religious identity of the wearers. In relation to the value of family life, the tattoo does not preclude the owner to coexist with other family members. Yet in Indonesia, tattoo as a form of personal identity is inseparable from the process of interpretation of society to the tattooing activity from time to time. Until now, still there is a difference views of tattoos amongst the wider community. A special effort has to be made by the tattooed persons to demonstrate high achievement in life so that people become enlightened that the tattoo is not a symbol of 'dark' life as in the conception of society in general that tattoo and tattooing activity are something useless and harmful. However, this study still needs to be deepened further, particularly how to explore other values associated with the theme of tattoos as religious symbols especially relates to the underground music community in Indonesia.

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- Contact email: bhirawa@peter.petra.ac.id