

THE MEANING OF TATTOO IN
THE CONSTRUCTION
OF CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY
OF TATTOOED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS
IN YOGYAKARTA, CENTRAL JAVA,
INDONESIA

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Introduction

In Indonesia, the existence of tattoo can be found in many traditional ethnic groups such as Mentawai, Dayak, dan Irian. Mentawai even believed as the oldest ethnic group in Indonesia that has a genuine tattoo tradition, since their arrival to Sumatera Island from Dongson, Vietnam and Mainland Asian around 1500 BC to 500 BC (Rosa, 1994: 60). In Indonesian tattoo history, the meaning of tattoo ever got a negative disarticulation when occur what is called “Petrus” (from Indonesian “penembak misterius” or mystery shootings) around 1983 to 1984 (Tempo, Juni 1983).

At that time, there was a massive shootings to criminal and street hoodlums which was called “Gali” (from Indonesian “Gabungan Anak Liar” or street kids groups) who have tattooed on their bodies. Their dead tattooed bodies found everywhere around some big cities of Indonesia such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung and Medan. Almost 5000 dead tattooed bodies found at that bloody time (Berman, 2002: 63).

In this case, tattooed bodies have been used by the government to restrain the people’s need by the name of stability. This political incident then created a negative stigma and even phobia to tattoo as a part of criminal world. Since that time tattoo was always related with criminals, hoodlums or any

other negative groups that should be kept away from the society. Until 1986, the existence of tattoo in Indonesia seems disappear and the negative stigma spread around the nation (Ibid, 65).

However, during the latest decades, the existence of tattoo seems get a shift of meaning. With the decline of the Soeharto's New Era regime and the grow of popular culture in many big cities of Indonesia -Western music, movie, novel and others- tattoo now positively accepted as a means of self identity expression. More individuals and groups have tattoo on their bodies – women, middle class groups, and even university students who have a relatively higher economical and social status – also got tattoo on their bodies. This paper will the meaning of tattoo for tattooed students and how they create their construction of identity through tattoo on their bodies.

Tattoo, Identity and Social Construction of Identity

Historically, tattoo has been existed since 2000 BC with the proof of a tattooed woman priest mummy called Amunet in Thebes, Egypt (Rubin, 1988: 22). Tattoo which is found on the body of Amunet has a simple pattern, with the dots and lines which form an abstract picture around her lower belly. In Egyptian culture, this tattoo believed as a symbol of women fertility. Another evidence of tattoo also found on a frozen dead body from Similaun, at Aspen Mountain, Italia. The body, which is guessed originally from Neolithic period and has been heaped up for 5500 years, has tattoo in his back and knee (Marianto, 2000: 9).

In anthropological researches which are done, then, it is revealed that the existences of tattoo are found in most cultures of the world. The existences of tattoo expand all over the world as what has been shown by some terminology of tattoo in some cultural vocabulary. For instance, Tahiti (*tatau*), Japan (*irezumi*), Maori (*moko*), Mentawai (*titi*), English (*tattoo*), Dayak (*pantang*), Tetun (*hedi*) (Marianto, 2000: 2). It also found in some other social live as in Indian Haida, Irian, Siberia, Eskimo and Hawaii.

In each period and culture, it appears that tattoo has various meanings and functions. Tattoo is not just a kind of picture found on a peel. Tattoo has an important role in human cultural construction. Through tattoo, the life reality of country, including social, cultural, religious, economical, artistic even political

aspect, can be read. Yet, in sociological discourse, identity is the result of individual interaction. Someone's identity does not exist inherently in his individual side, but it is the result of social construction (Falk, 1994: 12). Identity, then, is social thing, constructed through socialization process and exists in a certain social.

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann have explained about social reality and how identity construction is socially formed. Both of them try to analyze the process of where someone creates daily social reality. They mention that the process is as a symbolic reality construction process (Berger and Luckmann, 1990: 23). According to Berger and Luckmann, social world is human's product. It is human's construction and is not something given naturally. Social life is constructed through some typicals which have major reference toward the object and evidence which are experienced routinely by individuals and experienced collectively by others in a *taken for granted* pattern.

On the other hand, the younger generation will learn this social reality through socialization process. For instance, they learn another thing which creates the world they find daily. The younger generation also learns the meaning of social system giving them cognitive validity and normative legitimacy (Berger and Luckmann, 1990: 34). Socialization involves simultaneous transmission process of knowledge and so on. In such socialization, understanding about social reality also experiences evaluation.

In this framework, identity construction, basically, is a kind of socially meaning process product. Group identity, culture, nation even individual, all are constructed on the meanings given by the covering society. Epistemologically, identity can be divided into two; individual identity and social identity (Barker, 2000: 165). Individual identity refers to the concept which we believe for ourselves. This sight is known as essentialism. It assumes that the picture about us reflects essential individual entity. Femininity, masculinity, Asia race, European race, the Black or young group are considered to have a standard and permanent essential.

On the other hand, the social identity refers to identity concept which is constructed by people's view and sight. This belief is also known as anti-essentialism. Referring to such view, identity is known as specific social and cultural construction based on the time and the place. Identity is not "something",

but it is a kind of language discursive construction which continually changes, following the change of time, place, and usage. However, as what has been mentioned previously, identity is fully a kind of social construction and it cannot exist outside the context of social culture representation giving its life.

In addition, according to Giddens, self identity is constructed through the ability to create a narrative about self with the creation of biographical continuity feeling consistently (Barker, 2000: 166). Self identity is an individual project which is understood and constructed based on his/her own biographical history. The history of identity creation, then, is a roll over process and an unstopped process. Such identity project is formed on the basis of what we think about ourselves at the present, with past and present memory and experience reference, also with what we think about ourselves in the future. About social identity, Giddens explains it as an entity which relates to normative rights, obligations, and punishment creating certain roles (Barker, 2000: 167). Giving of attribute, typology, stereotype, even stigma is a part of social identity forming process.

Based on the research's purpose which is hoped to be reached, this research uses qualitative participative research method as the approach to get an understanding about the chosen phenomenon. Through the qualitative approach, the symbolic and non-verbal aspects which are felt and fully experienced by individual are hoped to be more deeply understood (Moleong, 1991: 23).

There are some reasons why the qualitative approach is used in this paper. *First*, this method can give deeper rooted description and explanation, especially about identity construction forming process, so that, the meaning construction and people's action process in that world can be observed. *Second*, qualitative analysis can probably also be used to systematically reveal the chronology of social process construction which relates to the meaning of tattoo and to the construction forming of the tattooed university students. It also gives an explanation about the relation between some matters which relate to the tattooed university students phenomenon, more deeply. The last reason, *third*, is that through qualitative method, further abstraction activity is possible to do, that, can result in sideline findings and new theoretical integration which are difficult to do through quantitative research (Nasikun, 1995: 19).

Typology of Tattooed University Students Permanent Tattoo: Identity vs Ideology

The first typology of tattooed university students is they who use permanent tattoo in their body. Based on the deeply participatory observation and interview which are done, the characteristic of permanently tattooed university students are signed by high confidence, medium class social status, reclusive tendency toward family, careless tendency about the other's view and physical appearance, high desire to be free, the willing to privately choose the way of life. However, the users of permanent tattoo are reluctant to directly show the tattoo in their body. For this typology of the tattooed university students, the tattoo in their body is for themselves, for their own selves' fun, not for the other people. The significant others of this typology are their friends who previously have tattoo. Besides, the university students who use tattoo in their body are frequently well known as individuals who have desire to show masculinity features.

They, who have permanent tattoo in their body, often use certain symbolic identity such as cloth, body accessory, and life style. These symbols function not only as accessory but it is further as certain cultural ideology. The clothes which indicate certain sub-cultural ideology, are *hippies* (with long cloak, faded jeans trouser, sandal, long hair, and coat), *skinheads* (with jeans trouser rolled till ankle, military shoes, T-shirt with political jargon, jeans jacket, and bald head), *punks* (with torn jeans trouser, safety pin in the ear, rigid hair style), or *bikers* (with crust jacket, tight jeans, black t-shirt, and chain belt). The hair with caloric paint or the pin in the ear, eyebrow, nose, and chin are also the characteristic of who are tattooed permanently.

Related to identity forming to be tattooed university students, this kind of typology faces more complication rather than the two other typologies. Negative connotation and stigma from the society considering tattooed people as a crime or contrast with social norms cause permanent tattooed university students experience negative treatment from the society. Such social construction force them tend to hide themselves in the strange social interaction. Somehow, there are a few permanent tattooed university students who are brave to dismantle themselves. The high social economy condition and open minded in

the family extremely influence the bravery to dismantle them as the tattooed university students. Another characteristic which is much found in typology is their willing to gather with tattooed community. The role of such community is to give space for interaction and sharing information about tattoo, besides, to strengthen the same identity as tattooed people.

Temporary Tattoo: Style, Mode, Fashion

The second typology of tattooed university students is they who use temporary tattoo in their body. Based on the deeply participatory observation and interview which are done, the major characteristic of temporarily tattooed university students is their high desire to show their tattoos to other people. The temporary tattoo usually made in the parts of the body which are easy to be seen clearly by others, such as neck, wrist and tarsus, and shoulder. This characteristic is not quit of their desire to actualize themselves through body appearance, tattoo. To be in the limelight, their identity is supposed to construct. The *significant others* of this typology are actors of film and music who are known to have tattoo in their body. The economic social status which is relatively high causes them quickly able to follow the development of world's entertainment information flow.

This typology tends not to be much bounded by certain sub-cultural identity symbols as the first typology. They use tattoo with more awareness that it is as the necessity of style, mode, and fashion without caring about cultural ideology existing in the tattoo they use. Even though they use certain sub-cultural identity symbols, the university students in this type mean it as *brikolase* practice, or it is just culture borrowing (Hebdige, 1988: 23).

The beauty and the exoticism of tattoo considered as consideration more than meaning and history behind each design of tattoo. Thus, with this consideration, the designs of tattoo they choose tend to be freer – in ideology association meaning. The tribal and *Celtic* motive, feminist motive (flower, porpoise or butterfly), zodiacal motive, even cartoon characters such as Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, Shinchan, or Pluto, are chosen by this typology. The motive of prominent figures such as Karl Marx, Stalin or Che Guevara which explicitly has left ideology connotation is rarely chosen.

The temporarily tattooed university students are not much bounded by the existence of tattoo community. Indeed, they do not really care about the existence of such tattoo's lover groups. Only few of them who know the existence of tattoo community in Yogyakarta. Their motivation to use tattoo is just for style, mode, and fashion. The appearance of these tattoos makes them feel that they do not need any backing of specific community to strengthen certain identity.

In the relation to self identity construction, the temporarily tattooed university students face fewer problems than who use permanent tattoo. The temporary feature of the tattoo is the major reason of why they minimally face problems in social interaction. Commonly, their environment friend of study, friend out of home, or family – will understand more about their decision to use temporary tattoo.

Sticker Tattoo: Enthusiasm to Play

The third typology of tattooed university students is they who use sticker tattoo in their body. Based on the deeply participatory observation and interview which are done, the well known characteristic of university students who use sticker tattoo is their enthusiasm to play and to amuse, high confidence, freedom expression, careless and willing to be different from the other people. Based on the gender or sex, most of the sticker tattoo users are female university students, although it is not impossible if the male university students use this type of tattoo.

The dominance of females to use sticker tattoo is at least urged by two factors. *First*, the picture or motive of the sticker tattoo which features more feminine than masculine. The motives of flower, star, zodiac symbol, and animal or symmetric shapes with conspicuous colors, are considered to be closer to feminist feature. *Second*, the function of the sticker tattoo which tends to be accessory, appearance of style and cosmetic is considered to be closer to the female world. Because of this function, the sticker tattoo is sold more in cosmetic shops rather than in tattoo studio.

The university students, who use sticker tattoo, commonly come from the family with upper- medium economic status. With economically established

family background, they easily follow and have various popular culture products which they want. The physical appearance which tends to set out mode and fashion is the way to make them popular through fashion product with popular brand. They also tend to be open minded in their interaction with the family or friend, and have broad environment of intercourse. This open-minded is shown in the attitude or behavior. Permissive demeanors and life style attitude and inclusive intercourse are the special characteristic of university students in this typology. The *significant others* of this typology are beauty headings and popular mode magazines. Indeed, through the magazines they get information about sticker tattoo and following mode.

As compared to the two previous typologies, the university students in this category have lowest level of tie to sub-culture or indeed have no tie to certain sub-cultures. They tend to be apolitical and pragmatic. The constructed identity of them is identity of popularity which borrows some existed sub-cultural symbols only for appearance. Besides, the temporary feature is also the characteristic which differentiate them from the two other typologies. The use of sticker tattoo for them is not more than just as accessory such as bracelet, necklace, ring, silk, ribbon, or glasses. The more the tattoos they use are conspicuous and interest others' attention, the more it is loved.

In the relation with tattoo community, this typology almost does not have any relation or tie. Indeed, it can be said that they do not know and do not need the existence of such community. The conspicuous characteristic of playing in this category makes them do not need to involve in a tattoo community. The need of self actualization through identity is enough to be got through using the sticker tattoo. Related to the social interaction, they who use sticker tattoo almost do not face any kind of problem. They have never got negative stigma from the society just because they use sticker tattoo in their body. This case is because of the type, the shape, and the appearances of these tattoos are different from permanent tattoos or temporary tattoos.

Table 1. The Summary of Tattooed University Students' Typology

No.	Characteristic	Permanent	Temporary	Sticker
1.	Motivation to use tattoo	As identity of certain cultural ideology	Just for style, mode, fashion	Just for play
2.	Interaction with society	Often get negative stigma	Relatively far from negative stigma	No negative stigma
3.	Open-minded with the family	Tend to be reclusive	Tend to be open-minded	Open-minded
4.	Economic social status	Medium	Upper-Medium	Upper-Medium
5.	The role of tattoo community	Very important	Not important	No role
6.	Binding with certain subculture	High enough	Relatively low	No binding
7.	<i>Significant others</i>	Tattooed friends	Film & music actors	Mode magazine

Tattoo as Individual Identity

As individual identity symbolic device, in this point tattoo has tied relation to the world of fashion and style. Even though it also occurs in permanent tattoo, this case much occurs for temporary and sticker tattoo. In the contrary to permanent tattoo, temporary and sticker tattoo with its temporary, superficial, and flexible feature, it can be changed based on its users' willing and is very suitable with the demand of fashion and style.

“Kita cuman pengen beda aja. Lain dari hari-hari biasa. Tato temporer kan kayak aksesoris. Nambah aksen gitu. Penampilan jadi lain. Saya suka gambar lumba-lumba ini. Lucu sih. Kalo pake tato jadi beda sama orang lain, ya kan? Orang-orang ngelihatn kita. Bangga lho. Kita mau jalan ke Galeria nanti” (D, 20 tahun).

We just want to be different. Differ from usual days. The temporary tattoo is like a kind of accessory. We add our action. The appearance is different. I like this dolphin picture. It is funny. Using tattoo is different from the other people, isn't it? People look at us and we are proud. We are going to go for walk to Galeria (D, 20 years old).

Tattoo as Social Identity

The use of tattoo in some sub-culture groups is a kind of symbolization of social identity through the body. As permanent typographic symbol of the body,

tattoo is considered able to be a social identity symbol of a group which differs from another one. Yet, the permanency feature of tattoo can also be the social's and culture's tie of any community. For instance, through tattoo the pre-modern society keep the identity of their individual and social community, and preserve the binding, value and belief of them. Thus, it also occurs for the use of tattoo in young-age sub-cultural groups. Tattoo is used as the device of social and cultural stability of such subculture and preserving the value and belief of culturally social which are practiced.

“Kita semua pake gambarnya Bordir. Gambar tengkorak sama tulisan DEVIL. Itu lambang kita, Yogya Punk. Kita pengen orang gampang tahu kalo ada gambar itu, ohh berarti anak Yogya Punk. Kita pengen seperti kalo orang lihat lambangnya Red Hot, ohh itu Red Hot. Jadi gampang dikenal, populer. Kita juga buat grafitinya. Buat kita sendiri, lambang ini musti dipake oleh semua anak Yogya Punk. Ini bagian kelompok kita, kayak rambut, celana, sepatu, jaket. Kalo nggak pake berarti bukan anak Yogya Punk. Wong, ini memang lambang Yogya Punk” (R, 23 tahun).

We all use Bordir picture. Crossbones picture with DEVIL writing. It is our symbol, *Yogya Punk*. We want anyone easily knows that the picture is there; oh... that's *Yogya Punk*. We want to be like when people see *Red Hot* symbol; oh... that's *Red Hot*. So, we are easy to be known, popular. We also have the gravity. For us, this symbol must be used by all *Yogya punks*. This is part of our style, like the hair, trouser, shoes, and jacket. If you don't have it, you're not *Yogya Punk* boys. This is indeed *Yogya Punk* symbol (R, 23 years old).

In this research, some subjects of the research mean tattoo as certain social identity. Some sub-cultural groups in Yogyakarta, who often use tattoo, are punk groups and street-boys. The groups of punk or street-boys sub-culture which have been found are *Realino Boot Boys*, *Yogya Punks*, *Black Boots*, *Joxzin* dan *QZRH*. While, there are also a number of community that use tattoo as their social group identity such as *Lembaga Budaya Kerakyatan*, *Taring Padi*, and *Serikat Tato Gampingan*. Even though it is different from Western sub-culture, the meaning of tattoo using in Indonesia is still identical to social identity of sub-cultural groups.

In the relation to social identity, tattoo also has meaning as a symbol of an opponent against parental culture and dominant culture (Hall, 1976: 22). A number of research subjects declare that they use tattoo – especially, permanent tattoo – as the opponent of their parent’s attitudes which are rigid and authoritative. In addition, they use tattoo to refuse their parents’ willing which contradicts their willing (research subjects’ willing). Using tattoo which is considered to be taboo for their parents, in fact it is intentionally made and openly shown. This refutation to parents’ willing, through tattoo, is also a kind of refutation against culture, value and belief practiced by the parents.

“Aku cuman pengen ortuku *ngerti*, *kalo* kita *udah* beda dengan mereka. Kita *nggak* bisa dikurung terus dalam rumah seperti mereka dulu. Kita butuh jalan. Kita butuh keluar rumah. *Nggak* bisa aku disuruh terus di rumah. Aku bisa pusing. Aku *pengin* ortuku *ngerti* *kalo* tatoan itu bukan *trus* jadi preman. *Nggak*. *Nggak* ada hubungan itu. Kita orang baik-baik kok.” (P, 24 tahun).

I just want my parents understand that we have been different from them. We cannot be always shut-in home as they did. We need to walk. We need to be out of the house. I cannot be always in home. I can be puzzled, then. I want my parents understand that using tattoo does not mean to be hoodlums. No. No relation to it! We are kind people” (P, 24 years old).

An opponent against culture through tattoo is also shown in the dominant capitalist cultural values. A number of research subjects declare that they use tattoo not for a fashion or mode. In the contrary, tattoo tends to be considered to have anti-fashion feature.

“Tato ini bukan untuk *gaya-gayaan*. Bukan. Ini bukan fashion. Ini anti-fashion. *Bikinnya* sakit. *Kalo* mikir lagi, dulu aku *bikin* tato ini sebenarnya cuman karena *pengin* aja. Ya *udah*, *pengin*. *Nggak* ada maksud apa-apa. *Nggak* buat pamer. Jadi *nggak* untuk ditunjuk-tunjukin. Paling cuman di kost *temen-temen* tahu *kalo* aku punya tato” (P, 24 tahun).

The tattoo is not for style. No, it isn’t. This is not a fashion. This is anti-fashion. It is painful to make. When we think twice, I actually made this tattoo just because of my wanting. Here it is, just want! No special

intention. Not to show. Thus, it is not to be ostentatious. Probably it is only in the boarding house, where my friends know that I have a tattoo” (P, 24 years old).

Conclusion

The meaning of tattoo in the construction of identity

The meanings of tattoo in the construction of identity of tattooed university students' Yogyakarta are divided into two. *First*, tattoo is an individual identity. Making tattoo in the body is a kind of self identity mirror and individual expression to exist through style, mode, and fashion. Tattoo is considered as body accessory, the popular cultural commodity product which is able to construct its users' identity as unique individuals and different individuals from others in modern culture reality. *Second*, tattoo is social identity.

Making tattoo is a kind of conscious decision with social implication to construct young-ages' culture identity and to show an opponent of negative stigma against tattoo. In this context of tattoo as social identity, intentionally or not, the tattooed university students consider tattoo as a symbol of refutation against dominant culture. It is not just an art work or accessory.

The tattooed university students' identity construction is constructed through process of interrelationship interaction (inter-subjectivity) between the research subjects, family, friends, *significant others*, and society. Thus, the tattooed university students' identity construction, as individual or social identity, is not constructed naturally in them. It is a result of social identity construction.

The research subjects' biography sketch has an important role in the process of the tattooed university students' identity construction. Stock of knowledge, the present condition and the future hope, is a reference forming the developing tattooed university students' identity construction. The research subjects' biography sketch is basically a kind of private life view of the research subjects about how the process of having decision to tattoo their body goes on, from the research subjects' own view.

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