



Revealing the Tattoo Philosophy and Pop Culture of the *RR Kakek Gaul* Community

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Abstract

Tattoo is associated with crime and lawlessness, and individuals who have tattoos are either respected or feared by others. In the modern era, Indonesians have begun to broaden their minds to eradicate negative stereotypes toward people who have tattoos. As a result of the mixing of foreign cultures that have entered Indonesia, not even a few minors feel compelled to have tattoos on their body parts. In recent years, a phenomenon has occurred in the growth of tattoo communities, where members gather and support one another. One of tattoo communities is the *RR Kakek Gaul*. This research aims to analyze why the members decided to get tattoos on their bodies and how they interpreted their tattoos. In order to help the researchers doing the analysis, the researchers used Semiotics concept from Roland Barthes and signs from Peirce. The sources were taken from the *RR Kakek Gaul* Community's Instagram and YouTube accounts, which focused on two community members in particular. The findings of this study indicated that members of the *RR Kakek Gaul* Community attempted to convey messages of optimism about the future by eradicating negative stereotypes held by non-tattooed individuals. They conveyed these meanings via a tattoo symbol they possessed.

Keywords: meanings, signs, symbol, tattoo

Introduction

A tattoo is a semi-permanent marking on the skin, and its creation involves the painful sensation of multiple skin punctures with a needle. On the one hand, a tattoo is a visible declaration of rejection of a taboo; on the other hand, it cannot be overlooked that it is a form of self-injury inextricably linked to pain (Roggenkamp, et.al., 2017; Kierstein, et.al., 2015). Now, tattooing is a popular trend in body art (Piccinini P, Pakalin S, Contor L, Bianchi and Senaldi, 2016). Across cultures and generations, people have tattooed their bodies (Kuczerowska, et. al. 2020), as it is a globally growing trend among adults in industrialized countries is around 10–20% (Dieckmann, R., Boone, I., Brockmann, Hammerl, Kolb-Mäurer, Goebeler, M., Luch, A., Habil., and Al Dahouk, S., 2016). Tattoo in many indigenous community is a part of their culture and it is done on men, women and sometimes on the children too, but they signify a different meaning to the different members of the society (Archita and Kaustav, 2017).

Most of the tattooed people can be seen in Western countries because the contemporary practice of tattooing emerged there. (Santos, M. and Villafranca, M., 2019). Current research on tattoo as part of body modification in Asian society provided evidences that it remains less acceptable among individuals in the society (Lim, 2013). Some previous studies on tattoos and piercings discussed stereotypes, judgments, criminals, rebellious, deviants, and pathological toward person or group with tattoos in the Western context. DeMello explored the view of Western society that most people have continued to associate tattooed person with rebellious and criminals (Demello, 1993).

Tattoos are considered taboo in Indonesia, despite being practiced in our country at least since prehistoric times, between 1500 and 500 BC. Tattooing frequently runs counter to the Muslim majority's social and religious traditions. Indonesians, who live in a similar Muslim-majority country in Asia, tend to view tattooed individuals as deviants. When tattoos deviate from societal norms, they become negative symbols. Additionally, the tattoo's symbol is used to denote "otherness." Good people will conform to social norms, such as being impeccably dressed, pious (according to religious standards), and, most importantly, ridding from tattoos and piercings (Olong, 2006). Rokib (2017) examined how tattoos are perceived in Indonesian Islam. He interviewed one of the participants, Tirmidzi, who shared his perspective on tattoos for Indonesian Moslem. He emphasized the dangers of permanent tattoos, stating that they can obviate the need for Muslims to perform ritual ablution. He continued, "Islam categorically prohibits immoral acts such as tattoos. Being a Muslim requires a certain level of cleanliness and purity. They cannot claim to be Muslims without first erasing their tattoos." According to one of these perspectives, having tattoos is viewed negatively.

In Indonesia, tattoos are viewed as a 'contrast' to social norms (Rokib, M. & Sodik, S., 2017). According to Handoko and Olong (as cited in Handoko & Green,

2020), good people adhere to social norms, such as not wearing tattoos or piercings. That is why tattooed individuals are frequently viewed negatively, as tattoos have been linked to destructive behaviors such as violence, weapon possession, drug use, increased drinking habits, and earlier sexual activity. Additionally, it is consistent with Brown's statement, which stated that women with visible tattoos and body modifications continue to face social and cultural stigma and discrimination as a result of their physical appearance, with tattoos historically being associated with criminal activity, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, and violence (Brown, Melanie L, 2020). Even though one of Indonesia's cultural tribes uses tattoos as their symbol, tattoos continue to attract a great deal of negative judgment and opinion from those who have them.

Tattoos are prevalent in various circles, particularly among young people, in the current generation. The researchers hypothesized that this could occur because tattoos are no longer exclusively associated with thugs and artists. Tattoos are no longer viewed negatively by young people in rural and urban areas. Tattooing practices served various purposes and connections, including amusement, adhering to emerging trends among young people, and expressing oneself creatively (Dillingh, R., Kooreman, P. & Potters, 2016). The researchers concluded that tattoos' meanings and purposes have evolved according to that statement. It is consistent with Rewathy and Linojah (2019). They stated that tattoos can be symbolic or simply the result of a desire to be decorated. Certain individuals feel compelled to get tattooed in order to permanently 'write' messages and reminders on their bodies, which serves as a form of self-expression (Buss, L., & Hodges, K., 2017). Tattoos are also a form of non-verbal communication, as they allow individuals to express their personalities and life experiences without having to explain their meaning (Santos, M. L. & Villafranca, M. R., 2019).

Tattooed people wear it as an identity and their ways of expressing themselves. Atkinson (2003) found that tattoo enthusiasts have strong feelings about self-identity, deviance, bodily control, rebellion, and group membership, though they disagree on what tattooing is all about. He also concluded that his research subjects' tattoos served as a form of emotional expression. It is a method for tattoo enthusiasts to manage and control their emotionality, and is particularly beneficial for expressing grief and loss. The terms "being unique," "self-identity," and "deviance" were widely recognized as powerful motivators for tattooing at the time (Atkinson, 2004). By critiquing the term "deviance" in the tattoo debate, Kosut examined the discourse of deviance itself through the lens of tattoo's historical development. He believed that the discourse surrounding tattoo deviance is relative, not fixed in negative connotations and influenced by the shifting cultural boundaries over time (Kosut, 2006). Similar findings appear in Nina Cesare's (2011) survey,

indicating that tattooing is not a characteristic of deviant behavior. Cesare argued that tattooed individuals tend to self-segregate and are not intrinsically deviant.

Based on the research, the number of tattoo enthusiasts is one factor contributing to the rise of mobile tattoo studios in major cities, particularly Jakarta. It is easier to find a tattoo studio in areas frequented by a large number of people, particularly teenagers. Tattoo enthusiasts are not exclusively male; many females have dared to get inked. The average age of young tattoo enthusiasts in Jakarta is between 17 and 23 years old. Tattoo studios in the Jakarta area are also not insignificant, owing to the youth's growing number of tattoo enthusiasts. It is because they genuinely enjoy tattoos, wish to express themselves, or wish to keep up with trends. Numerous tattoo designs and vibrant colors have influenced some teenagers to get tattoos.

Due to globalization, many tattooed communities make ends meet. The researchers found a community on YouTube that interest in our study, namely *RR Kakek Gaul*. This community is available in Kota Tua Jakarta and Yogyakarta. However, our main concern is in Kota Tua. The community is active until now. *RR Kakek Gaul* community is one of the oldest communities in Jakarta. It has been established since 2009.

Roland Barthes, a structuralist thinker, known for his linguistic and Saussurean semiology, stated that semiology encompasses any system of signs, regardless of their substance, including images, gestures, musical sounds, and objects (Barthes, 1968). It is a significant system. According to R. Barthes, semiology is a subfield of linguistics; more precisely, it is the subfield that encompasses the great signifying units of discourse. (1968, Barthes). Barthes analyzed visual objects using the denotative and connotative 'levels of meaning.' The term "denotation" refers to what all people see without regard for their society, culture, or ideology (Bouzida, 2014). In other words, denotation is the fundamental meaning of visual symbols. It is the fundamental level of meaning. Meanwhile, connotation refers to the interaction between a sign and its users' feelings or emotions and the values of their culture (Fisk, 1992). In other words, the denotation of an object is what the sign represents, whereas the connotation is how it is described.

Symbols or signs found on a tattooed individual's body almost certainly have their philosophy, depending on the theory associated with the symbol or sign. Pierce stated that it was a representation, reference, and interpretation form. Pierce's semiotics comprises three interdependent communication components: signs, objects, and interpreters. Pierce defines a sign as anything that is determined by something else, which he refers to as its Object. A sign also determines an effect on a person that refers to as its Interpretant. In such a way, the former immediately determines the latter." (1902, 478 Peirce) Peirce (1931-58, 2.172) stated that signs can take the form of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts, or objects, but that these things lack intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with

meaning. 'Nothing is a sign unless and until it is interpreted as sign.'

There are numerous people who constantly appear in people's minds as to why someone would tattoo himself, and in general, people who feel alienated from the community who wear tattoos as a symbol of rebellion and self-existence. The RR Kakek Gaul community performed tattooing by making a hole in the skin's surface with a pointed object and forming an image according to the individual's request, then inserting colored ink/liquid beneath the skin's surface through the holes. (2000) (Marianto & Barry, p. 2). This community or group can be formed on the assumption that if people share a common goal, they will seek out friends who share that goal. Feldman adopts this flow, stating that people with a lot in common feel connected to one another because they share the same attitude, making it easier to interact and unify opinions (Zulkarnain, 2014). It is consistent with the social context of the RR Kakek Gaul community's emergence in Kota Tua Jakarta due to the similarity between his hobbies and activities of tattooing his body. In light of the preceding, the researchers concentrated on the tattoo philosophy revealed by the RR Kakek Gaul Community. Thus, in this study, the researchers analyzed why the members decided to get tattoos on their bodies and how they interpreted their tattoos.

Method

This research used descriptive qualitative research methods. According to Bogdan and Taylos in Moleong (2002: 12), research with a qualitative approach is a study with research procedures that produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior. The researchers used Semiotics concept from Roland Barthes and signs from Pierce. This study looked at tattoo characteristics, processes and design, as well as the background and reasons of users in the *RR Kakek Gaul Community*. There were several stages that we did.

- a. Selected some tattoo communities and the *RR Kakek Gaul* community as the research object.
- b. Determined the sources to be interviewed to obtain the required data information.
- c. Carried out an analysis by finding out the denotation and connotation of the signs using Roland Barthes approach.
- d. Elaborated the philosophy of tattooing taken from any sign system, such as; pictures, gestures, and objects using Pierce method.
- e. Concluded the whole meanings of the signs using

Results & Discussion

RR Kakek Gaul is a tattoo community that was formed in 2009 which already has 2 community areas, namely Jakarta and Yogyakarta. However, this study focused

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on RR Kakek Gaul community located in Jakarta. According to Bogdan and Taylos in Moleong (2002: 12), research with a qualitative approach is research with research procedures that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior. This study looked at the characteristics, process and design of tattoos, as well as the background / reasons for users in the RR Kakek Gaul Community.

This community also has a YouTube account with a total audience of 343,418 people.

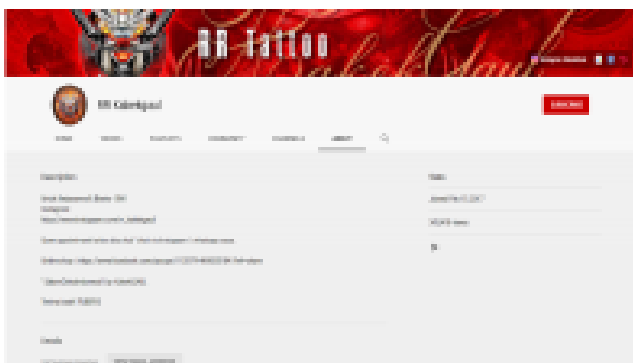


Figure 1. RR Kakek Gaul Community's YouTube Account

In November 2019, this community also participated in the 10th anniversary celebration of the Kota Tua Art Fest.

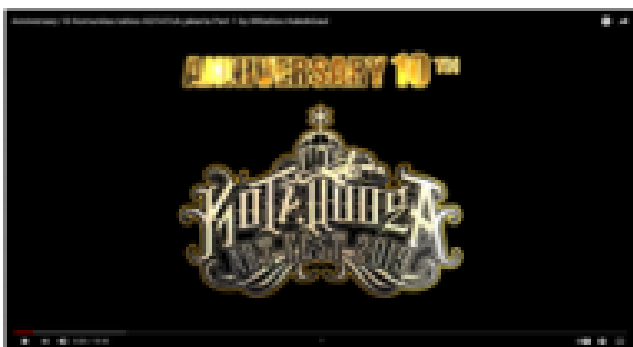


Figure 2. RR Kakek Gaul Community participation in the 10th anniversary celebration of the Kota Tua Art Fest.

Many participants from various regions in Indonesia participated in this event such as Bali, Central Java, West Java and many more to take part in a tattoo competition with the theme of art color. This activity is also a tattoo competition event to find which community is the best. Grandpa Gaul's RR community got a tattoo of a woman's face in the spring.

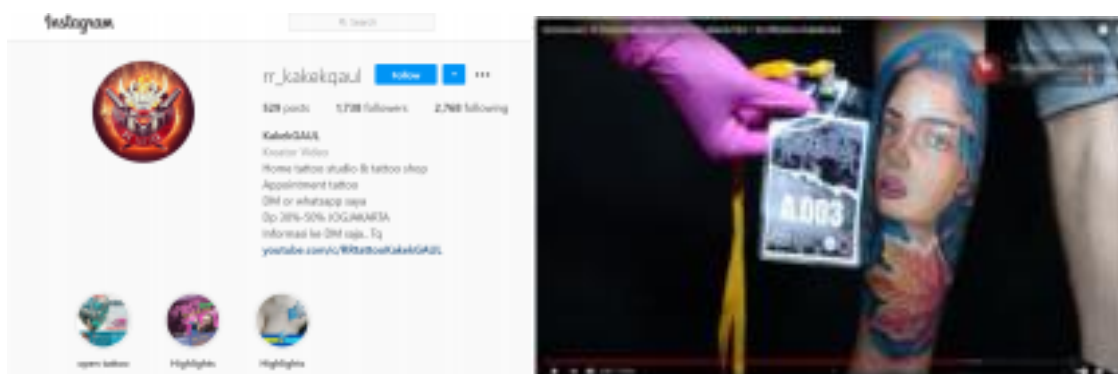


Figure 3. RR Kakek Gaul Instagram Account

Not only YouTube, *RR Kakek Gaul* also has an Instagram account with the username @RR_Kakekgaul with a total of 1,738 followers and 529 posts on Instagram. *RR Kakek Gaul* often posts the tools and materials they use in tattooing to provide information and also informs prospective customers that what they are using is safe, they also upload posts of the results of the tattoos they have made. *RR Kakek Gaul* Jakarta tattoo studio has 2 tattoo artists, namely Kakek Gaul (Anonymous) and Bro Chandra. They produce workable tattoos that can be classified in various types of forms namely realist, tribal, religious, biomechanical, dark side, old school, and fantasy tattoos.



Figure 4. Philosophy Tattoo of Dream Catcher on one of the members of the *RR Kakek Gaul* Community

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKC_E317USU&t=36s

Tiara is one of the female members in the *RR Kakek Gaul* community that we found on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NK_C_E317USU&t=36s). She wants a dream catcher tattoo on her back because a few days ago she had a nightmare. According to her with the dream catcher tattoo on his back the nightmare will not come back to him, Tiara said that "if I think the nightmare will come again, so I put an antidote to the nightmare on my back".

Denotatively, dream catcher means a circular framed net with a hole in the

center that is used by some American Indian peoples to help block bad dreams and catch good ones (Meriam Webster Dictionary). According to Shabi (2016), real authentic, traditional dream catchers are handmade and crafted only from all natural materials, in size measuring just a few small inches across. The hoop is traditionally constructed from a bent Red Willow branch covered in stretched sinews. Wrapping the frame in leather is another common finishing touch among "real" dream catchers.

The shape of the dreamcatcher is a circle because it represents the circle of life and how forces like the sun and moon travel each day and night across the sky. The dream catcher web catches the bad dreams during the night and dispose of them when the day comes. As for the good dreams, the feathers act as a fluffy, pillow-like ladder that allows them to gently descend upon the sleeping person undisturbed. There is some contention when it comes to the meaning of the beads that often decorate the dreamcatcher. According to some American Indians, the beads symbolize the spider—the web weaver itself. Others believe the beads symbolize the good dreams that could not pass through the web, immortalized in the form of sacred charms (Shabi, 2016).

The dream catcher or antidote to nightmares is synonymous with Indian tribes from America. According to the belief of the Indians who are Native Americans, this dream catcher is believed to be able to catch good dreams and get rid of bad dreams. In general, this dream catcher is used as a home display which is usually installed in bedroom windows, headboard, and in the area around the bedroom. However, it is different with Tiara which puts the dream catcher as a symbol that will function as a tattoo on her back.

The dream catcher symbol has a philosophy or early history of dream catcher makers, there are many types of Indian tribes, one of which is the Ojibwe tribe. According to Atkinson (2003: 24, 30-50), tattoos are best implemented in each generation and can be divided into six different eras that reflect different cultures. This era is the invaders, the carnival, the working class, the rebels, the new order, and finally the present era. Even though in the past, Indonesian society when women used tattoos would be underestimated by the public, but in today's era people have an open mind about people who tattoo themselves, because of a mixture of cultures. According to Atkinson (2003: 24), tattoos are now much more open to interpretation and subject to existing definitions. Indeed, despite the historical potential of people looking at tattoos, people can still make the argument that the most valuable sociological contribution to understanding cultural and social phenomena is the result of in-depth historical and contextual analysis of cultural practices or trends (Foucault 1978, 1982, 1984, 1986). ; Durkheim 1897, 1912) for placing actions in a particular context and avoiding generality.

According to historical records, dream catchers were first created by people in the Ojibwe tribe, in their culture there was a spider woman named Asibikaashi.

This woman is the person who is trusted to look after the people in the Ojibwe tribe from children to adults. One day, the people in the Ojibwe tribe had to move house and made it difficult for Asibikaashi to look after them, then in the end they made a circle-shaped object with a web in the middle that resembled a spider's web. This object is a symbol that the Asibikaashi will continue to protect the Ojibwe people wherever they are. Native Americans believed that this object could be used as an antidote to nightmares. The dream catcher has several parts, each of which has its own meaning:

- a. A circular shape, which is defined as a circle of life from morning to night.
- b. The net in the middle means to channel good dreams while bad dreams will be trapped in it while a person is sleeping.
- c. Beads on the feathers, interpreted as spider woman, Asibikaashi.
- d. The feathers underneath are believed to be a ladder that causes nightmares to slowly descend on the sleeping person.

The *RR Kakek Gaul* community will carry out the tattooing by making a hole in the surface of the skin using a pointed object and forming an image according to the person's request, then through the holes colored ink or liquid is inserted under the surface of the skin (Marianto & Barry, 2000:2). Therefore, Tiara chose to have a dream catcher tattoo as in the picture above which is the result of a tattoo made by *RR Kakek Gaul* for one of the members of his community. With the symbol he calls a dream catcher on his body, it can filter out nightmares and capture the good dreams that will come to Tiara.



Figure 5. Philosophy One Eye Tattoo and Heart Emoji Tattoo on one of the members of the *RR Kakek Gaul* Community

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odhqDEngikk>

Luky is one of the members of *RR Kakek Gaul* who wants to tattoo an eye and heart eyes emoji. The reason is because he wanted to let people know that we can't look down or see someone with one eye only regardless of their job, social status, as well as people who have tattoos themselves. Heart eyes emoji is because he thinks he is a flirt, he would go "heart eyes" easily.

Dennotatively, one eye is a specialized light-sensitive sensory structure of

animals that in nearly all vertebrates, most arthropods, and some mollusks is the image-forming organ of sight. It is also the faculty of seeing with eyes and the faculty of intellectual or aesthetic perception or appreciation (Merriam Webster Dictionary).

According to Wilson (2020), in later editions, the Eye of Providence was included as an attribute of the personification of 'Divine Providence', ie God's benevolence. As the name of the symbol and its early usage suggest, it was invented as a sign of God's compassionate watchfulness over humanity. As a result, a motif like the Eye of Providence was deliberately esoteric in its appearance. It's a symbol almost purpose-built to be reinterpreted, and maybe even misinterpreted. In Britain, in 1794 Jeremy Bentham commissioned the architect Willey Reveley to design him a logo for his 'Panopticon' – a revolutionary new prison aiming to allow for continual surveillance of each cell. The resulting design prominently included the Eye of Providence – a symbol now of the unblinking stare of judiciary righteousness – surrounded by the words 'Mercy', 'Justice' and 'Vigilance'.

According to the BBC, the Eye of Providence was originally a Christian symbol to represent God. But then as time goes by, the Eye of Providence begins to be mistaken as Illuminati. However, Luky didn't think that this tattoo of his has anything to do with illuminati. The definition of this tattoo is purely because he wanted people to not look down on people with tattoos.

Another tattoo symbol that Luky has is heart. Denotatively, heart means a hollow muscular organ of vertebrate animals that by its rhythmic contraction acts as a force pump maintaining the circulation of the blood (Merriam Webster Dictionary).

Taken from the article entitled Heart Symbol, the heart is often used to symbolize the moral, emotional, spiritual and even the intellectual substance of a person. The heart has been referred to and believed to be the core of one's humanity. It was used and still used as the primary symbol that represents love.

According to Richo (2014), the heart also signifies our understanding of God's word and our personal decision to follow it. In Jewish tradition, the heart contains wisdom and evil too. Thus, it is a combination of opposites, that is, an example of spiritual wholeness. A "change of heart" is a transformation of one's personality/being in the direction of goodness. It was only in recent centuries that the heart referred to love. To love the Lord with one's whole heart, i.e., one's character and entire being, is a Jewish and Christian commandment. Babua ben Asher, a rabbi of the eighteenth century, commenting on this commandment, said that the heart was the first part of us to be created and will be the last to die, so to love with our whole heart is a promise to go on loving till our last breath. The commandment is devotion to a personal love for God which is an unconditional love of neighbor.

In India, the heart is symbolic of the universe. This makes sense physically

since the heart, like the whole universe, contracts in systole and expands in diastole. The human heart in Hindu tradition is called Bramapura, the abode of Brahma the creator. The heart has perennially represented centrality since it is the center of the body. The Celtic words for center and heart are similar. The word for heart is *crídh*, related to the Indo-European word *krd* from which comes the Latin *cor-cordis*. In the West, heart represents feeling, especially love. It was also associated with intellect and intuition and considered the core of the entire psyche. In archetypal symbolism, a center is the zone of the sacred and the path to it is difficult. An heroic journey, our central human archetype, is the challenge required (Richo, 2014).

To the Chinese, the heart in the human body mirrors the position of the sun in relation to the universe. In this sense, the heart is a fiery energy, an equation we will encounter later in the mystics and in Teilhard de Chardin. Master Su-wen says the heart lifts itself to the principle of light and is thus the center of enlightenment. Buddhists refer to *bodhicitta*, the enlightened heart, as the longing to heal the sufferings of the world. Universally in the world of symbol, the heart is also recognized as a container (Richo, 2014).

The perspective of people with tattoos has been diverse since then. Tattoos used to be a symbol of bad guys in some nations or some places. Bad guys here means either criminals or simply people that have a bad life. As time goes by and as modern life approaches, people see tattoos as art and could hold a very deep meaning in every stroke of it. Although for some people, especially those who live in the countryside, they tend to think tattoos are bad and the one who has them are bad people. People who find it cool usually are the ones from the city or the one who has a broad knowledge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researchers discovered that tattoos are not only viewed as works of art but also as an integral part of an individual's identity. Individuals who get tattooed attempt to communicate the meanings of their tattoos. There will always be social consequences and pressure for anyone who gets tattooed, as tattoos are viewed as 'contrary' to social norms. We should respect the norms and rules that have been established over time. However, we should also respect anyone who has chosen to get tattooed. On the whole, the stereotype of people who get tattooed may change due to the meanings associated with them.

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