

Body, Tattoos, and the Challenge of Norms: A Social Study of Tattooed Women in Bali

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Abstract. Tattoos hold diverse meanings across cultures. In Balinese society, tattoos are historically perceived as masculine symbols, while women with tattoos are often stigmatized as deviating from social norms. Yet, the growing number of Balinese women with tattoos highlights shifting cultural values and raises questions about identity, gender equality, and artistic expression. This study aims to analyze the sociocultural background behind Balinese women's use of tattoos as body accessories and to interpret their meanings, both denotatively and connotatively. Using a qualitative method, research was conducted in several tattoo studios in Bali with women tattoo clients, tattoo artists, and community members as informants. Data were collected through document studies, observations, and in-depth interviews, then analyzed using Peter L. Berger's social construction model, which involves stages of conceptualization, validation, objectification, and debunking. The findings show that tattoos among Balinese women are not merely aesthetic but represent acts of self-expression and gender negotiation. Predominant motifs include flowers and nature-inspired designs, which convey feminist nuances and challenge patriarchal perceptions. Tattoos also serve as a medium for women to assert equality with men while reclaiming bodily autonomy. In conclusion, tattoos on Balinese women function as cultural texts that reflect both resistance and adaptation to social norms. This study implies the importance of recognizing body art as a legitimate form of women's cultural agency. Future research may explore comparative perspectives on tattoo practices across diverse communities to deepen understanding of gender and cultural identity.

Keywords: Tattoos; Balinese Women; Social Body

1 Introduction

The human body in sociology is not understood solely as a biological entity, but rather as a social construct that reflects the values, norms, and ideologies of society [1]. One of the forms of body management in popular culture is the practice of tattooing [2]. In Bali, tattoos are generally associated with masculinity, but in the last decade, more and more women have chosen to tattoo their bodies. This phenomenon creates social tension because

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it is considered contrary to Hindu religious values that emphasise the principles of *ahimsa* and society's moral view of women's bodies. Tattoos in this context are not simply aesthetic, but become symbols of identity negotiation, spaces of resistance, and forms of self-expression that transcend the boundaries of traditional culture. The human body is not only present as a biological entity, but also as a meaningful social construct [3,4]. In the study of the sociology of the body, the body is understood as a representation of the values, norms, and ideologies of the society that shapes it. One form of body management that is developing in popular culture is the practice of tattooing. In Bali, tattoos are generally associated with masculinity, but the phenomenon shows that many women also choose to tattoo their bodies. This phenomenon causes social tension because it is contrary to Hindu religious values that uphold the principles of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and are considered risky in terms of health and morality.

Writings about tattoos have been written by Atkinson [5] which states that tattoos are symbols of *self-expression* and *subcultural resistance*, as well as aesthetic and commodification objects. In many societies, tattoos are related to issues of social class, masculinity/femininity, criminality, and body art. Naser et al. also conducted an anthropological study on tattoos in Indonesia. [6] who conducted research on tattoos in the Mentawai community. Tracking of research results and journal articles about tattooed women in Balinese society has not been found. Likewise, studies on this problem outside Bali are very rare. There are two articles in the journal, namely Nugraha, Hatuwe, and Sary articles [7] entitled "Perception of Tattoos for Women with Tattoos in Samarinda City" in the Journal of Communication Sciences. This article is the result of qualitative research using a communication approach. This article finds that the reasons women get tattooed are peer pressure, curiosity, and imitation. Each tattoo holds memories for its owner.

Tattoos are not just pictures on the skin. It is a symbol that carries personal and social meaning. In the context of Balinese women, tattoos are not only an expression of aesthetics or identity, but also a space for negotiation between the personal body and the social body. In the midst of cultural dominance that emphasizes women's purity and submission, the presence of tattoos creates a new discourse about the body, power, and resistance. The relationship between women and professional painters is also not free from power dynamics. The determination of the shape, location, and price of tattoos is an arena of attraction that reflects the dominance of capital—both symbolic, economic, and cultural capital. This phenomenon places the practice of tattooing within the framework of market exchange, where the body becomes a commodity and a contested symbolic arena.

In addition, tattoos contain denotative and connotative meanings that can be interpreted through a semiotic approach. In this case, tattoos are cultural texts that store narratives about identity, experiences, and social positions. By reading tattoos as signs, we can trace how Balinese women build their sense of self through their marked bodies. This article aims to examine the background of Balinese women choosing tattoos as their social body accessories, explore the power relationship between tattoo makers and female consumers, and uncover the symbolic meaning of tattoos in the context of contemporary Balinese culture.

2 Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a sociology of the body perspective as the primary analytical framework. This approach focuses on understanding the body not only as a biological entity, but also as a social and cultural space imbued with meaning, including through body modification practices such as tattooing. Data were collected

through in-depth interviews with six Balinese female informants with tattoos, who came from diverse backgrounds: tourism employees, housewives, and entrepreneurs. The informants were selected purposively, considering the diversity of their experiences, motives, and interactions with the tattoo industry. Additionally, several professional tattooists in Bali were interviewed to gain perspectives from tattoo service providers.

Participatory observation was conducted by attending tattoo studio sessions, observing interactions between tattooists and female clients, and documenting the process. These observations were supplemented by visual documentation that recorded the shape, motif, and placement of tattoos on the body, for in-depth analysis of their symbolic meanings and messages.

Data analysis was conducted in stages. First, market exchange theory is used to examine the power dynamics and negotiations that occur between tattooists and female clients, encompassing the design negotiation process, pricing, and social relationships that develop during the tattooing process. Second, semiotic analysis is applied to interpret tattoos as cultural texts, examining how the symbols within tattoos function to shape identity, express values, or convey specific social messages within the unique Balinese cultural context. This combinatory approach allows the study to not only describe the technical practice of tattooing but also uncover the dimensions of meaning, social relations, and identity construction.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Background of Balinese Women Wearing Tattoos

Tattoo is a body art that has a long history in various parts of the world, including in the archipelago. Globally, the oldest evidence of tattoo practice was found in the mummy of Otzi the Iceman (c. 3,250 BC), which had more than 60 marks on its skin, presumably for medicinal and ritual purposes [8]. In the Pacific island region, including Polynesia, tattoos became symbols of social identity, courage, and attachment to the community [9].

In Bali, the ancient tradition of tattooing was once part of the culture, although it is not as intensely documented as in other regions such as Mentawai or Dayak. Some sources say that tattoos in the ancient Balinese context had symbolic and spiritual functions, especially in relation to occult protection or markers of group identity. However, modernisation and colonial influences made this practice dim, until tattoos reappeared in a contemporary form in the era of tourism and globalisation [10].

Nowadays, women with tattoos in Bali have become an interesting social phenomenon to research. From the perspective of the sociology of the body, tattoos on Balinese women are not just aesthetic ornaments, but a form of *body narrative*—the skin as a canvas that contains personal stories, values, and resistance to conservative social norms [11]. The choice of motif, location, and size of tattoos often reflects personal identity, life experiences, or even political and gender statements.

The influence of globalisation and tourism brought in international tattoo styles, ranging from old school, tribal, watercolour, and realism. Balinese women who choose to get tattoos often combine modern elements with local cultural symbols such as barong, rangda, frangipani flower motifs, or Balinese Hindu symbols that have spiritual meaning. This creates a form of cultural hybridisation, combining local identity with a global aesthetic.

In an interview, Eka Putri Jayanti (37), a hotel employee in Kuta who has tattoos on her arms and back, explained that her reason for getting them was:

“alasan membuat tato karena sudah terpesona dengan seni tato sedari kecil, sepertinya banyak terinspirasi dari Papa. Sudah pernah iseng minta izin waktu kecil dan diizinkan hanya jika sudah dewasa dan bisa cari uang sendiri. Tapi keputusan itu lekas datang saat punya suami, karena beruntung ada keluarga kecil dan keluarga besar yang selalu support keputusan Putu. Jadi tidak butuh waktu lama setelah menikah dalam pengambilan keputusan tsb”

Meaning:

"The reason I got the tattoos was because I've been fascinated by the art of tattooing since I was little, probably inspired by my father. I'd asked permission as a kid, and he only allowed me to do it when I was an adult and could earn my own money. But the decision came quickly when I got a husband. Fortunately, I have a small and extended family that always supports Putu's decisions. So it didn't take long after we got married to make the decision."

Eka's story reflects that tattoos for some Balinese women are not just an aesthetic trend, but also have spiritual and emotional meaning. However, on the social side, tattooed women in Bali still face stigma. Tattoos are often associated with deviant behaviour or courage against norms. In the context of Balinese culture that still upholds customs and the value of politeness, tattoos on women can be considered a form of *cultural transgression*. However, more and more young women view tattoos as a symbol of freedom of expression, self-empowerment, and respect for their own bodies [12].

The informant admitted that he was fascinated by tattoo art since childhood, inspired by his father, who also had tattoos. This desire had been conveyed since childhood, but it was only allowed when they were adults and had their own income. The decision to get a tattoo got stronger after marriage, with the full support of her husband and extended family. For informants, tattoos are a form of artistic expression that is also part of the formation of self-image. The informant admitted that he had been fascinated by tattoo art since childhood, inspired by the figure of a father who also had tattoos. This interest is not only present as an aesthetic impulse, but as a form of affection and identification with the father figure as a role model. Although the desire to have a tattoo has been conveyed since childhood, its realisation only occurs when the informant is an adult and has their own income. This momentum provides social legitimacy as well as autonomy over his body. After marriage, the decision to get a tattoo has the full support of her husband and extended family, which reinforces the belief that tattoos are not a form of deviation, but rather part of legitimate self-expression.

From the perspective of the sociology of the body, this experience shows how the body is not only understood biologically, but also as a social and symbolic construct. In line with the thinking of Bryan S. Turner and Chris Shilling, the body is the locus through which identities, social norms, and power structures are produced and negotiated. In this context, tattoos are a medium through which the subject builds *agency* over his body, as well as responds to the social relations around him. The tattooed body is not merely an aesthetic body, but a body that is interpreted, arranged, and displayed within a certain cultural framework.

Meanwhile, from cultural studies, tattoos can be seen as a form of *cultural text* or a cultural text that is full of meaning. In Stuart Hall's thought, identity is not fixed, but is constantly formed through symbolic representation and practice. Tattoos, in this case, serve as a form of visual representation of personal or collective narratives—whether it's family values, emotional experiences, or affirmations of adopted aesthetic values. The process of choosing an image, the location of the tattoo, and the time of implementation, are all part of a *cultural performance* that conveys a message about who the individual is, how he wants to be understood, and how he negotiates his position in society.

Thus, the decision to get a tattoo cannot be separated from the broader sociocultural dimension. Tattoos are not just paintings on the skin, but symbols of resistance to dominant

norms, the search for identity, and the affirmation of bodily autonomy in a society that often regulates the normative representation of the body.

In the process of making tattoos, the informant already has the concept of the drawing before coming to the tattoo studio, but still discusses the design with the artist. The selection of tattoo artists takes into account reputation, quality of work, gender (especially for designs that require a finer touch), as well as the cleanliness and safety of the tool. Although artists rarely provide direct advice, they usually show a portfolio of works as a reference. Power relations are collaborative, where the client retains full control over the design and placement of the tattoo, while the artist acts as the technical executor at the client's request.

In the process of making tattoos, the informant already has the concept of the drawing before coming to the tattoo studio, but still discusses the design with the artist. The selection of tattoo artists is carried out selectively, taking into account reputation, the quality of the work, gender (especially for designs that require a more subtle and intimate touch), as well as the hygiene and safety aspects of the tools used. Although artists rarely provide direct design-related advice, they usually show portfolios as a reference and an open dialogue space. In this relationship, power is collaborative—the client retains complete control over the design and placement of the tattoo, while the artist acts as a technical executor with his or her artistic expertise to realise the client's wishes.

Within the framework of the sociology of the body, the relationship between the informant and the tattoo artist reflects how the body becomes an arena for the production of meaning and self-control. In line with the thinking of Chris Shilling and Bryan Turner, the body is understood as a project that is consciously managed by the individual. The selection of images, the location of tattoos on the body, and the selection of artists show that individuals are not passive to social constructions about their bodies, but rather actively shape and manage representations of themselves through the body. In this case, the body becomes a medium of expression of cultural identity and agency. The informant is not only "tattooed," but also actively directs the process of symbolising his body—a form of *self-fashioning* in contemporary society.

3.2 Denotative and Connotative Meaning of Tattoos

Through the lens of critical theory, especially in Michel Foucault's tradition of the body and power, the relationship between the informant and the tattoo artist is not only a technical relationship, but also contains a dimension of power being negotiated. Although tattoo artists have professional authority, the relationship is not domineering because the informant has symbolic power over his own body. This shows a form of resistance to the traditional power structures that usually govern how the body should be displayed (e.g. a woman's body must be "natural", free of tattoos, or subject to certain moral norms). This process can be read as the practice of *self-governance*, in which individuals consciously claim authority over their bodies, transcending institutional and moral control.

Moreover, in a critical approach to cultural production, tattoos can be read as a form of "co-production" between consumers (clients) and producers (artists). Here occurs the *decentralization of artistic power*, in which the client is not merely the object of the artist's artistic action, but becomes an active subject who directs the form of the work. This challenges the capitalistic assumption of art as a one-way produced commodity.

In the perspective of cultural studies, especially those that emphasize representation and identity (e.g. according to Stuart Hall), the process of making tattoos is not only a physical act, but also a symbolic practice that constructs social meaning. The discussion between informant and artist reflects the process of symbolic negotiation in creating cultural texts on the body. Tattoos are not only the final result, but also a process of representation that involves the choice of values, aesthetics, and identity.

Gender factors in the selection of artists also contain an important cultural dimension. The choice to use gender-specific artists, especially for sensitive body parts or designs that are perceived to require a soft touch, shows how the body still operates within a social framework influenced by gender norms and perceptions of comfort and safety. Thus, the practice of tattooing is inseparable from broader social structures, including gender relations, body aesthetics, and the construction of morality.

The denotative meaning of tattoos on the informant's body is a visual representation in the form of flowers, lettering (in Sanskrit letters), and random designs according to aesthetics. Connotatively, tattoos are a symbol of self-expression, pride in identity, and a form of respect for art. For the informant, tattoos do not necessarily change social behaviour, but he chooses certain clothes to maintain modesty at formal or religious events. Tattoos are also a part of social interaction, where she feels more comfortable with female tattoo artists due to the more fluid communication.

4 Conclusion

Tattoos on Balinese women represent a complex social phenomenon that combines personal expression with the cultural structures regulating the female body. This study finds that, beyond their aesthetic function, tattoos serve as symbolic acts of identity formation, resistance, and negotiation of gender norms within Balinese society. By tattooing their bodies, women not only reclaim autonomy over their physical selves but also challenge patriarchal and traditional discourses that marginalize female agency. These findings highlight the broader implications of tattoos as a site of contestation where art, gender equality, and cultural transformation intersect. Theoretically, this research enriches discussions on body politics, feminist cultural studies, and the sociology of art. Practically, it suggests that tattoos should be understood not merely as stigmatized markers but as valid cultural expressions that reflect ongoing shifts in Balinese gender relations. Future research should expand to comparative studies across different regions or focus on intergenerational perspectives to examine how tattoos function in shaping identity and social acceptance over time. Additionally, exploring the role of media, tourism, and digital culture could provide deeper insights into the evolving meanings of tattoos for Balinese women in a globalized context.

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