

MATIGSALUG-MANOBO PANGATAB: A SKIN ART OF BEAUTY, REVERENCE, AND UNITY

Freddielyn B. Pontemayor¹, Estrella Y. Dacillo², Cleopha Mae T. Pacaldo³, Ma. Mea Stephanie G. Salubo⁴, Leonora L. Emperador⁵, Brigido D. Lacaran⁶, Johnny Maasab⁷, Ailen Jean Maasab⁸, Maridel Lacaran⁹

^{1,2,3} Language Education Department, Central Mindanao University
University Town, Musuan, Bukidnon, 8710 Philippines

⁵ University Laboratory High School, Central Mindanao University
University Town, Musuan, Bukidnon, 8710 Philippines

^{6,7,8,9} Barangay Sinuda, Kitaotao, Bukidnon, 8710 Philippines

Correspondence Tel.: +639263294942, Email: f.freddielyn.pontemayor@cmu.edu.ph¹

ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the pang-o-tub (body arts) of the Manobo-Matigsalug Indigenous Cultural Community in Sinuda, Kitaotao, Bukidnon in terms of loob (interior), labas (exterior), lalim (depth), and lawak (space/extent) from Covar's notion. A descriptive qualitative research design, specifically indigenous research was employed to conduct a community-based data collection. Referral, in-depth interviews, FGD, and video recordings with tribe elders, youths, and children. The study documented the design/figure and deduced the meaning of pang-o-tub/pangatab. Despite the rapid growth of technology and exposure to the Western lifestyle, the traditional pang-o-tub of the Manobo-Matigsalug people is still practiced. The typical patterns of the Matigsalug's skin art are usually inked showing two to three lines, the facial features of a datu, a spear, and portrayal of the design of their tribal clothes and other visual art materials like a mat (banig) or basket (binabay). Their pang-o-tubs are found on the upper portion of their wrist/forearm, breast, stomach/abdomen up to back/loin or waistline. The meaning of their pang-o-tubs/pangatabs revolves around their oneness as a cultural group, fertility and adornment for women, veneration for their warriors (bagani) and leaders, and of their communion with nature.*

Keywords: pang-o-tub/pangatab, Manobo-Matigsalug, concept of loob, labas, lalim, lawak

1. INTRODUCTION

Long before the arrival of the Spaniards in the country, the practice and influence of traditional tattooing among the natives, particularly in the Visayas has been widespread. This was proven true when the Spaniards called the natives "pintados" because their bodies were filled with tattoos [1]. The term pintados was first used when by a Spanish friar, conquistador, a colonist during the 16th century [2]. According to Kazandjieva & Tsankov (2007), the word tattoo originates in the Tahitian word tatau brought to Europe in the late XXVIII by Captain Cook after a trip made to Tahiti and Polynesia [3]. Based on several studies, it is believed that tattoos' significant contribution also include cultural aspect being a cosmetic and a decorative adornment. Similarly, Lars Krutak [4], a tattoo hunter and scholar, studied the process and meaning of tattoos in North America. According to his research, tattoos serve as adornment, identity, status and position, therapeutics, apotropaism and mimicry.

It was mentioned in the article "A Look into Visayan: History and Folklore" [5] that when the Spaniards came to the Philippines, they were amazed by the natives not only because of how they cared for their physical well-being but also because of the colorful jewelry made of copper, silver, and gold as accessories. Aside from these, men were not left behind as they wore headgear and other accessories, and their bodies were filled with tattoos [6].

However, William Henry Scott mentioned in the first chapter of his book *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society*, "Batuk is the general term tattoo or palik in other places means the marking of a snake or lizard or any symbol. After 500 years, the traditional tattoo of the Visayan slowly faded. Today, traditional tattooing is alive in Mindanao and the Cordillera of Luzon regions [7].

Traditional tattooing in the Philippines is part of a ritual, and performed to indicate a certain community, group, or tribe. The tattoo is usually placed on the body as a mark of

bravery or a successful battle in a war, a symbol of rite of passage, protection from illnesses, and adornment. For the Cordillera region, batuk is a generic term for tattooing, which means marking (in the body) showing a snake or lizard and other designs: batek (for Kalinga), fatek (for Bontoc), and fatok (for Benguet) other terms that initially comes from the sharpened thing that penetrate the skin [2]. For Kalinga people, tattoos are the only living testament to the practice of traditional tattooing. Their batek is characterized by marking, decorating, and designing a material permanently [8].

In Mindanao, specifically for Manobo culture and other subcultures, tattoos are called pang-o-tub, or pangatab. The operator is nearly always a woman, or a so-called hermaphrodite, who has acquired a certain amount of skill in embroidering. The process is straightforward. A pigment is prepared by holding a plate or an olla, over a burning torch made of resin until enough soot has collected. Then without any previous drawing, the operator punctures, to a depth of approximately 2 millimeters, the part of the body that is to be tattooed. The blood that flows from these punctures is wiped off, usually with a bunch of leaves, and a portion of the soot from the resin is rubbed vigorously into the wounds with the hand of the operator [9]. From Garvan's observation, it is believed that this practice is usually performed during puberty age onwards. They also believed that having a tattoo is part of their ornamentation, identification of their captives, rites of passage, and symbol of fertility. A study conducted by Rragio and Paluga in 2019 [10] also focused on pangatoeb in Pantaron using heuristic schema; however, this study focused on using the Filipino theory of Covar [11] *loob, labas, lalim, and lawak* [12] to expand more the meaning of Matigsalug's pangatab.

Nowadays, the Manobo-Matigsalug tribe in Sinuda, Kitaotao, Bukidnon continues the practice not because of the captive's identification but rather for ornamentation, power, the symbol of the group's identity, medicinal treatment, etc. At present, *pangatab* is no longer being practiced by the younger generations; indicating that this Matigsalug culture is slowly fading hence, the people who are practicing it are those who inherited the tradition from their elders like Datu Danny.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study used a descriptive-qualitative research design to illustrate or present the body arts and their meaning. The study was conducted at Barangay, Sinuda, Kitaotao, Bukidnon. The study employed a purposive sampling procedure in selecting the 15 informants. There were 5 parents/grandparents, 3 youths and 5 children, 1 *tigpangatab* or tattoo artist, and 1 respondent who volunteered being a recipient of an actual tattooing process.

Before the data gathering, the researchers followed the entry protocol, asked for permission, and presented the project to the Office of the Municipal Mayor, the Barangay Council, and the members of the Council of Elders of Federation of Matigsalug-Manobo Tribal Councils (FEMMATRICS). A MOA was also forged between CMU researchers and the community. The researchers also communicated/ sent a letter of intent to the National Commission on Culture and Arts (NCIP) and requested for a permit from the Institutional Ethics and Research Center (IERC) in Central Mindanao University (CMU). After the MOA signing, a PAMUHAT or ritual was conducted. Before the actual data gathering, the researchers asked the council to identify the respondents to be interviewed during the data gathering. During the data gathering, the respondents signed the informed consent and respondents' profile forms which specified the provisions on data privacy.

Data validation and verification were conducted, and the results were presented to the informants and the community.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tattooing among Matigsalug women is done before and after menstruation. For instance, many children had their first *pang-o-tub* aged 5-7 as part of their cultural identity. Most respondents had the same design of 2-4 layers or lines found on their right wrist. According to their elders, they started to have *pang-o-tub* at the age of 5-7 because their skin is still tight and is easy to achieve the desired design by the tattoo artist and the person getting the tattoo. Below is the detailed explanation and illustration of their *pangatab*: "Pangatab" is the term that refers to the body arts or tattoos among the Matigsalug-Manobo Tribe who settled in Sinuda, Kitaotao, Bukidnon. This body art is present and visible among children, men, and women of the said tribe, representing their overall identity.

During the data gathering, three respondents were interviewed about their body arts or *pangatab*. The first respondent was Bae Martina Sayad, who is a 54-year-old

married woman, and the leader of the tribe's *panubaran* (church). Her *pangatab* (body art/tattoo), is placed on her right arm and was tattooed a year ago by her nephew. The design is a rectangular shape divided into four parts with a straight line above (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Bae Martina's pangatab

Bae Martina expressed her liking to the design of her tattoo. To her, it was the most attractive among all the designs visible in the Manobo-Matigsalug Tribe. This design is also evident in the patterns of their tribal clothes. It was her willingness and sense of responsibility that pushed her to have a *pangatab* or tattoo.

Pangatab. According to Bae Martina, is of paramount importance in the culture of Matigsalug-Manobo Tribe. It represents their identity and serves as an indication that they belong to the tribe. As the head of the *panubaran* (church), she feels responsible for being a good model to her fellow tribal members, especially to the younger generation. One way of showing that is through *pagpangatab* (tattooing), which indicates that she embraces, feels proud, and takes pride in being a Matigsalug. For her, this body print represents her role and responsibility to the community as the leader of the *panubaran*. Thus, the meaning of Bae Martina's *pang-o-tub/pangatab* is governed by the culture of the Manobo-Matigsalug Tribe and her function to society.

She also added that she did not experience any discrimination regarding her *pang-o-tub/pangatab*. Instead, people get curious about her body art and would tend to ask about its meaning. She would then respond that having a tattoo or *pangatab* is part of their culture. Every Manobo should have their body prints.

The second respondent was Bae Mirna, a 55-year-old married woman. She is one of the *bagtingon* or *mang-aawit* (singer) in the tribe and plays the instrument called *saluroy*. The design of her tattoo is composed of vertical and horizontal lines on her left arm as shown in Figure 2. She got her first body art or *pangatab* at the age of 11 and considers it as an indication of her identity and culture.

Bae Mirna's second tattoo, as shown in Figure 3, is a marking of her name along with his closest cousin named Titi. This *pangatab* holds a sentimental value to her as it serves as a precious memory of her deceased cousin. She was her closest relative and a dear childhood friend. Bae Mirna always remembers her cousin with this tattoo.

Another astonishing body art of Bae Mirna is her *pangatab* from her stomach/abdomen up to the back (loin) which has intricate designs as shown in Figure 4. She got this tattoo when she was only 13 years old. According to her, the design of the tattoo is inspired by the designs of a mat (*banig*) and basket (*binabay/liyam*).



Figure 2. Bae Mirna's first tattoo



Figure 3. Bae Mirna's *pangatab* of her name and her cousin



Figure 4. Bae Mirna's third tattoo

One of the respondents is Mercy, a seven-year-old girl with a "pangatab" (two straight lines) on her right wrist (Fig 5). According to her, this marks the age when she understood that she belongs to a certain tribe and this tattoo further represents her identity and belongingness. Aside from Mercy, two other boys had also their "pang-o-tub" on their wrists, though it was not emphasized as to where these tattoos should be placed among girls and boys, the only certain thing is that they got their tattoos when they reached seven years old. Another figure shown in Fig. 6 is a pang-o-tub of siblings in the community, they were children of Jocelyn. They received their first *pangatab* when they were still 5 years old.



Fig. 5. Pangatab of Mercy, she received her tattoo when she was still 7 years old



Fig. 6. A three-line pangatab of a 7-year-old and 9-year-old boy

Another tattooed individual is Jocelyn, a 27-year-old married woman, who also had a tattoo on her left hand (two straight lines) (Fig. 7). She said she also had this body print when she was 7. According to her, this *pangatab* represents her identity as a Matigsalug. It symbolizes that no matter where she goes, she has this identity with her that can be recognized easily by their fellow tribal members.



Fig. 7. Jocelyn's first pang-o-tub

Another "pangatab" that is highly prominent on Bae Marita's body is the tattoo that is being printed wrapping all around her waist, resembling the design printed on their garments. She got the tattoo from her aunt (the tattoo artist) when she reached her teenage years, around 15 to 16 years old, marking the age wherein she is ready for courtship. Aside from these two tattoos, Bae also got two peculiar tattoos that looked like faces, which according to one tribal

council member Datu Danny, are the faces of their “Bagani” or their tribal heroes (heroes of the community). These peculiar tattoos can be found on the upper part of her two breasts. She got these “pang-o-tub” when she reached the marrying age, indicating that she was ready to marry and have children (shown in Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Facial portrayal of a Datu (Hulagway sa datu) a pangatab of Bae Marita found on the right breast

In summary, *pangatab* among women of the said tribe further represents that they are artists, which means they can sing, play different instruments, perform different dances of their tribe, weave, knit, and even do “pang-o-tub”. This means that if a woman of their tribe lacks these body prints, they are less beautiful as their standards of aesthetics, beauty, artistry, bravery, and talents are measured by how many tattoos are present in a woman’s body. The more body prints a woman has, the more beautiful she is in the eyes of the men who belong to the same tribe.

Apart from children and women having these body prints, men of this tribe also have their “pangatab”. Datu Danny, one of the tribal leaders of their community, is a tattoo artist, also has prominent markings on his wrist (two straight lines on his left hand) when he was seven years old. Like Mercy, Jocelyn, and the other children, Datu Danny already also knew their tattoos are indication of their belongingness to the Matigsalug Tribe. Aside from these lines, he also had a tattoo on his chest when he was 20. The embedded tattoo is two spears crossed, forming an “X” shape (Fig.9). According to Datu Danny, he had this tattoo as protection from enemies and other negative entities. It made him feel secure and safe when he had this print. Moreover, these spears represent the weapons they used to protect their tribe from enemies.



Fig. 9. Spear pangatab of a tattoo artist, Johny Maasab

He said that his first experience making tattoos was when he was 18 years old and embedded two straight lines on the right hand of his girlfriend, now his wife, Bae Aileen. Datu Danny added that they do not require all the members of their tribe to do the ‘pangatab’. Those who

are willing to be marked will be given a tattoo, but those who do not want it also practice freedom of choice in their tribe and are not obliged to have body prints.

Furthermore, Datu Danny said he got this skill and ability (tattooing skills) from his grandmother. Based on this information and the previous interview statements of the members of the tribe, the original tattoo artists were women, and some of the members of the tribe were willing to have a *pangatab* because aside from being “identity” and “belongingness” markers, these prints also mean “unity”. In the figure below, Datu Johny and a tribe member are seen as he volunteered to be tattooed and showed us the basic process of the Manobo’s traditional tattooing.



Fig. 10. The process of pagpangatab by Datu Johny and his volunteer

4. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the labas (exterior) represent the appearance/design/figure of the Manobo-Matigsalug’s *pangatab*, which includes: two to three straight lines, a facial figure of a datu, a spear, and portrayal of the design of their tribal clothes and other visual art materials like mat (banig) and basket (binabay). The loob (interior) is how this pang-o-tub gave value to their cultural identity or sense of belongingness to the indigenous group. Their pang-o-tubs are found on the upper portion of their wrist/forearm, breast, stomach/abdomen up to back/loin or waistline. The lalim (depth), aside from being part of the indigenous community, their pang-o-tubs represent adornment, and an indication of fertility, high regard and respect to their community, their veneration to their leaders and warriors (bagani)

and their communion with nature. They believed that nature is connected to their lives as the source of life and livelihood. Furthermore, lawak (space), the pang-o-tub of Manobo-Matigsalug revolves around their community. Their pangatab is not personal or subjective but always dependent on their culture and their great belief in their Magbabaya/Manama, who gave them all things and lessons taught by their leaders. The study also revealed that the standard pattern (two to three straight lines) pang-o-tub represents unity, love for nature and respect to their leaders and their community and the Salug River, the river which which their tribe name was based.

5. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that more studies can be conducted to focus on other forms of Manobo-Matigsalug arts and customary laws using the concept of Covar and other lenses.

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