



Sacred Tattoos: Construction of Identity

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Abstract

This case study examines the roles of sacred tattoos in the construction of identity among Thais in the contemporary Thai context. Multiple voices of sacred tattoo wearers were juxtaposed and valued equally to represent the unheard voices of sacred tattoo wearers in the present day. As a qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted with nine Thai sacred tattoo wearers at a sacred tattoo parlor in Bangkok from May to December 2019. The participants' narratives were then analyzed based on the frameworks of the seven dimensions of religion, globalization, intertextuality, and identity construction to determine the roles of sacred tattoos in the construction of identity among Thais in the contemporary context. The main findings reveal that sacred tattoos have shifted from being in the magical discourse to the fashion discourse due to the advent of globalization in the modern era. Cultural hybridization promotes the intertextuality to semiotically shift the perceptions towards sacred tattoos from being magical or peculiar to fashionable and trendy. Nonetheless, the traditional sense of sacred tattoos still exists in a sophisticated way created by the new generation of Thais influenced by globalized cultural flow. This leads to a new construction of individual and social identities among Thais as being free spirits rather than believers in magic.

Introduction

Most people may visualize tattoos as patterns imprinted on the human body with pictures, alphabets, or numbers which embody diverse stories and meanings. Different sizes, colors, and locations on the body may also reflect diverse significances of the tattoos. These vary in different societies where tattooing is viewed as either a means for individual expression and creativity or a belief in its magical influences on mortality, authority, or likability. As a tattoo is a permanent form of body

modification, its meaning or significances carry and signify an identity of the individuals.

Tattooing has been studied through the lens of various sciences. Through the historical sociological lens, it is viewed as a narrator of the dynamic society through different time periods (Polhemous & Housk, 1996). From a cultural perspective, it is seen as a mediator of disparate classes (Demello, 2000). It is also interpreted as a mark of civilization in the eyes of anthropologists (Rubin, 1988). Moreover, tattooing is perceived as peculiar social

behavior from the view of sociolinguists (Sanders, 1989). These days, tattooing has become more acceptable and therefore gained more popularity especially among young generations (Demello, 2000). Multiple forms of popular media culture have had a great impact on the recent popularity of tattoos. For instance, a myriad of well-known brands uses tattooed presenters in their commercials. Also, several famous entertainers in the field of music, films, and sports are tattooed. These have created a new role of tattoos in the modern era, which can be referred to as the new tattoo subculture (Velliquette, Murry, & Evers, 2006).

Furthermore, investigating the individuals' purposes of having tattoos can help us better understand how these factors contribute to the construction of identity. A useful approach to understanding the roles of these activities and images in the contemporary context are explained in the concept of myths which are cultural stories that have been widely acknowledged to reflect the fundamental needs of human beings (Barthes, 1972). These myths are often deemed sacred as they are able to express the stories and portray the essence of what individuals need to hold on to so as to continue their life satisfactorily. To simplify, they act like a spiritual anchor which enables people to believe in their own identity and actions. Consequently, people attempt to create heroic icons or profound statements to reflect their identity which is sacred, dynamic, and continuous (Mcadams, 1993).

In Thailand, sacred tattoos can be traced back to the period before the country itself was established. Since the history of Thai sacred tattoos is not documented, it is too vague to concretely define how such tattoos emerged. However, scholars such as Littlewood (2012) agree that sacred tattoos are originated from sacred geometry, which was derived from the Yantra sciences of the Vedic grimoires or textbooks of magic. The earliest parts of the Vedas emerged from documenting astronomical phenomena, which then developed into three sciences. The first one is the science of sacred heavenly geometry found as natural patterns in the cosmic nature or the geometry of Yantra design. The second is the science of vibrational harmonies or Kata chanting. The third is the science of numerology or the inclusion of numerical symbolism with the Yantra (Suvannarupo, Siripariyayanusas, Inthanon, & Chanrang, 2019). These Vedas were typically used to perform magical spells, charms, and divination. They could also be used to summon or invoke supernatural

entities like angles, spirits, and demons, or even create magical objects such as talismans and amulets. Such Vedic grimoires are believed to be the oldest magical sciences existing, which influenced beliefs and practices in many cultures including Hinduism and Buddhism. When both religions arrived in ancient Thai societies and neighboring countries namely Cambodia and Laos, they were incorporated with Animism, which was what the locals believed in at the time. The local Thais then adopted both sciences and mixed them with their own. Thus, Thai sacred geometry developed to the point where it gained its own stance (Muenhong, 2016).

Moreover, following the Brahman, Thais – especially men – in the Sukhothai period imprinted sacred Yantra onto their skin in a form of tattoos. The aim was to be invulnerable in battle since they were mostly involved in wars. Later in the Ayutthaya period, the government used tattoos to identify its people in two ways. The first way was to mark men on the wrist when joining the military. The second way was to mark convicts on the forehead (Buayaem, 2013; Nitmai, 2007). Although these methods were not undertaken sacredly, many people seemed to subconsciously connect sacred tattooing with non-sacred tattooing (Nitmai, 2007). As a result, tattooing seemed to be viewed negatively. Nonetheless, not everyone included sacred tattoos with ordinary ones. Several groups of people still carried on the sacred tattooing practices. Most of them were involved in commerce, therefore, they needed to travel to trade. Hence, amulets and Yantras were carried with them with the beliefs that they eluded them from danger and made them to be likable by those they met. Since these artifacts were not easy to be kept and tended to be stolen, the magical powers were transferred to the form of sacred tattoos which were imprinted on the skin (Gibbins, 2016). However, several rules were needed to be practiced in order to maintain their magical power. For instance, the tattoo wearers must keep the Five Precepts of Buddhism, and refrain from consuming certain foods providing cooling effects such as melons, aubergines, and cucumbers. The reason for this was to prevent the spells or the chemicals which were put into the skin whilst tattooing from fading or diluting. Such practices have been kept among sacred tattoo wearers till these days (Suvannarupo, Siripariyayanusas, Inthanon, & Chanrang, 2019; Puridumrongkul, 2010).

Additionally, sacred tattoos were originally viewed as supernatural due to their magical influence. A common pattern is a tiger or a lion since it is believed

that these two animals are strong and powerful. Thus, it represents strength, courage, and serves as a protector against bad luck or evil spirits. With such a belief to cast danger away, sacred tattoos were therefore widely used in the military. Later, from the Ayuttaya period to the reign of King Rama IV of the Chakkri dynasty, non-sacred tattoos were also used to identify prisoners. However, most people seemed to include those with sacred tattoos on the prisoners. Therefore, tattooed people were generally viewed as criminals (Buayaem, 2013; Nitmai, 2007).

Although many Thais kept the traditional sacred tattooing, they were exposed to foreign cultures such as Chinese, Indian, Malay, and Western through trading since the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods. However, international trade started to prosper in the reign of King Rama V of the Chakri dynasty during the colonial period (Maneerat, 2016; Nitmai, 2007). These merchants brought with them their beliefs and practices. Hence, Thais started to mix their own culture with those from the rest of the world. Western tattoo arts, therefore, played a major role in shifting the traditional Thai sacred tattooing to become more fashion orientated. Several research studies concluded that western tattoo arts carry stories of the wearers and they act as a sign to negotiate for identities (Wilson, 2008; Velliquette, Murry, & Evers, 2006; Nichols & Foster, 2005; Demello, 2000; Pritchard, 2000; Lentini 1998; Hardy, 1995). However, these Western tattoos do not hold magical enchantment like the traditional Thai sacred tattoos. In the modern era, with the solid and constant flow of cultures, the world has become capitalized, commercialized, and westernized in a sense. Globalization has played a critical role in shaping people's perceptions (Apparudai, 1996). Thailand began to tremendously embrace Western cultures. Popular media cultures seem to heavily promote the roles of tattoos and sacred tattoos as a means to express individual stances and identities as seen on television or the internet. Hence, the gap between sacred and fashion tattoos seems to be narrowed. Both genders also have gained somewhat equal rights and statuses in contemporary Thai society. Sacred tattooing is no longer only practiced by men, but women also are tattooed so as to negotiate for their identities and express their stances (Sae-Ueng, 2016; Puridumronggul, 2010).

With the force of popular media culture and cultural flow through globalization, the perceptions towards tattoos and sacred tattoos have shifted from magical enchantments to broader identity negotiators.

On the other hand, tattoos and sacred tattoos seem to have gained wide acceptance among the younger generation as being current and fashionable. Nonetheless, many people still seem to negatively view those, both male and female, with tattoos and sacred tattoos as convicts or deviants. This paradox leads to the questions why many people prefer having tattoos or sacred tattoos when they are likely to face criticism from society or even from their loved ones. What's more, although a number of studies concerning Yantra and tattoos have been conducted in Thailand in the domain of religious beliefs (Suvannarupo, Siripariyatyanusas, Inthanon, & Chanrang, 2019; Muenhong, 2016; Chuenchom, 2010), meaning of communication (Sae-Ueng, 2016), types and patterns (Niwat, 2020; Maneerat, 2016; Buayaem, 2013; Petchtongna, 2008), perceptions (Thongmueng & Panyapa, 2019; Prasithrathsint, 2015), and gender identity (Puridumronggul, 2010), none of them have explored Yantras and sacred tattoos through the lens of intertextuality and identity construction using narratives. Thus, this qualitative study bridges the literature gap and provides a different insight into the study of sacred tattoos in Thailand.

Objective

This case study aims to explore the roles of sacred tattoos in the construction of identity among Thais in the Thai contemporary context.

Conceptual framework

The frameworks of the seven dimensions of religion and globalization were used to explain the roles of sacred tattoos in a Thai context. Then, the findings were intertextualized to ascertain the identity construction of sacred tattoo wearers as illustrated in Figure 1.

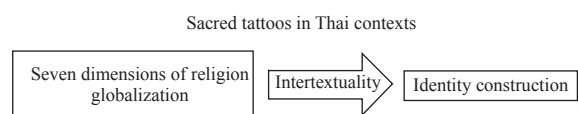


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

1. The Seven Dimensions of Religion

As sacred tattoos possess a religious quality, their implications can be analyzed by the framework of seven dimensions of religion initiated by Smart (2002). Aiming to understand a human phenomenon - why

people act as they do, he proposed that all religions possess certain recognizable elements which can be classified into seven dimensions. The first is the practical and ritual dimension. That is, all humans carry on somewhat similar religious practices either individually or as a group, such as worship, praying, and ceremonies. The second is the experimental and emotional dimension which describes how people react when encountering something they believe is profound. This can be expressed through emotions such as bliss, ecstasy, devotion, liberation, inner peace, mystery, dread, and guilt. The third dimension is narrative or mythic which explains such a practice as people telling stories so as to pass on what they believe to others or the coming generations. The fourth dimension is doctrinal and philosophical which aims to provide the reasons why people believe or follow such a religion, practice, or ritual. The fifth is the ethical and legal dimension. This justifies ideas and rules that shape religious behaviors, such as the Five Precepts and the Ten Commandments. The sixth is the social and institution dimension. Such a dimension elaborates the social outgrowth of religious experience which can be seen in the form of places of worship like temples, churches, and masjids. The last and perhaps the most relevant to the study is the material dimension which refers to objects that symbolize or manifest the sacred or supernatural such as artifacts, images, talismans, and Yantras including sacred tattoos.

2. Globalization

Defined as 'the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organization of social life on a global scale, and growth of a shared global consciousness' (Ritzer, 2008), globalization is perhaps one of the keynote phenomena in the 21st century. The growing influence of technologies and cultural flow stemming from this borderless phenomenon is irrefutable. It enormously affects a wide range of areas, notably politics, economics, and culture. In this study, the focus is on the cultural impact. Although globalization seems to promote a global cultural imperialism where diverse cultures are homogenized, several globalization theorists such as Inglis & Thorpe (2012); Crane (2008); Tomlinson (1999); Robertson (1992); Appadurai (1996) argue that globalization does not lead to cultural homogenization, but to a cultural heterogenization and hybridization of discourse. To elaborate, local cultures are not deterred or destroyed, rather they mix and match with global cultures in light of their own value and interest. Such a process can be

called globalization where local cultures become global and vice versa (Pieterse, 1994). In other words, globalization reinforces local cultures as well as produces new local cultures. This concept also relates to the idea of cultural creolization proposed by Hannerz (1987) that globalization is not just a mixture; it involves the creation of new cultures.

Similarly, since religion is a culture, globalized cultural flow also simultaneously creates religious globalization where local religions are hybridized with global religions. Hence, the new age religion where all religions are synchronized emerges. The concept of hybridization and creolization has proved insightful in highlighting the emergence of new forms of identity (Barker, 2000).

3. Intertextuality

The classic semiotic theory by Saussure (1959) explains that all objects exist on their own without a definite name. The name or the signifier that is used to signify such an object is created by an individual self or group. Therefore, such an object, or what is signified, can be decoded differently depending on the view of the viewers. This concept parallels the framework of identity construction proposed by Jenkins (2008) and Barker (2000) who stress that identity is not naturally or genetically born with each individual. By contrast, it is acquired from the environment and setting each individual lives in. As identity is learned and constructed through experiences, it can be changed periodically. This statement also supports a notion by Berger & Luckmann (1966) which emphasizes the dynamic property of identity that is created by the social changing process. It can be stable for a while; yet can be altered or developed.

It is, therefore, the right of each individual to choose what defines them. What one signifies or perceives oneself to show one's identity is also subjective. It can be varied in the view of others. Additionally, it can be changed from time to time depending on the environment and situation (Vygotsky, 1962). Such an idea also incorporates the concept of intertextuality derived from Bakhtin (1984) who believes that text is not merely an individual verbal entity but a social phenomenon. It is a product of multiple determinants that are specific to different classes, social groups, and communities. To simplify, none of the words we use are truly our own. We all borrow words and phrases from others. Every utterance we make is fundamentally heteroglossic – made up of numerous voices of numerous others who have used similar phrases and similar ideas before we used

them. Not that we are plagiarists but rather that every act of communication is a matter of dialogue. While Bakhtin (1984) seems to pay close attention to the social, historical, and human determinants, Rose (2007) emphasizes on intertextuality as the meaning of any digressive image or text each individual perceives. Thus, when going through text, one literally negotiates and interprets codes with pragmatic dimension. Such a notion is also aligned with the conclusion from Worton & Still (1990) who mentioned that the first person who interacts with a text is the first-hand producer of one's own interpretation depending on the individual's frame of reference. Also, Kristeva (1980) puts an emphasis on text, textuality, and their relation to ideological structures. In other words, everything has an intertextuality property which involves the redecoding or detextualization of a text, then the viewer creates a new concept or reconceptualizes what is signified. Simply put, the meaning of an object can be changed if it is placed in a different context. The identity can also be semiotically viewed as a text which is subjective and dynamic.

4. Identity Construction

With the sophistication of individual cognition and interaction, the identity of each individual is diverse in different social contexts. More than a single identity may be constructed when one is situated in different environments. This could influence the transferred learning system of oneself which subsequently affects the changes of individual identity. This is because individual identity is not static, but rather maneuvered by external factors such as when, where, why, and who one is with (Varien & Potter, 2008).

Aside from individual identity, one is also furnished with social identity notably when one socializes in social groups. When gathering as a group, one's identity tends to change according to members of the group, the level of engagement in the group, and the comparison between group members (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011). Moreover, one's social identity may differ when encountering with different material cultures. Since both individual and social identities can be shifted as per various factors both internally and externally, the two identities are co-constructed (Varien & Potter, 2008). What's more, as a group, one tends to take into account what is going on within the context. That is, social factors within the group are the interactive elements to shape group identities, activities, shared goals, and interactions (Van Dijk, 1998).

Additionally, when one is situated in a workplace, one's identity tends to be altered by certain rules and conditions one is conditioned with. This contributes to corporate identity where one chooses to identify oneself in a professional context. Such an identity is usually represented by projecting oneself on behalf of an organization. To elaborate, corporate identity is how an organization is perceived by others (Kulvisaechana, 2009). Although one's identity can be shaped by institutional regulations and policies, such an identity is usually regarded as the identity of an institution, not the identity of oneself (Van Dijk, 1998).

Since identity is not merely the process, but the product of discursive construction, identity is constructed within a situated discourse to maintain the social order occurring within such a discourse (Tann, 2010). That is, within a certain discourse, one's identity is constructed and prolonged. Since identity is dynamic and interactive, the ways one interacts with oneself and society allow each individual to identify one's individual and social identities within a situated discourse (Gee, 2011; Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011). When one is placed in a different discourse, both individual and social identities also change to adapt to a new context (Dwyer, 1998). The way such identities change depends on one's personal background, experiences, and shared individual goals within a group (Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Varien & Potter, 2008). That is, identity can be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in a variety of discourses.

As Thailand is rich in culture and traditions, these four frameworks – the seven dimensions of religion, globalization, intertextuality, and identity construction – provide a solid background for investigating identity construction among Thais by using such religious materials as sacred tattoos as a means to negotiate for the construction of identity.

Research methodology

1. Participants

As qualitative data can be purposively selected to serve the research objective, the number of participants in a qualitative study can be small so as to contribute rich information (Gerring, 2007; Battaglia, 2008), nine participants were purposively selected. All of them were Thai sacred tattoo wears and were customers at a tattoo parlor in Bangkok. They agreed to participate in the study without any monetary rewards. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to prevent

the disclosure of the participants' identities.

2. Research instruments

In-depth interviews were conducted to elicit the participants' perceptions toward the roles of sacred tattoos. The questions concerned the participants' involvement with sacred tattoos and the perceptions towards their identity through tattooing. Each interview question had been created based on the conceptual framework consisting of the seven dimensions of religion, globalization, intertextuality, and identity construction. The interviews were conducted in Thai to avoid language barriers. The interview questions are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Interview questions based on conceptual frameworks

Frameworks	Interview questions
The seven dimensions of religion	1. How strictly do you keep your religious practices? 2. How do sacred tattoos contribute to your religious beliefs?
Globalization	3. How are you aware of globalization and its effects on your life? 4. How does globalization affect tattoo wearers?
Intertextuality	5. How has the role of sacred tattoos in the past differed from those in the present day? 6. How do sacred tattoos affect modern and traditional lives?
Identity construction	7. How do sacred tattoos influence your personal and family identities? 8. How do sacred tattoos influence your social and corporate identities?

Table 2 Participants' backgrounds and the representation of their sacred tattoos

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital status	Religion	No. of fashion tattoos	No. of sacred tattoos	Year of having sacred tattoos	Occupation
Kajorn	54	M	Married	Buddhist	0	7	34	Civil servant
Malai	45	F	Widowed	Buddhist	0	5	17	Business owner
Supachai	42	M	Married	Buddhist	0	12	23	Business owner
Matinee	36	F	Single mother	Atheist	5	3	8	Fashion designer
Marisa	31	F	Engaged	Atheist	3	2	12	Reiki master
Tana	29	M	Single	Buddhist	5	2	11	Air steward
Napat	19	M	Single	Buddhist	2	7	4	Student
Chalita	19	F	Single	Buddhist	3	2	2	Student
Krit	18	M	Single	Buddhist	0	5	2	Student

Pseudonym	Role of sacred tattoos	Brief description of the role of sacred tattoos
Kajorn	A Remnant of The Past	A projection of traditional and magical heritage
Malai	A Charming Spell	A magical charm of likability and success
Supachai	A Holy Guardian	An anchor to preserve traditional practices
Matinee	A Liberated Spirit	A symbol of freedom of thoughts and actions
Marisa	A Reminder of a Journey	A reminder of life stories deemed salient
Tana	A Fashionista	A means to project the passion for fashion
Napat	A Bridge between Two Worlds	A connector between traditional and contemporary realms
Chalita	Peer Acceptance	A negotiator for individual and social identities
Krit	A Symbol of Masculinity	A redemption and representation of masculinity

3. Collection of data

The data was collected from May to December 2019. Each interview was conducted at a tattoo parlor in Bangkok for approximately one hour. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Since the interviews were in Thai, the transcripts were translated into English. The data was then reorganized and summarized to create the narratives of each participant. The narratives were then presented to each participant to ensure mutual understanding between the researcher and the participant (Gray, 2004).

4. Data analysis

Qualitative research focuses on context influences on data observation and interpretation (Duff, 2008). Hence, the transcribed data from the interview was analyzed based on the frameworks of the seven dimensions of religion, globalization, intertextuality, and identity construction.

Results

The narratives from the nine participants have been reorganized and summarized to showcase their personal backgrounds and their worldviews towards sacred tattoos in the domain of religious beliefs, globalization, and intertextuality, which would subsequently shape the construction of their identities.

A summary of the participants' backgrounds and the representation of their sacred tattoos is illustrated in Table 2.

Kajorn: A Remnant of The Past

Kajorn is a 54-year-old Thai civil servant. He is married with two children. Since he spent his childhood growing up in a Buddhist temple, his connection to religion has been relatively strong. He has always been interested in Buddhism and has strictly practiced the Five Precepts which prevent him from taking lives of sentient beings, stealing, committing sexual misconducts, lying, and intoxicating the body. Not only does Kajorn try to remain calm and uses reason to cope with problems, he also believes in magical spells. To him, supernatural entities play an important role in his life. They help him stay on a high road and prevent him from doing something sinful. A way of coping with and expressing such beliefs is to have sacred tattoos embodied on his skin. It was easy for him to get his first sacred tattoo done due to his surroundings. Living in a Buddhist temple at a young age, he was exposed not only to Buddhism but also magical spells. The 20-year-old Kajorn had his first sacred tattoo imprinted on his back at the temple he was living in and by a Buddhist monk he highly respected. The first sacred tattoo that Kajorn had was *Yant Takut-Maha-Ra-Ngab* because he was drawn into its magical powers to stun opponents or incoming danger. Any harmful objects such as swords or bullets are not able to penetrate the tattoo wearer's skin. It is also his favorite pattern along with *Yant Ar-Woot-Tang-Si* which represents the four enchanted weapons to protect the wearer from demons or dark spells. Although he has never had to literally get involved in any physical fights, he feels safe and reassured to have such an immortal blessing embodied within him. Realizing the influence of globalization, Kajorn respects and is open-minded to diverse cultures and practices. However, he has always strictly been following his original religious beliefs. Because of his work which prohibits him from visibly disclosing any tattoos, all of his seven sacred tattoos are under his clothes. Three of them are on his chest and four are on his back. Despite being unable to reveal his sacred tattoos at work, he is comfortable and proud to expose all of his tattoos to his family members and friends. Aside from sacred tattoos, Kajorn also has several collections of amulets and Yantras at home in the religious room and in his car at the steering wheel and the rear view mirror. These artifacts make him feel safe and secure while being with his family and whenever he travels.

Malai: A Charming Spell

Malai is a 45-year-old Thai woman who is widowed with three children. She is a strong and

independent business woman. Growing up in a conservative Thai family, she was restricted to follow certain traditions and practices. She was not allowed to have any piercings or tattoos. Her interests in sacred tattoos began at the age of 28 after being married to her late husband. This was the time when she had more freedom to do whatever she liked. Her late husband was a sacred tattoo wearer, and that had a great influence on her to step into sacred tattoo territory. At first, she began to like sacred tattoos because of their beautiful and intricate patterns. However, after she learned about their magical traits, she was even more drawn into sacred tattoos since she believed in their supernatural powers. Even though her husband has passed away, she still keeps having more sacred tattoos. Currently, Malai has five tattoos and all of them are sacred tattoos. The first and also her favorite sacred tattoo was *Yant Gara-Wek*, or bird of paradise, which is believed to have magical spells to increase charm and affection. The wearer becomes likable and is likely to succeed in negotiating business. The place where she had her first tattoo done was at a Buddhist temple in a north-eastern province of Thailand. Malai is a strict practitioner of the Five Precepts of Buddhism of which she believes they shape her into becoming an ethical person and prevent her from going on a wrong path of life. Although she regularly needs to socialize with her colleagues and clients, she does not drink alcohol since she believes that the magical spell of the sacred tattoos would wear off. Because of her work, Malai prefers to have all of her five sacred tattoos invisible from others. When dealing with her colleagues and clients, she thinks that she looks more professional and has more credibility without any sacred tattoo exposure. However, she feels confident and secure inside knowing that these sacred tattoos could support her and bring her success. Her children are supportive of her having sacred tattoos although they do not have any. Nonetheless, both Malai and her children have amulets and Yantras in their car. They believe that the amulets and Yantras would protect them from any danger on the road. Malai is aware of the trend of globalization where people of various cultures and background merge through travel, media, and social networking. She is open-minded to other beliefs and practices as their final goals are to shape the believers to do good deeds. She also believes that women have equal rights to men. Hence, having sacred tattoos is not only for men anymore. Everyone is free to have sacred tattoos if they want as long as they are good persons.

Supachai: A Holy Guardian

A strong believer in supernatural powers, Supachai is 42 years old and married with a single child. He considers his interests in sacred tattoos as holy and special. Being born and raised in a family which has been involved with traditional Thai costumes for decades, his childhood strongly revolved around myths and folklores about spirituality. Each year his family holds a ritual to pay respect to the spirits who protect the traditional Thai costumes. A myriad of images of Buddha, amulets, and Yantras are also parts of this religious ritual. At the age of 19, Supachai had his first sacred tattoo imprinted at a local Buddhist temple in a southern province by a famous Buddhist monk who was known for his magical powers at the time. He likes all of his 12 sacred tattoos equally. The first tattoo that he had is *Yant Phaya Hanuman*, or the Great King of Monkeys, which is believed to instill immortality as well as likability mantras to the wearers. As Supachai strongly believes in magical powers, he views his sacred tattoos as his personal guardians and spirit boosters which protect him from dark spirits and bring him good fortune. That is why he is a strict practitioner in the Five and Eight Precepts of Buddhism. He also prays every Buddhist Holy Day which comes weekly. He also refrains from certain kinds of foods that provide cooling effects since those foods decrease the magical spells embedded in each sacred tattoo. Being a business owner in the field of traditional Thai costumes, Supachai is a proud sacred tattoo wearer who is not afraid to expose his tattoos. He has two sacred tattoos on both of his arms, two on both legs, four on his back, and four on his chest. He believes that Yantras, amulets, Buddhist images, and sacred tattoos carry similar magical spells; however, sacred tattoos are closer to him as they are always with him. Like many Thais, he also has several Yantras at home and in his car of which he believes bring good luck and protect him from evils. Supachai is also a very active social media users who has his own Youtube channel to provide knowledge about spiritual powers. Realizing the hybridization of cultures through advanced communication technologies, Supachai is worried that the new Thai generation may neglect the traditional beliefs and traditions. However, he does not blame anyone personally, yet understands and accepts the dynamic of the globalized world.

Matinee: A Liberated Spirit

Matinee is a 36-year-old single mother who is currently living with her 13-year-old son. Since both of her parents were teachers, her childhood was mainly

involved in academia. Her days were usually scheduled with studying and tutoring. Because of the high expectation from her parents, Matinee felt that she had to excel at school, and she did. After her high school graduation, she continued her degree in fashion design in the U.S. where she found a new life. At this time, she was first introduced to tattoos. She had a small fashion tattoo in the shape of a dolphin on her right wrist. To her, it symbolizes freedom and liberation. After that, she continued to have a few more fashion tattoos, usually in the shapes that are meaningful to her life story. After the completion of her degree, she returned to Thailand and started her career as a fashion designer. Working in the fashion industry, Matinee has been exposed to diverse ideas, perceptions, and cultures. She is very free to welcome any exchange of thoughts and activities including sacred tattoos. Her first sacred tattoo was done at a sacred tattoo parlor in Bangkok. The shape that she chose was *Yant Gara-Wek*, or the bird of paradise, which is believed to have the likability spells. However, she did not think much of the spell when she decided to have it. To her, the bird symbolizes freedom and free spirit. Currently, Matinee has five fashion tattoos and three sacred tattoos. All three sacred tattoos that she has connote her personal life stories. Aside from the meaningful stories, she also chose the sacred tattoos due to their beauty. She is mesmerized by the intricate details and the authentic patterns of the sacred tattoos. Nonetheless, she is also aware of the magical spells instilled within them, and that is fine to her. She respects and has nothing against the thoughts that people believe in the spiritual power of sacred tattoos and certain practices to follow in order to maintain such power. Matinee considers herself as a good person although she does not strictly keep the Five Precepts of Buddhism. Matinee is a heavy drinker and regularly socializes with friends and customers, which involves drinking and smoking. However, she tries her best not to kill any sentient beings, steal, lie, or conduct sexual misbehaviors. She has never committed a crime or stolen from someone. She also considers herself as an atheist. She believes in the good deeds all religions intend to pass on to the believers. Although her parents are Buddhists, they respect her decision to cease her childhood religion. Realizing the influences of cultural flow through globalization, Matinee believes that everyone and every being is equal. She respects and empathizes with all cultures and traditions. The sacred tattoos have a special place in her heart as much as her fashion tattoos as they

all symbolize and represent her journeys.

Marisa: A Reminder of a Journey

A 31-year-old Reiki master, Marisa, was born into a Thailand family in a southern province. At the age of 10, she migrated to Sweden to reunite with her mother who was remarried to a Swede. She returned to her home country when she was 19 on a trip to visit her family. That was the first time she was attracted to the beauty of sacred tattoos. Her first tattoo was a sacred tattoo of the Fortune Supporter or the Five Lines of Luck (*Yant Noon Duang* or *Yant Phok-Ka-Sap Ha Taew*) which is written in the ancient Khmer alphabet. It is believed that each line embodies different magical powers; likeability, good fortune, success, zodiac sign, and charm. Although Marisa is aware of such powers, she does not follow the Five Precepts of Buddhism. She respects all religions and believes that the ultimate goal for every religion is to teach its believers to do good deeds and be kind to one another. Being raised in a bicultural family, Marisa understands the broad concepts of Buddhism and Christianity. Before moving to Sweden, she practiced Buddhism like her Thai family, however, she became a Christian after she moved to Sweden. After her graduation, Marisa travelled to many countries in Asia and Europe. She became an atheist three years ago when she met her fiancé who believes in the healing power of the universe. That was when she was involved in Reiki and became a Reiki master. To her, the two sacred tattoos that she has carry no magical spells, yet they mark as a reminder at a certain point of time in her life. Along with her other three fashion tattoos, all of her tattoos have a special meaning as story tellers which bring her back to the place and time when she had each of them. Marisa respects and has nothing against those who believe in the magical powers of the sacred tattoos because everyone is entitled to believe in whatever they want.

Tana: A Fashionista

Tana is a 29-year-old air steward who is single and was born into a liberal family. His parents are open-minded and supportive of whatever path their children pursue. Being a non-strict Buddhist himself, Tana has been involved in general Buddhist traditions and rituals like most of his family members and friends. He is uncertain if he believes in supernatural powers; however, he respects and is open-minded to such powers. During free time, he enjoys shopping, clubbing, and socializing with his friends. With his educational background in performing arts, he has always been intrigued in diverse cultures especially the ones with rich

traditional arts which include dancing, painting and drawing. He was first introduced to fashion tattoos at the age of 15 and sacred tattoos at 18. The first pattern that he chose was *Yant Noon Duang* or *Yant Phok-Ka-Sap Ha Taew* which is believed to bring him five magical traits along the five lines of luck. However, that was not the reason he chose such a pattern. Instead, he was drawn into his first sacred tattoo due to popular culture. This pattern is trending among many celebrities in Thailand and overseas, so he believed that having one would make him fashionable. However, due to his work, he is not allowed to have his tattoos exposed. Thus, all of his tattoos are not visible at work. Currently, he has two sacred tattoos, and both are on his back. As a proud gay man, Tana advocates for equality and freedom. He thinks that one should not cling solely to a single belief or practice. Rather, one should experience and embrace whatever feels right to one. In Tana's worldview, sacred tattoos are equal to fashion tattoos because they are both imprinted on his body, and he loves all parts of his body equally. To put this into perspective, he does not believe that the head is more superior to the feet. Without even one foot, one is unable to walk freely and comfortably. Likewise, both types of tattoos signify the pattern arts he likes. Due to his career, he is aware of the hybridization of cultures via globalization. To him, even though sacred tattoos are traditional Thai art, they can be transformed to become contemporary by emancipating the magic and re-symbolizing the authenticity of Thai culture to anyone regardless of race, gender, or belief.

Napat: A Bridge between Two Worlds

Having been raised in a traditional Thai family whose members are strict about the Five Precepts of Buddhism, Napat has been absorbing religious practices through his family. As a 19-year-old student in Thailand's capital, he finds himself caught in the middle between popular culture and traditional norms. He has a strong interest in sports which has made him a university athlete. Being heavily active in sports, he also has to maintain good academia as he believes that both can bring him success in life to a certain degree. That is a reason he has to maintain good discipline with a helping hand from religious beliefs through sacred tattoos. This is due to his exposure to such objects through his father and elder brothers who believe in the magical powers of sacred tattoos. At the age of 15, Napat had his first sacred tattoo done by a respectful Buddhist monk in Bangkok. Suggested by his father, the *Yant Phaya Hanuman*, or

the Great King of Monkeys, was selected as his first sacred tattoo due to its magical spells of immorality as well as likability. Napat has remained strict in the Five Precepts of Buddhism ever since. Currently, he has seven sacred tattoos on his body, together with two fashion tattoos. The two fashion tattoos are on his shoulders. Four of the sacred tattoos are on the back, and three are on the chest area. All of them are not visible when he wears school uniform. The reason for this is that he does not want people to view him differently from others. Being a magic believer is somewhat difficult to blend in with his peers. Thus, his sacred tattoos are imprinted on his body using clear ink which is a special kind of ink aiming to disguise the explicit appearance of sacred tattoos. Another reason for this is because of his future career. As a thoughtful person, he is worried that having sacred tattoos imprinted with the usual black ink may limit his career opportunities in the future. Nonetheless, the magical powers are believed to be retained, therefore, he refrains himself from consuming foods providing cooling effects. Realizing the inevitable trend of globalization, Napat is open-minded to diverse cultures and traditions. Hence, he decided to have his two fashion tattoos because he thinks it is trending among teenagers and celebrities. To him, fashion tattoos represent outrageous fun and liberation he has barely experienced from his upbringing. The symbolization of both fashion and sacred tattoos coexists in harmony within his realm.

Chalita: Peer Acceptance

Chalita is a 19-year-old student who enjoys being around her friends and having fun. She believes that one should be free to do whatever they want as long as it does not cause negative outcomes to others. During her free time, she usually goes out at night to party with her friends. To her, the magical powers do not exist in her sacred tattoos. She values both fashion and sacred tattoos equally. Despite being a Buddhist, Chalita does not attend any religious traditions unless being forced to by school. She also does not believe in the magical spells of amulets and Yantras although she has nothing against those who believe so. To her, amulets and Yantras act as decoration items which is the same idea that her friends' practice. Also, these items should not be reserved merely for men. Females have equal rights to wear them if they want to, and society should not view females differently just because they wear sacred tattoos, Yantras, or amulets. At the age of 17, she had her first sacred tattoo done. That was a year after she had her fashion tattoo imprinted. She

chose the *Yant Nang Gwang* which resembles a beckoning woman. This pattern is popular among merchants as it is believed to welcome good fortune and wealth to the wearers. However, Chalita chose the pattern solely based on its appearance. To her, the beckoning woman represents herself attracting her loved ones to her life. In addition, both fashion and sacred tattoos are popular among her peers. That is another reason she chose to have them both as she wanted to be a part of the group. That is, the tattoos symbolize a common marking among group members. Being a digital native, Chalita is aware of the globalized trends of culture, information, and technology. She is open-minded to and embraces different cultures and beliefs which are deemed salient to her. Sacred tattoos, therefore, serve the same way as fashion tattoos as a representation of her individual and social identities at particular points of time.

Krit: A Symbol of Masculinity

Krit is an 18-year-old student who was born in an eastern province of Thailand. He has been living in Bangkok for two years for his tertiary education, and this is where he has had his sacred tattoos done. Being away from home, Krit has total freedom to himself which he never received at home. Krit is aware that such tattoos are believed to provide magical spells; however, that is not the reason he chooses to have them. Instead, his interest in sacred tattoos began with social media. He saw several people, celebrities, and influencers have sacred tattoos, and they sexually appealed to him. Being a sexually active gay man, Krit finds that not only do sacred tattoos make him feel sexy, they also lure attractive men of his type for recreational sexual activity. Even though Krit considers himself a Buddhist, he does not strictly follow the Five Precepts of Buddhism. He recreationally enjoys intoxicating his body with narcotics, especially during his sexual activities. As he used to be bullied because of being a rather feminine gay man, Krit tries to alter the way he looks and acts when he is in Bangkok by regularly going to the gym to build muscles and maintain the lean body shape. He believes that the current trend among gay guys these days is to be manly. As a consequence, having sacred tattoos is another way to augment his masculinity. In Krit's worldview, sacred tattoos do not project any magical spells, but act as a symbol of masculinity so as to attract men of his type. He currently has five sacred tattoos: two on the chest, two on the shoulders, and one on the back. His favorite one is *Yant Phaya Suer*, or the Great Tiger, which is believed to carry with it the same traits

attributed to an actual tiger with strength and courage. It is also used to ward off danger or ferocious animals. However, these magical properties are not meaningful to him. The reason he likes such a pattern is solely based on its appearance. The tiger signifies the masculinity that he longs for. Another pattern that he likes is the *Yant Noon Duang*, or the Five Lines of Luck, because it is considered trendy among celebrities and famous people. Being a digital native, Krit understands and enjoys the hybridization of cultures and information via globalization. He has nothing against certain beliefs and is open-minded to learn about new cultures and practices.

Discussion

The findings revealed myriad aspects of identity construction among Thai sacred tattoo wearers reflecting the continuum of sacred tattoos as texts being intertextualized from religious discourse to liberal discourse via globalization. Kajorn, Malai, and Supachai were the voice of the older generation of Thais who are surrounded by the traditional essence of religious beliefs and practices while being aware of globalized trends. Thus, their identities have been constructed as conservative yet responsive to change. Mathinee, Marisa, and Tana echo the middle generation with great exposure to Western cultures through globalization. Hence, their worldview is liberated to construct their identities. Napat, Chalita, and Krit represent the younger Thai generation who have been given freedom of choice to construct their identities in more diverse ways amid the amalgamation of conservative and globalized worlds. These three generations of Thais are juxtaposed in dynamic contemporary Thai societies intertwined with traditional and modern cultures. Their identity constructions can be explained as follows.

1. Religion as a Form of Identity Construction

An aspect that is discernible from the data is that almost all of the participants were Buddhists. This can be explained with the framework of the seven dimensions of religions by Smart (2002). The Thai way of life is closely related to Buddhism which aims to instill good deeds to its believers. However, Buddhism in Thailand has been greatly influenced by Hinduism. As a result, Thais tend to constantly carry on religious practices and rituals (Practical and ritual dimension). Whenever they encounter something supernatural, they seem to receive an emotional impact and therefore show respect to the divinity so as to avoid evils. This is to make themselves

feel safe and secure (Experimental and emotional dimension). As most Thais are considered collectivists, they depend on each other as a group. Stories and myths have been told within the social groups from generation to generation with a goal to pass on what they believe is profound (Narrative or mythic dimension). While telling such stories, the elders also provide the youngsters with rationales to maintain such rituals (Doctrinal and philosophical dimension). Additionally, in order to keep the good deeds within themselves and the social groups, Thais follow the Five Precepts of Buddhism (Ethical and legal dimension). This explains why Thais constantly go to temples to make merit so as to keep the good deeds and to stay away from evils. Such a belief is widely practiced in the numerous Buddhist temples countrywide (Social and institutional dimension). Both in temples and at home, most Thais worship the Buddha images of different attitudes, the Hindu God and Goddess images and the supernatural in a myriad of forms which include artifacts, amulets, sacred Yantra, and sacred tattoos (Material dimension).

Surprisingly, two atheist participants also chose to have sacred tattoos. According to the interviews, although they do not believe in God or Buddha, they believe in the good deeds of human beings. To them, the sacred tattoos are just ordinary tattoos with beautiful patterns which embody meaningful stories that are salient to them. Therefore, the magical enchantments in the eyes of most Buddhists are removed from their mind. This can be semiotically explained that different viewers may perceive an object differently. Any object, including a sacred tattoo, is a sign. The name "sacred tattoo" is a signifier which is created by a group of people who believe in its magical concept. The concept of magical enchantment of such a sign only affects those who believe in its power. By contrast, those who do not believe in such a power decode and interpret sacred tattoos differently. Hence, the signification of a sacred tattoo to one group of people may differ from that of another. In this case, the two atheist participants intertextualize sacred tattoos from one signifier to another. How they detextualize and reconceptualize sacred tattoos depends on their schemas. Since both of them used to spend a number of years in a Western context, their schemas are somewhat different from the majority of Thais. Although, in a sense, both of them still show respect to the Thai long-rooted belief towards magical spells, such a respect is not salient enough to represent their identity as magic or supernatural believers. This case strongly promotes

the concept of hybridization. Since no culture is pure, the people who live in one culture tend to absorb and adapt what they acquire from other cultures they are exposed to.

2. Globalization as a Means to Construct Identity

One of the most significant findings is that the majority of sacred tattoo wearers were male. As sacred tattoos have been rooted in Thai society since the ancient period with a strong influence on men during time of war, either to defend the country or to expand its territory, these men seem to hold their emotional stances to the enchantments such as sacred tattoos in order to keep good deeds and other magical effects within themselves. Due to the masculinity nature and social status of men, most male participants chose to have sacred tattoo patterns which represent immortality. What's more, as Thailand is considered a male-dominated society with a strong hierarchy (Hofstede, 1991), Thai men seem to have inherited the beliefs in sacred tattoos. That is why the number of Thai men with sacred tattoos is higher than that of women.

Interestingly, the number of young female sacred tattoo wearers is higher than expected. Such evidence cannot be overlooked. The data from the interviews reveals that female participants felt that women in the modern day have earned their status as equal to men. Therefore, they are entitled to do whatever men can. However, due to the femininity nature and social obligations of women, most female participants chose to have sacred tattoo patterns which represent likability. To explain this with the globalization theory (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012; Crane, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999; Robertson, 1992; Appadurai, 1996), although Thailand is considered a male-dominated society, women's rights have been promoted much more in contemporary settings due to the influx of Western cultures through the globalized cultural flow. Hence, Thai women, especially the younger generations, seem to negotiate for their own identities as human beings which should be equated to men. Although in the past women with any kinds of tattoos were viewed as sexually deviant such as prostitutes, nowadays they have become more liberated due to the changing society. Women, therefore, employ tattoos as a communicative signifier to negotiate for their identity. This clearly shows a transition of female identity in the Thai contemporary context.

3. Intertextuality of Identity

Another interesting finding is the age range of the sacred tattoo wearers. At first, I assumed that the

number of older people might be significantly higher than the younger ones. However, the results reveal that although most sacred tattoo wearers are deemed to be older, the number of younger sacred tattoo wearers seems to have been increasing. Together with the data from the interviews, it can be interpreted that despite being heavily influenced by the cultural flow of globalization, the younger generations are somewhat selective in choosing which global cultures are profound and salient to them. As a result, they mix and match the global cultures with their local and subsequently create a new hybrid culture of their own. Due to popular media culture, tattoos are worn by several popular icons and have become fashionable. Hence, the new generation choose to become like their pop culture idols by having tattoos. As any object can be seen as a text (Rose, 2007; Kristeva, 1980), tattoos are seen as objects that the new generation use to express their feelings and negotiate for their personal and social identities. Likewise, sacred tattoos are also viewed as objects that serve the same purposes. In the viewpoint of these youngsters, sacred tattoos are the signified. They detextualize and reconceptualize the sacred tattoos in their own hybridized culture. The traditional meaning of tattoos is less salient to them than the globalized cultural trend. Therefore, they choose to have those which are more important to them. They choose to have sacred tattoos not because of their magical enchantment, but their beauty and ways to express their stance within individual, social, and corporate identities.

As the analyses reveal, identity is an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the culture within which the individual lives. It is dynamic and reversible depending on different periods, situations, and environments. Sacred tattoos have been used as a means for a group of Thais to express their feelings, perceptions, and stances both at individual and social levels. As identity is dynamic, and so as the object or sign which has been chosen to represent such an identity, the sacred tattoo has a long history and has influenced Thai ways of thinking and living to some degree. Originally, the sacred tattoo was popular among Thai men in ancient times as they believed in its magical power of immortality and likability which could become helpful in battles. However, during a certain period, there were tattoo markings on prisoners and convicts, which resulted in a construction of discourse where people with tattoos were viewed as deviants and therefore were not good to be associated with. Nonetheless, with the

cultural flow of globalization in the modern era, the sacred tattoo is perceived somewhat differently from the past due to the hybridization of cultures. Cultural hybridization promotes the intertextuality to shift the perception towards sacred tattoos from being magical or peculiar to fashionable and trendy. The impacts of cultural hybridization also greatly fuel the transition of gender identity among Thai females to liberate their feelings and project their stance to the society. Although Thailand has embraced a great deal of globalized cultural flow, the traditional sense of sacred tattoos still exists in a sophisticated way created by the new generation of Thais who have developed a new hybrid culture where local and global cultures coexist. This should result in a new identity among Thais in the contemporary context.

Suggestions

In this study, the roles of sacred tattoos are explained through the lens of religious beliefs, popular media, intertextuality, and identity construction. However, there are several other aspects left to be explored, for instance, how different sacred tattoos and their patterns symbolize and represent the tattoo wearers, the ways others perceive sacred tattoo wearers, and how foreigners perceive sacred tattoos. These are recommended for further research studies. Also, there were only nine participants in this case study; therefore, the current findings lack generalization properties. Quantitative research with a large number of participants may yield different results. Additionally, the number of participants of the same age range in this study were unequal. This could have created biased findings due to the disparate number of participants of different generations. Consequently, future research containing equal number of participants of the same age range are recommended. Moreover, the nationality of the participants in this study was only Thai. A greater variety of participants' nationalities in further studies may provide contrasting findings. On top of that, all participants in this study were from or residing in a large metropolitan area – Bangkok. Those who live in less populated or remote areas may provide other intriguing results.

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