



IN a traditional longhouse in Kalimantan, a teenage Dayak boy lies on a reed mat as two tribal elders simultaneously pull the skin on his shoulders taut and hand tap ink into his skin using two bamboo sticks, one with a needle secured to the end.

The gentle tapping sound is hypnotic, and almost anti-climatic after the excitement of the bloodletting and chanting ritual that took place before.

A day or two earlier, the boy had returned from a successful hunt bearing a wild boar, a sure sign that he was now ready to become a man. As per Dayak custom, this meant that he could receive his first tattoos, a set of *Bunga Terung* flowers with spiral centres on each of his shoulders.

These would be followed by many more tattoos over his lifetime, each one telling the story of the tribe he came from, where he travelled, and his achievements including marriage, children, and even the severing of his enemies' heads.

Like the Polynesian islands, Indonesia has a rich history of tattooing that dates back centuries. The two main groups to practice the art are the Dayak in Kalimantan and the Mentawai from a chain of islands off the west coast of Sumatra. With both basic and intricate tattoo designs and patterns, many of which represent elements of nature, they seek to display status and gain protection from evil spirits.

For generations traditional hand-tapping tattooing was an essential part of life for these and a number of other tribes across the archipelago. However, by the 1960s and '70s a mixture of missionary influence and New Order policies, both of which discouraged ethnic expression and encouraged religious conformity, caused the art to go into almost complete decline.



Ask any Indonesian about tattoos and most of them will tell you that they are a relatively new fad brought to the country by travellers from other lands. Peruse the ubiquitous tattoo shops of Kuta and you might be convinced that this is true, as the sample books include a range of decidedly un-Indonesian designs like Sailor Jerry-style pin-up girls, Japanese koi fish, and Celtic bands.

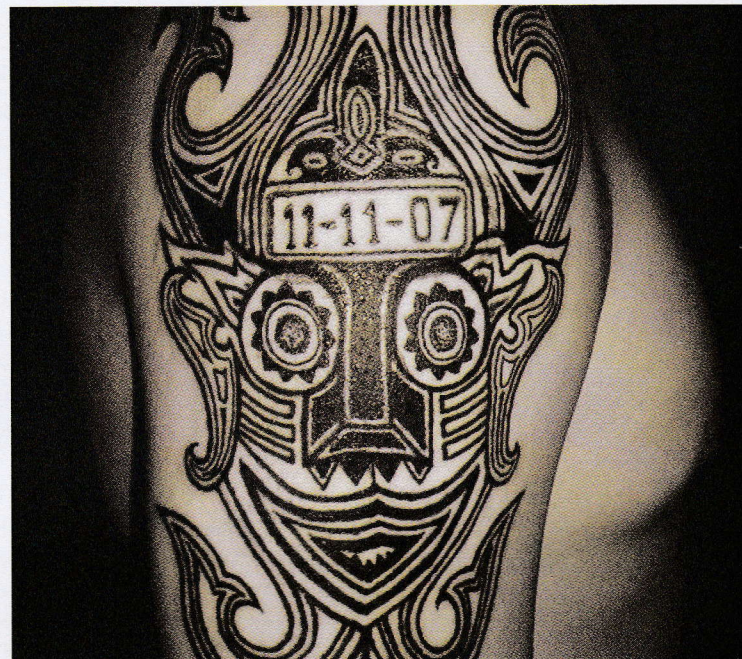
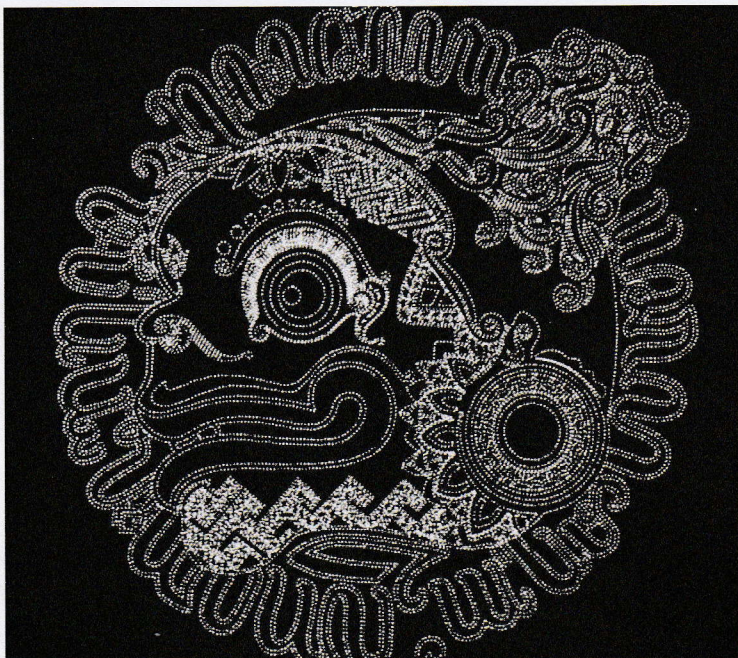
Yet in a small tattoo studio on Jalan Nakula, one Indonesian artist is working tirelessly to revive the traditional Indonesian tattooing methods and motifs.

Never one to conform to the norm, Jakarta-born Albar Tikam discovered his passion in body art over 20 years ago, much to the chagrin of his conservative family. He began working in tattoo and piercing shops in the capital, but found it hard to do what he loved in a society where tattoos and piercings were seen as criminal elements. He needed a change and Bali's more liberal and international vibe seemed like a good fit.

Albar soon became a well-known figure in the Bali body art scene, most notably for his ample facial piercings, split tongue, and interest in alternative arts like scarification and body suspension.

In 2007 Albar attended a tattoo convention where he saw the Dayak way of traditional tattooing.

"At first I just wanted to have a traditional tattoo on my body, but then I thought I could learn about this kind of thing too, because up until now my aim has always been to connect with my culture through piercings and tattoos," he says.



From that point on, Albar began his education in traditional tattooing, seeking out teachers from within the tattoo community and elders in the Kalimantan jungles. In 2010 his studio, Suku Suku Tatau, became the first and only official studio on Bali to offer traditional hand-tapping and hand-poking tattoos, and one of just a handful across Indonesia.

The hand-tapping technique involves two artists, one to stretch the skin and one to use a bamboo stick to tap a second bamboo stick with a needle into the skin. Hand-poking tattooing can be done with just one artist using a bamboo and needle tool.

Sono, the owner of the Cap Bagong Tatu studio in Ubud and the only other artist doing traditional hand-tapping tattooing in Bali says, "Although hand-tapping uses the same needle as a tattoo machine, with a machine you get more bruising and swelling. With tapping it's a really different experience. It is more gentle and relaxing, but for bigger tattoos it may be uncomfortable because it takes longer."

The Indonesian hand-tapping and hand-poking techniques are not particularly complicated to learn, but what is proving to be more difficult is finding the traditional patterns and symbols that were once passed down through the generations.

"From what I see now in Kalimantan, the new generation doesn't have tattoos," Albar says.

"They don't want to have them and not many people know about it anymore, so it is a little bit hard to find out exactly what the meanings of the different motifs are.

"But in the 1980s and '90s, some of the designs were already famous outside Indonesia. Western people came over and were interested in the

tradition, so they took those designs and after 10 or 20 years, they brought them back again. That's a good thing but I'm thinking, what the fuck? That's our culture. Why does it have to be brought back by another culture?"

Sono says: "Here in Bali, it's mostly foreigners who want traditional tattoos. But in Java, more locals are open to that, especially in Jogja because people go there to study and have more knowledge, understand more motifs, and want to go back to their roots.

"I think things everywhere are changing. This generation is more open, so people can choose what they like, and many are choosing their culture. When you want to have your own character you must go back to your roots so you can have a strong character."

While both Albar and Sono are constantly seeking out traditional designs and the meanings of those motifs among the people who still practice the art, they also incorporate original freehand, pointillism and custom designs into their work. And neither believes that traditional tattoos should be limited to or only hold significance for Indonesian people.

Albar says: "Some (foreign) people come in and want designs from Kalimantan or Mentawai and they ask, 'What do you think about this?' And if I know the meaning, I will explain it. At least the people coming here for traditional tattoos know what they want, and I'm happy to do tattoos for somebody who knows exactly what they want.

"Now there are more people who want to learn about hand-tapping and I am positive that in a few years you will see more people doing it here. Slowly things are progressing. I just hope that people don't do it just for fashion. In the end, a tattoo is not just fashion – it is art. It is part of your soul and part of your life." ●