

Tattoos for Beauty and Magic: An Anthropological Study of the *Sakyan* Tattoo in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper examines the meaning of the so-called magical tattoo, *sakyan*, in contemporary Thailand. Thailand has several types of traditional tattoos in which the most popular are tattoos for beauty and magic. In rural areas, there are many traditional tattooists who continue to practice. They are very different from the modern tattooists found in tattoo studios in urban areas. These traditional tattooists are monks, Brahmanistic hermits (*reusi*), or other religious specialists who exercise other religious practices in addition to tattooing. They believe magical tattoos are necessary purification rituals to obtain sacred power. Through an ethnographic analysis, the author clarifies how *sakyan* is understood by the tattooists.

Keywords: Tattoos, Magic, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Thailand

1. Introduction

In Thailand, you can easily find tattoos on the exposed skin of pop singers or football players on TV, taxi drivers in *tuktuks*, or cashiers in convenient stores. It would seem that the Thai people do not have any special feelings toward tattoos. It is not true that tattoos are completely acceptable in Thai society. Actually, I have met many people who dislike tattoos and do not want their children tattooed. At the same time, they do not have the same disfavor for tattoos that one may experience in most of Japanese society. One reason the Thais do not regard tattoos as special is that tattoos have been a part of their tradition and culture for centuries. There are several kinds of traditional tattoos in Thailand. This paper explores two major aspects of Thai tattoos - beauty and magic - by focusing on traditional tattooists to clarify Thai people's expectations from magical tattoos.

2. Tattoo, Scripts, and Body

Anthropological or sociological studies about tattoos can be summarized into the following six categories: (1) tattoos and social deviation, (2) interpretation of social

structure from geometric designs in tattoos (Lévi-Strauss, 1963), (3) actor-network theory analyzing interrelationships between tattoos and people (Gell, 1993), (4) cultural renaissance of traditional tattoos, (5) representation of cultural identity (Kuwahara, 2005, Sanders and Vail, 2008), and (6) general introduction of regional tattoos.

As for the magical tattoos in Thailand, we can find some research which considers them a part of magical practices (Tannenbaum, 1987, Terwiel, 1994) or argues that they are regional traditions by comparing other “tribal tattoos” in Southeast Asia (Cummings and White, 2012, Drouyer, 2013). However, the uniqueness of *sakyan* has not been sufficiently researched. While other tattoos often represent patterns and figures, *sakyan* adds a passage or a stanza from Buddhist sutra by inscribing scripts. By focusing on scripts, we can discuss tattoos beyond the context of body modification or succession of traditional culture.

In Southeast Asia, modernity did not evolve from oral culture to written culture as Ong argues (1982). However, the complicated relationship between orality and literacy still remains (Kashinaga (ed.), 2007). For example, in 15th-century Northern Thailand, Buddhist monks regarded memorized and orally transmitted knowledge rather than written documents as more genuine (Veidlinger, 2006, pp.58–62). Magical practitioners, called *mo tham*, in Northeastern Thailand teach spells to their disciples by writing them down in notebooks, though the writing method is not fixed because of their indifference to the orthography of the Pali language. Although the notations are different, once they are chanted, the vocal sounds become almost the same and are considered to have a magical power (Tsumura, 2009).

Sakyan ought not to be regarded as just one type of decorative tattoo or body modification but as something inscribed with oral knowledge and sacred power. *Sakyan* has very different characteristic from other traditional tattoos. In the next chapter, we will compare *sakyan* with other traditional tattoos in Thailand.

3. Traditional Tattoos in Thailand: Beauty and Magic

Tattoos in Thailand have the following seven types (Somchai, 1984, p. 117-120).

- (a) Indication of status and membership: Since 1827, once conscripted, symbols were tattooed on people’s wrists (*sak kho mue*). Since the end of the 19th century, soldiers were forced to be tattooed with the number of their unit, which is called a number tattoo (*sak lek*).

- (b) Punishment: As a punishment, some criminals were forced to be tattooed on their shoulder. If monks violated the Buddhist precepts or laymen committed a severe crime, they were forced to be tattooed on the face (Kriangsak, 1996, p.23).
- (c) Indication of ethnic identity: Some groups of Lao people have a traditional tattoo from the waist to the knees, which is called *kha lai* or *sak kha*. While one group was called “*Lao phung dam* (black-bellied Lao)” which tattooed up to the abdomen, another is called “*Lao phung khao* (white-bellied Lao)” with the abdomen untattooed.
- (d) Indication of belief: When the Holy Man’s Rebellion took place in the beginning of the 20th century in Northeastern Thailand, the followers of the holy man had the same tattoo. For instance, the followers of Tham Singto tattooed a flower and Khom scripts on the inside of their upper arm in order to show solidarity.
- (e) Medical Treatment: A special tattoo was used to remedy a kind of skin disease in Northeastern Thailand. Because such tattoos were given by using herbal oil instead of ink, no traces remained.
- (f) Beauty: It is called a *sak suai ngam* (beauty tattoo) or *sak lai* (decoration tattoo), which includes figures such as flowers or animals. In the past, in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, men with more tattoos were considered more attractive to females. At present, Western commercial tattoos have been adopted widely, which is called a *sak thaet-tu* (tattoo) or *sak faechan* (fashion tattoo).
- (g) Magic: *Sakyan* is used for sacred power by inscribing magical spells.

In the 1930s, the tattoo systems of number tattoos (a) and punishment tattoos (b) were abolished (Nataphat 1978, p.95). *Kha lai* of (c) is a diminishing tradition and hardly found¹. On the other hand, beauty tattoos, except for *kha lai* of (c) and (f), have become very popular recently. The tattoos of solidarity for the same belief such as (d) are hardly seen now. The medical tattoos of (e) disappeared after modern medicine became widespread, even in rural areas. The most common tattoos that we see in modern times are beauty (f) and magic (g), aside from *kha lai*.

While we can find beauty tattoos and magical tattoos in modern Thailand, it is important to illustrate the relationship between the two types. In the context of modernization, we generally discuss the commercialization of the tradition. However, it is difficult to adapt this understanding to Thai tattoos. It seems too superficial only to consider that the purpose of a tattoo has been changed from magic to decoration. Before

further investigation of the relationship, we will examine each type of tattoo in detail in order to clarify the differences.

3.1 Tattoos for Beauty: *Sak suai ngam*

Tattoos for beauty, or beauty tattoos, are called *sak suai ngam* or *sak lai*. Presently, Western tattoos have become more popular in Thailand and are called *sak taet-tu* or *sak faechan*, using words derived from English. On the touristic streets of big cities such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, or Phuket, there are many tattoo shops for foreign tourists. Even in rural cities, these days there are some Western style tattoo shops for Thai people. Shops appear to be like a barbershop, with a couple of tattoo chairs, design pictures on the walls, and usually open from the evening until midnight. These shops appear to be like tattoo studios in other countries².

In tattoo shops, most of the tattooists are laymen with artistic skills. Once clients choose a design from one of the sample books, the tattoo is drawn out and discussed. A preliminary sketch is then directly outlined onto the skin, or traced using carbon paper. Once things are agreed upon, the tattooist begins tattooing using a tattoo machine.

Designs at fashion tattoo shops rarely include scripts. Comparable to Western tattoos, the most popular motifs are sexy women, butterflies, eagles, roses, hearts, crosses, and so on. In some cases, tattooists inscribe the designs in remembrance of clients' past events with a particular figure, name, and date. As for location, shoulders, breasts, calves, or ankles tend to be chosen in order to show off the tattoos to other people (Arungrat, 1993, p.38).

Though Western-style tattoos have spread since the 1980s in Thailand, tattoos to enhance beauty have an older history. Beauty tattoos such as *kha lai* had been practiced for a long time, much like *sakyan*. The difference with *sakyan* is the absence of Khom scripts, *akkhara*, and the purifying ritual. For example, the leaping tiger in *Figure 1* is a popular *sakyan* design for gaining power. Even though they are the same design, the tattoo is considered to be a beauty tattoo without magical power unless it has *akkhara* and has been purified (Sulak and Thavivongse, 1994, p.26).



Figure 1. A Tattoo of a Leaping Tiger

3.2 Tattoos for Magic: *Sakyan*

Traditional tattoos with magical power are called *sakyan*. The word *yan* derives from *yantra* in Sanskrit and means “geometric pattern composed of letters, numbers, and figures.” *Yan* was transmitted to Southeast Asia by a Brahman priest who lived in different port cities for maritime trade between China and India. Since the 9th century, when the Angkor Empire extended its power, the soldiers of Angkor were said to protect themselves by amulets or tattoos which were inscribed with *yan*. Throughout wars, such traditions spread to Sukhothai and Ayutthaya; the soldiers of Ayutthaya wore magical shirts with *yan* (*suea yan*) to protect themselves from being wounded (Vater and Aroon, 2011, pp.12-14).

Sakyan in Northeastern Thailand uses the Khom script to inscribe Buddhist sutra in the Pali language. In order to prevent imitation, *sakyan* is sometimes tattooed by reordering characters so that other people cannot recite it correctly. If *yan* is inscribed onto cloth, stone, wood, or metal, it will become an amulet or magical instrument for protection or fortune.

Amulets with *yan* retain magical power by a purifying ritual and the observance of related taboos. In Thailand, when monks or magical specialists make Buddha statues or amulets, the objects become sacred after blowing magical spells to purify them (*pluk sek*). This is the same as magical tattoos, which are composed of *akkhara*, figures, and magical spells in order to activate the sacred power.

Sakyan and other traditional tattoos were practiced by using tattoo needles (*khem sak*) made from thorns of rattan, sewing needles, or iron nails. Presently, the needles are made of metal-like brass or stainless metal. The needles are 60 centimeters to 1 meter long and are fixed to wooden or metal sticks. Some artists use electric tattoo machines, but they are not popular because they are not suitable for writing Khom scripts.

Currently, tattooists use tattoo ink. In the past, however, they made ink by mixing resin; soot from a pan; gall bladders of bears, cows, or water buffaloes; and snake-head mullets³ (Khamphun, 2001, p.126). Various oils and ingredients are also chosen to mix in order to enhance the magical efficacy, such as the oil of sandalwood, sesame, other animals (elephants, tigers, bears, snakes, etc.), snake poison, the skin of *Tokay* geckos, *Phrai* oil (*namman phrai*)⁴, and herbs.

Sakyan is practiced at a temple or a hermitage by a Buddhist monk or other religious specialists. They are called “*phra sak*” (tattoo monk), or “*khru sak*”, “*acan sak*” (tattoo master) and their clients are considered as “*luksit*” (disciples). Once a *luksit* obtains a tattoo, a permanent relationship between the master and his disciple is

established. They usually organize an annual ritual (*phithi wai khru*) to show respect for the master.

Sakyan can be divided into four categories (Phutao, 2013, p.55-56):

- (1) Invincibility (*khong kraphan chattri*): The tattooed will be invincible from a sword or a gun. Ex.) *mahaut* tattoo, which has motifs of Buddha.
- (2) Mercy and Charm (*metta mahaniyom*): a tattooed person will become fascinating and the tattoo is used for love magic or prosperity of business. E.g., tattoo of starling birds with golden tongues (*sarika lin thong*).
- (3) Offence (*kankratham*): This tattoo is to attack someone. Ex.) tattoo using the same spell of malicious magic of breaking a monk's bowl (*bat taek*).
- (4) Defense (*pongan kankratham*): This tattoo is for protection against a magical attack. Ex.) tattoo of three rows of a sutra just under the collarbone (*mongkhon sam sai*).

Tattoos related to invincibility (1) and mercy and charm (2) are more popular than the others. While *sakyan* for good purposes is tattooed on the upper body like the chest, upper arms, or head, tattoos of offence or sexual purpose are usually done on the lower body.

Unlike beauty tattoos for enhancing beauty, *sakyan* is done in order to try to obtain magical power, which will be maintained by special tools and ink, purifying rituals, and the observance of taboos. The scripts within tattoos are not designed for decoration but as a magical spell itself which will endow sacred power. In the next chapter, we will examine tattoo practices in the Khon Kaen province of Northeastern Thailand to analyze how to utilize *sakyan* in the present.

4. Tattooist Monk

Field research about traditional tattoos has been ongoing in NK village and in Khon Kaen, a principal city in the Khon Kaen province since December 2013. This chapter considers two cases of tattooists: a monk in NK village and a *reusi* in Khon Kaen.

NK village has a population of 785 people, with 141 households of Lao ethnic groups, who cultivate glutinous rice for self-consumption and sugarcane and cassava as

commercial crops. At the same time, most of them earn a living by working at a factory, a golf course near the village, or in Khon Kaen, 20 km away from the village.

While the Buddhist temple S—which was founded 120 years ago when the village was established—supports the villagers’ religious life with some monks and novices, there is a monk’s abode in the graveyard of the northwest edge of the village where monk S has been staying since 2003. The villagers called it “graveyard temple (*wat pa cha*)⁵.”

4-1. Monk S’s History

Monk S lives alone in the graveyard temple. He was born in 1957 at DY, a village located south of NK. He was ordained as a novice at a temple in Khon Kaen when he was 10 years old. After returning to lay life, he earned wages from construction labor, got married, and had children. However, he became an alcoholic, which caused family discord, and he and his wife divorced in 2000. Then, his life became tough and his relatives recommended that he get ordained as a monk—he followed their advice in 2003. He stayed in a small abode at the edge of the golf course in DY for three years and then moved to the graveyard temple of NK in 2006. His relatives in NK and DY built a simple abode and supported his ascetic life.

Monk S had not been familiar with tattoos when he was young. According to Monk S, he taught himself about tattoos almost around the same time when he moved to the graveyard temple. At the beginning, he learned how to tattoo with a 20-years-old layman from NK who helped to tattoo Monk S. He has lots of tattoos now: Buddha on his left upper arm, a lion on his chest, a peacock on his right thigh, and so on.

As he concentrates on meditation in the graveyard, there are many people who believe in Monk S’s magical power. Followers come to visit him from, not only from the neighboring villages, but also from Khon Kaen and other provinces to exorcise evil spirits, cure illness, purify a car or motorbike, and so on. During in the Rains Retreat period (*khao phansa*), he does not accept any guests in order to devote himself to religious austerities. After the end of the Buddhist Lent Day (*ok phansa*), many people come to visit him on weekdays and holidays.

4-2. Monk S’s Tattoo Practice

In the beginning, Monk S tattooed with a tattoo needle (*khem sak*), which was 80 cm long and made of two sewing needles tied together and fixed to a wooden shaft. The shaft was inscribed with magical spells painted in gold (*Figure 2*. A tattoo needle

used by Monk S). However, using this needle was tiring because it took a long time. This is why he decided to make a tattoo machine (*krueang sak*).

According to Monk S, in the tattoo studio in Khon Kaen, they use a tattoo machine, but it was too expensive for him. He then tried to assemble a tattoo machine from a motor of an old cassette deck, a spring, and a case of a ball point pen in order to move a bundle of needles up and down at a constant speed (*Figure 3*. A Hand-made Tattoo Machine of Monk S). This machine does not have any inscribed spells. Even though the needle does not have sutras and moves electrically, he considers it to have the same sacred power and tattoos *sakyan* with his tattoo machine because of its speed.

He asks his followers to purchase black and red tattoo ink in Khon Kaen. In the past, people made tattoo ink by mixing ash or herbal oil, but he prefers to use commercially available ink because the colors are more vivid.



Figure 2. A Tattoo Needle of Monk S



Figure 3. A Hand-made Tattoo

Monk S tattoos both *sakyan* and beauty tattoos. For *sakyan*, he chooses figures and magical spells for the client's purpose: love, prosperity, warding off bad luck, and so on. He learned some of the spells from a book that he found at a bookstore and others are brought by clients who found the tattoo somewhere else. The most popular designs are (a) *Ha tao*: five rows of spells in 5–10 cm on a shoulder blade, and (b) *Kao yot*: nine buddha figures and Khom scripts arranged in a pyramid-shape. Except for such geometric designs, traditional designs of animals' and gods' images are also popular: geckos (*chingchok*), starling birds (*sarika lin thong*), tiger (*suea*), or the Hindu monkey god, Hanuman.

On the other hand, some of the young female clients prefer beauty tattoos. Clients bring their favorite pictures of tattoos taken from a website or social media with their smart phone to show their favorite designs to Monk S⁶.

After tattooing *sakyan*, he purifies it by blowing spells, which activates the magical power. If not purified—even though it is a design of *sakyan* with Khom scripts—it is considered to be just a beauty tattoo. The fee is 199 baht per design for a

sakyan and for a beauty tattoo. The fee is not called a “tattoo fee” but a “ritual fee (*kha buchha*)” because it is utilized by monks for commercial activity.

5. Tattooist Brahman Hermit, *Reusi*

The word “*reusi*” derives from Sanskrit and means people with superhuman powers who attain a higher state through asceticism. In contemporary Thailand, *reusi* indicates Brahmanistic specialists who lead an ascetic life at their ashram (*asom*) and communicate with gods and spiritual beings in order to cure illness and exorcise evil spirits. There are some notorious *reusis* in Northeastern Thailand whose disciples have also become *reusis* to engage in religious services.

5-1. Reusi M’s History

Reusi M. was born in 1981 in Khon Kaen and nearly died in car accident when he was 16 years old. When he turned 18, he began to hear strange voices of someone he could not see. At 20 years of age, he was ordained as a monk for a year. When he was a monk, he got along with a 60-year-old man who was ordained during the same period. The man was very familiar with magic and taught him some spells. At first, Reusi M did not trust him or magic, but after returning to his regular life, he tried one love magic and surprisingly it worked. When he served in the military in Ratchaburi province, he met a man familiar with magical tattoos and he received a *sakyan* on his back for the first time.

While in the military service, his health deteriorated. Even though he was alone, he heard the same voices and sometimes he became stiff and immobile. After finishing his military service, he remained in the same situation even though he came back home. He heard the voices his head say, “Please let me stay here,” and “This guy is mine.” He wished for the voices to stop, but he could not help it. One day, in addition to hearing voices, his finger began to move unintentionally as if it tried to write scripts on his body. He felt as if someone inside him made him move like that. After that, he felt bored with his life and did not want to do anything. He just wanted to stay home to concentrate on meditation. The voices did not cease and his mother thought her son had lost his mind.

One day, he heard a rumor about a famous *reusi* in Chiangyuen district of Mahasarakham province. When he visited him and explained his condition, the *reusi* advised him to stay in his ashram. He decided to live in the ashram as a disciple and learned about *sakyan*, exorcism, recitation, and meditation.

Three years later, he was able to control the voices inside him. After he understood how the voice came to him and how the voices left, he decided to return to his home and live as a *reusi*. Now, he has many followers and has bought a large piece of land on the outskirts of Khon Kaen to build a new ashram.

According to Reusi M, the voices he heard were of ancient *reusis*. The *reusis* who possess Reusi M are over 100 and sometimes he is possessed by Hindu gods and Islamic saints. The most admirable *reusi* for him is Reusi Saminphai who is said to be one of the famous ancient Brahman *reusis* and older than the Buddha era. Reusi M obtains sacred powers, called *yan barami*, from Reusi Saminphai and performs various services.

His followers come not only from neighboring villages but also from Bangkok, other provinces in Thailand, and foreign countries like China and Singapore. Besides elaborate magical tattoos, he performs spells to invite good luck, remove bad luck, bless others for love or prosperity, and exorcise evil spirits. He also retails magical amulets and tools called *watthu athan*⁷: tube-shaped amulets (*takrut*⁸), love-magic oil (*namman phrai*), baby dolls with magical powers (*lukthep*), and so on. On every Buddhist holy day, 10–20 pious followers gather at his ashram at night to recite sutras with Reusi M and there often occurs possessions among the followers and *reusi*.

Case 1. Recitation Ceremony at Reusi M's Ashram, observed in January 2016

On a Buddhist holy day, I participated in a recitation ceremony. At 20:30, disciples in their teens to their fifties gathered at Reusi M's ashram. In the beginning, everyone, including Reusi M who was sitting in front of the disciples, recited sutras by reading a booklet which is stored in the ashram. After a 30-minute recitation, a disciple turned off the lights. Only a single candle on the altar was dimming a slight light. After hearing *reusi's* voice, the disciples repeated after him. Reusi M's voice got faster, then the disciples tried to keep up. Finally, Reusi M's voice had become too fast to follow, and the recitation stopped suddenly. And after an instant silence, I heard Reusi M speaking in a strange language like "glossolalia". Around me, two or three of the disciples roared like beasts and their bodies trembled. It continued for about three minutes, then silence. After everybody began meditating without any instructions. The candles went out and after five minutes or so, the lights turned on; the disciples looked so relieved and they returned home around 21:30.

Buddhist holy days regularly fall on the same day as the first-quarter moon, full moon, third-quarter moon, and the last day of the month. Once a week, this recitation ceremony is held and around 15 disciples gather. They are pious followers of Reusi M. They all wear white clothes, which are usually worn on special religious days, and some of them wear countless amulets on their shoulders. Most of them are tattooed with a *sakyan* by Reusi M. We can observe that the religious community has been built through the belief in *reusi* and *sakyan*.

5-2. Reusi M's Tattoo Practice

Reusi M has 20 tattoo needles for clients. He recognizes infectious diseases transferred by blood, such as hepatitis and AIDS, so he changes needles and ink pods every time. After tattooing, he disinfects the instruments with alcohol and sterilizes them in the sun.

When a client comes to his ashram for *sakyan*, Reusi M shows a file of his design collection. He only performs *sakyan* and does not accept beauty tattoos. According to Reusi M, tattooing is a sacred thing which is never for an amusement (*sak len mai dai*). His design collection has 150 pages and each page has one to three designs of magical figures. It also indicates the name, price, and efficacy of each tattoo. There are two price ranges, which lists “Color Tattoo: 256 baht, Oil Tattoo⁹: 199 baht” for each tattoo. The expensive design cost more than 1,500 baht. Reusi M told me that the price depends on the size and teaching fee (*kha khru*). It takes more time for a bigger design. Most of the designs are obtained from masters by paying a teaching fee; the more expensive the teaching fee is, the higher the cost of the design. The prices are written like a catalog sale, but the fee is called a “ritual fee”. Before tattooing, a client provides a ritual fee, flowers, and candles on a tray (*khan ha*) and holds the tray over his head with his hands to offer to the *reusi*.

Case 2. Reusi M's ashram, observed in March 2015

One male client in his 20s visited Reusi M from Mahasarakham province with his wife and a child. The client consulted with Reusi M who advised him to get a “Leaping Tiger” on his right shoulder. He offered flowers, candles, and fee of 500 baht on a tray to Reusi M who received it while sitting on the altar. After blowing spells onto the client's shoulder, he started tattooing. The Leaping Tiger tattoo—which was about 10 cm square—was done in 40 minutes. After Reusi M

rubbed herb oil onto the tattooed part, which seemed red and swollen, he recited a spell again and then blew strongly to end the tattoo.

The clients who receive tattoos from Reusi M are required to observe taboos called *khalam*. One example is, “Do not eat a wax gourd.” This is because wax gourds will weaken the effect of herbs mixed with ink and the magical power will be weakened. Another example is, “Do not do anything which society prohibits”. According to Reusi M, although they ought to observe all the Buddhist Five precepts, it is quite difficult for ordinary people to follow them. So, he requires the tattooed people to at the least follow social rules.

Most of the clients do not just visit once. On the annual festival, called *wan wai khru*, his followers gather at his ashram. This ritual day is for followers to pay respect to Reusi M and for Reusi M to pay respect to his masters, including the legendary Reusi Saminphai, and gods like Siva. The neighboring villagers also visit the ashram and there can be more than one thousand participants who join the sutra recitation session. During the ritual, many of the participants are possessed by spirits and *reusis*; it is a chaotic space filled with cries and groans. In the *khop sian* session, Reusi M put Reusi Saminphai’s mask on the followers’ head and he blew his spells overs the mask in order to recharge the sacred power to the followers’ *sakyan*.



Figure 4. Khop Sian session

6. Considerations

Monk S, who is a self-taught tattooist, performs both types of tattooing by using a tattoo machine and contrasts sharply with Reusi M, who learned tattooing to cure himself from a *reusi* and tattoos with a needle. However, the contrast is not the same one as the previous studies concluded; while a monk is legitimate, meditative, and sacred, a *reusi* is peripheral, ecstatic, and profane [cf. Tambiah 1970]. In some contexts, we can see that Monk S offers tattooing more secularly and Reusi M concentrates on religious seriousness. However, their common interests are to make a distinction between *sakyan* and fashion tattoos and to do so, they purify *sakyan* by blowing magical spells. Both Monk S, who stays at the graveyard for austerities, and Reusi M, who often still is

possessed of gods and reusi, have bodies which accumulates unnatural power. By keeping a distance from the secular world, they enhance sacredness. By providing their sacredness, they distinguish *sakyan* from other tattoos.

Both Monk S and Reusi M receive fees from clients, not as a “tattoo fees” but as “ritual fees”. It is the same when Monk S does decorative tattoos. Monk S and Reusi M’s tattoo practice is considered a religious practice both by them and by their followers. Especially for Reusi M, the relationship between the tattooist and the tattooed will be maintained through rituals like weekly recitation ceremonies and the annual *wan wai khru* festival. As for Monk S, there are many clients who visit him just to talk even though they do not have any special to talk about or do. Such continuous relationships between tattooists and clients are obviously supported by the people’s respect for religious specialists. Relationships between masters and disciples is constructed in the mixture of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and magical beliefs.

The motivation for the tattooist to practice *sakyan* is a virtuous role. Reusi M told me why he sometimes practices *sakyan* on young people¹⁰, “Even though I reject them, the young guys will go to other places to get tattooed. If so, it is better for them to practice *sakyan* beautifully by myself.” Once the young get interested in tattooing, they tend to start tattooing by themselves. As Reusi M explained, it becomes ugly and gives no taboo. That is why Reusi M tattooed alone, to give them taboo in order to live following social rules. The taboos concerning *sakyan* are very different with each tattooist or in designs. Taboos which Reusi M imposes to clients are at least following three principles: (1) good conduct of mind (*kankratham cai*); (2) good conduct of body (*kankratham kai*); and (3) good conduct of speech (*kankratham waca*). Reusi M explained that it is difficult for ordinary people to observe all of the Buddhist five precepts, but at least he would like to start with getting his mind, body, and speech cleansed. *Sakyan* could be regarded as an opportunity to follow social rules and tattooists of *sakyan* try to lead people in a benevolent direction.

While fashion tattoos in the contemporary world are valued for their beauty or their ugliness, *sakyan* in Thailand continues to show its religious power in complicated ways.

Notes

1. According to my interview in NK, an 80-year-old man told me that he noticed most of the elderly men had *kha lai* when he was a child. In the same village, a 90-year-

-
- old man who died in 2012 had *kha lai*. We can estimate that *kha lai* had been practiced until the 1950s in the researched village.
2. In the touristic areas of Chiang Mai or Samui island, we can find signboards advertising “Traditional Bamboo Tattoo”, tattoos done with a bamboo needle in order to make “Thainess” appealing.
 3. The red color was made from cinnabar.
 4. *Phrai* oil is said to be extracted from female corpses from unnatural deaths like puerperal death. It is used for love magic.
 5. Accurately, it is not a temple (*wat*) but a monk’s abode (*thi phakson*).
 6. Some of the designs on social media are not the traditional one, but Monk S reinterprets the design as *sakyan*. For example, clients who desire a butterfly, he explained that butterflies are symbols of attractiveness (*mahasane*) and can be tattooed as *sakyan*.
 7. The word *athan* means the Atharva Veda of ancient India and the magical materials derived from Atharva Veda were called “*watthu athan*”.
 8. Takrut is a metal plated with spells rolled into a cylinder so that a string can pass through in the middle so it can be worn in order to avoid any dangers.
 9. Oil tattoos are a colorless tattoo which is made not with ink but with herbal oil handmade by Reusi M.
 10. It is prohibited to tattoo anyone under 18 years old. Most of the tattooists I interviewed give colorless tattoos to students or people under 18 years old.

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