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Antipodal Tattooing: Muslim Youth in Chinese Gangs

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Muslims and body art has not been a subject of academic inquiry. This is strange since tattooing has become more prevalent in many urban cosmopolitan cities. This article examines the tattooing practices of Muslim men in Singapore. These practices are sociologically interesting because they involve Malay men who are predominantly Muslims, tattooing themselves as part of their membership in gangs that are mostly Chinese-dominated. This article presents the concept of "antipodal tattooing," which can be instructive in understanding the relationships between tattooing and identity formation as expressions of the fragile and fragmented character of minority youth identities in urban life.

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In modern urban settings where neighborhood and family ties are weak and fragmented, youth gangs provide a coherent set of social networks. Gang membership confers a certain level of prestige for young men, who in mainstream society often find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Gang membership is predominantly male membership and is typically denoted by tattooing and other body modifications as marks of social identity. Given that sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and medical practitioners have devoted much attention to the study of tattooing within the context of diverse populations since the 1990s, it is somewhat peculiar that the subject of young Muslims and body art has not emerged. In the globalized and cosmopolitan environments that many urban young Muslims find themselves today, the reconciliation of Islamic piety with that of tattooing is an important aspect of their social realities.

While tattooing has always been a feature of gang membership, it is even more significant as an aspect of social membership in the ambiguous cultural context of a multiracial society like Singapore. Fundamentally, tattooing among the Malay youth (who are predominantly Muslims) has a transgressive quality since Islam specifically condemns tattooing and bodily ornamentation (DeMello 2014:320–322). At the same time, we can treat the tattooing of the human body as an example of cultural classification demarcating an inside and an outside of the body that as a result raises issues about social, as opposed to hygienic, pollution. While the article presents the case study of Singapore, its urban context offers an insight into understanding the factors that shape Muslim tattooing practices. The article ends with a discussion on meaning making and classificatory transgressions in the tattooing practice of the Muslim body, and broaches the concept of "antipodal tattoos" as an expression of the fragile and fragmented character of youth identities in urban life.

This study presents data from various sources. I engaged in participant observation at various gang rendezvous and conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 young Muslim males who have been or are actively involved in the gang culture in Singapore. Due to respondent confidentiality, the gang members' hangouts where the researcher engaged in a participant observation and the venues where they were interviewed will not be revealed. Respondents were recruited through referrals in line with the snowballing method. All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

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While the research is predominantly qualitative, I also utilized statistics garnered from the national census and various public and private organizations, whenever possible. I also report in this article, data from the newspaper archives of interviews conducted with tattooed gang members over the last five years.

There is relatively little research on gang culture in Singapore but existing works suggest that while gang membership is primarily defined by ethnicity, much of established literature on gangs in Singapore are limited to the study of Chinese secret societies. This article particularly explores an unusual feature of gang membership, namely the inclusion of Malay youth in Chinese gangs. Consequently, any attempt to understand the culture of body modification among Muslim youth gang members needs to situate the practice in the context of a predominantly Chinese gang culture.

The other Singapore

In Singapore, gangs are traditionally called "secret societies," with their origins in the underground Chinese triads that were organizing prostitution, gambling, and illegal money-lending activities. These groups provided social support and some welfare services for Chinese men arriving in colonial Singapore mostly as low-skilled workers, and were prominent in resisting Japanese occupation in World War II. They started to recruit members aggressively from other ethnic groups after Singapore's independence (Kamaludeen 2014b). The decade after that saw violent clashes between rival gangs over issues of territoriality.

Despite the official stance of "zero tolerance" with respect to gangs, Ganapathy and Lian (2002) argue that there is a symbiotic relationship forged between the Chinese secret societies and the police with respect to the policing of problem areas and activities. Illegal money-lending, prostitution, coffee shops, massage parlors, and karaoke bars, as well as contractors who run businesses that necessitate constant surveillance, might not be served by the full extent of the law. It is within these crevices that secret societies play a social function by offering their services in exchange for territorial exclusivity and control over the legal and illicit activities within their territories. This perpetuates secret societies as an important facet of Chinese communal life, which provides stability and solidarity within a criminal subculture and offers an avenue for Chinese youth who are marginalized from mainstream society to access illicit opportunities. The exclusive working relationship "between the police and *institutionalized* secret societies (emphasis added)" (Ganapathy and Lian 2002:151) ensures social order in the criminal underworld, repels uncooperative headmen and prevents new gangs from breaking into the scene. This has not deterred the formation of ethnic minority gangs. The OMEGA gang is the most significant Malay secret society in Singapore. OMEGA is an acronym of *Orang Melayu* Enter Gangster Area, with the Malay words *Orang Melayu* denoting "Malay People." The name makes reference to the spatial dynamics in gang membership, denoting an attempt by the Malays to gain a foothold in a domain already dominated by the Chinese.

Young Malay boys are also recognized as members of predominantly Chinese gangs such as the "369 gang." Malay gang members have also displayed with pride their body adornments such as jade pendants, which are traditionally associated with the Chinese community in Singapore, and posted photographs of themselves with tattoos of Chinese gang emblems on popular social networking sites such as Friendster and Facebook. Some Muslim gang members have gone through initiation rites, paying homage to Chinese deities, and many take part in Chinese ceremonies such as the Hungry Ghost Festival, are conversant in Chinese dialects, especially Hokkien, and play basketball—a sport that in Singapore is associated with the Chinese community—in order to bond with other gang members. These developments among young Malays may offer an explanation for the unprecedented 0.1% of the Malay community professing Buddhism/Taoism as their official religion in the Singapore Population Census of 2000.

In order to understand the cultural contradictions of tattooing among Muslim youth in a predominantly Chinese society, we need to delve into some details of the ethnic composition of the modern Singapore society. The Population Census of the year 2010 shows that ethnic Malays

make up about 13.4% of the total citizen population numbering about 503,900 people. The ethnic composition has been more or less steady since the mid-1800s, with the Chinese majority having a 75% representation and the other minority group, the Indians, numbering around 8%. Of the total Singapore population, 14.7% are Muslims. An overwhelming majority comprises of ethnic Malays while the rest comes from ethnic groups such as the Indians, Arabs, and Chinese.

Since the Malays make up the overwhelming majority of the Muslim population in Singapore, it is not far-fetched to surmise that the "Malay Problem" is the problem of the Muslim community. A lot has been said in recent decades about the "Malay Problem." Since independence, Malays have been linked with negative traits such as educational underachievement, economic backwardness, dysfunctional families, drug abuse, and a generally non-competitive outlook toward life. Malays are thus often deemed as lazy, laid back, and easily contented. Discussions affiliating the Malays to these social issues have been a feature of Singapore politics since its inception (Li 1998; Kamaludeen 2007; György and Sebestyén 2013). In 2007, Malay Muslim leaders expressed concern about a disturbing trend among Muslim youth in the community. Young Muslims were seen to be turning to gangsterism in disproportional numbers and in some areas they were thought to have replaced the dominant Chinese gangs. One study showed that a significant 34% of juvenile rioters were Malay. It also showed that, when placed in Singapore's demographic profile, relatively more Malays (24%) were joining youth gangs (John 2007).

The status frustration experienced by Malay gang members extends into the illegitimate sphere, situating them in a double bind. On the one hand, exclusively Malay gangs such as the OMEGA have been clamped down on by the state and deemed by the authorities as no longer operational. On the other, these young people are still likely to experience social immobility if they were to participate in Chinese gangs. The double marginalization faced by Muslim youth in Chinese gangs is often an issue that is highlighted by my respondents. In a sense, they are the marginalized of the marginalized and the true underclass given that these young men are deprived of social status in both the legitimate and the illegitimate spheres.

The themes of minority-living, ethnicity, and state management set out above form the urban context against which we can understand the nature of tattooing among Malay youth in Singapore. As Kosut puts it, "the tattooed body is a distinctively communicative body" and is able to convey both the identity of the wearer and the culture in which the individual lives (2000:79). Specifically, their position as minority youth within a Chinese-dominated gang culture forms a big part of their identity, which translates into the form of tattooing they adopt. Nonetheless, as this study is particularly concerned about the tattooing practices of young Muslims, the issue of classificatory transgressions becomes all the more important as we seek to understand their reconciliation with Islamic piety.

Tattooing the Muslim body: Meaning making and classificatory transgressions

In a society where young people often feel vulnerable, tattooing is both an example of self-definition and armor against the outside world. The tattoo, at least subjectively, indicates that the body is no longer a weak vessel and the person no longer simply a victim (Atkinson 2004:138). A similar approach was adopted by Susan Benson (2000) who described tattooing as "self-inscription," which of course it is, but tattooing has a social context and function. It is typically a self-inscription that only has meaning in defining the self against an outside world and at the same time inscribing the individual onto the social group.

For the young Muslim respondents in this study, the decision to tattoo their bodies comes with additional religious considerations. While the meaning attached to tattooing is often diverse, the notion of "transgression" in its adoption is often linked to the problem of contagion and contamination in breaking the skin of the body and the fact that numerous cultural barriers have been constructed to proscribe and condemn tattooing. In the main, Muslims reject tattooing for similar reasons. Muslims believe that as God has made the human beings perfect, it is a blasphemy to change

the human form. The *Qur'an*, in *An-Nisa* 4:119 considers these body modifications to be inspired by Satan who "…will command them (his devotees) to change what Allah has created…." A number of specific *hadith* (narrations of the Prophet), has documented that the Prophet Muhammad has cursed both the tattooer and the tattooed, thus placing tattooing squarely in the realm of acts of deviant religious behavior (Bryant and Forsyth 2012:539–542). Muslims are however divided between two dominant traditions—Sunni and Shi'ite. While Sunni Muslims, like all of the respondents in this study, are governed by the prohibition in tattooing, the Shi'a scholars (such as Ayatollah Sistani and Khamenei), who do not necessarily accept the traditional *hadith*, think that there is no authoritative prohibition on tattoos.

Despite the overt prohibitions within the Sunni tradition, the tattooing culture is undeniably gaining popularity among the young. While tattooing among young people is typically an aspect of modern gangs and youth culture, it is also important to situate such body modifications within a consumer society. Young Muslims have a sociologically interesting location in this context since many of them have or are discovering a youthful, popular, and chic Islam that is a potent mixture of Muslim themes and global consumer culture. Tattoos in this regard are simultaneously rejected as *haram* (forbidden) and accepted as aspects of popular youth culture.

The tension with regards to these domains and the notion of "classificatory transgressions" become apparent when an impure Muslim body is introduced in a sacred site such as the mosque or when performing the *hajj* in Makkah. Mohamad, who has a dragon tattoo on his forearm, recounts the stares and snide remarks he received at the mosque. "Some insensitive ones would mock me about it," he lamented. Similarly, Ridwan who regarded tattoos as an art and has five tattoos on his back, chest, waist and shoulders, recalled being manhandled amid being publicly shamed as fellow pilgrims chanted, "Haram! Haram!" Mohamad and Ridwan's condemnation of their condemners as lacking in compassion and exhibiting aggression, especially in view that their tattoos did not actually cause any physical harm to other Muslims, are examples of coping through neutralization techniques. Many Muslim gang members drift from the mainstream prescribed norms of the Muslim community—through performing Islamic rituals like praying and fasting—and their deviant subcultural values. Their expression of guilt over their tattoos and respect for those who abide by traditional conventions are encapsulated by Ridwan who related, "I accept this advice with an open heart. Maybe this is Allah's test in the Holy City" (Berita Minggu, April 28, 2013).

Muslim youth have adopted tattooing primarily as a personal identification within the context of strong group solidarity. These forms of tattooing can be thought to resemble the sub-cultural uniforms worn by skinheads and other deviant social groups in Europe in the 1960s and '70s (Clarke 1976; Hebdige 1981). Among Malay men in the 369 gang, it is common to see "Chinese" motifs and inscriptions such as dragons and Chinese poetry tattooed on Muslim bodies. In this sense, tattooing, which is so often cited as a sign of social dislocation, serves as a pro-social activity among gang members (Strohecker 2011). Members of the Malay OMEGA gang are often marked with tattoos on their arms, usually of the Greek letter "omega" (Ω). They refer to each other as *jam tangan*, which means "wrist watch" in Malay. These bodily indicators of the Malay gangs are often reproduced in the designs that gang members carry on their motorbike helmets. Some of the other gang designs include "a dice or a man's face in the shadows, or tribal designs of the group's name… And all the group members have helmets in the same color scheme, like black and yellow" (Lim 2007). In an interesting fusion of both a Muslim identity and subscription to a Chinese gang, an innovative Arabic inscription of the numerals *salakau* (369 in Hokkien) was seen on YouTube as part of a tribute to the gang (John 2007).

These are reminiscent of Hebdige's (1981) study of youth culture where he utilized the concept of "bricolage"—a term he borrowed from Dadaist surrealist painters of the early 1900s—in which the youth depicts familiar mundane objects in fresh and unusual contexts to give them surrealistic meanings. For the OMEGA gang, a symbol of an elite consumer society, an expensive watch, has been ironically chosen as the gang's code name. The Swiss symbol connoting high culture is thus inverted to refer to marginalized members of an illegitimate sphere. Bennett (2000) suggests that this drift towards the eclectic and

bricolage that is seen in popular youth culture is revealing of a desire among the youth for a more fluid consideration of the relationship between the individual and the collective that might be considered "neo-tribal." The "underground" character of the local youth culture is read as a form of resistance to those who exercise conventional political and commercial power in the city.

Drawing on the broader sociopolitical landscape in Singapore, members of the mono-ethnic OMEGA gang also utilizes religion, Islam specifically, as a form of symbolic capital.

> *Bismi-llāhi ar-rahmāni ar-rahīmi* (In the Name of Allah Most Gracious Most Merciful) Omega is jihad and Omega members are *mujahideen*. To *jihad* is to strive in the way of Allah, and Omega symbolises a struggle. Omega members struggle, sacrificing money, blood, limb and life to prevent the oppression of Malay Muslim IDs by Chinese infidels. Omega is not blind to members of Chinese SS (secret society) beating up and bullying our fellow brothers to showcase their masculinity. But the worst are the Malays in Chinese SS, who pray to Chinese idols, perform Chinese rituals and join the Chinese infidels to crush other Malay Muslims! Worst than the Chinese infidels are these Malays who betray their race, abandon their religion. They shed the blood of their brothers while glorifying their oppressors. They're a norm, not an exception. Look at the Malay leaders in Singapore slaving under the iron fist of Chinese PAP, like puppets! PAP tells them to be moderate Muslims, they nod. PAP tells them to sanction organ donation they kick Islam away and abide by the ways of the infidel Chinese PAP. Malays in Chinese SS and in the PAP while they suppress their Malay Muslim brothers are themselves being suppressed by the Chinese. If they retaliate, the Chinese get rid of them. Omega wages war to stop the Chinese SS from oppressing Malay Muslims, in prison and in the underworld.
>
> Pledge of martyrdom to establish Omega secret society (from Nafis, 2008: 1)

Drawing on the marginality of the Malays both among the political elites in the country and in the underworld as symptomatic of the pervasiveness of discrimination in all strata of society, OMEGA positions itself squarely as the defender of Malay Muslim rights in the criminal underworld. The gang clearly utilizes religious rhetoric to galvanize their existing members and as a strategy to recruit new ones. Within the OMEGA gang setup, there is a strong culture of affirmation (Copes and Williams 2007) of the deviant gang lifestyle through ethno-religious rationalizations. However, since tattooing is seen as transgressive from the lens of Islamic piety, the gang rationalizes its appropriation of tattoos from other cultural traditions. For young Muslim gang members, since they are hard pressed to rationalize their tattooing through their own Islamic tradition, they drift to adopt tattooing cultures that are antipodal to their own.

Antipodal tattoos

"Islamic tattoos" are one of the latest trends to have taken over young Muslims, especially among Muslim minority populations in the West (David and Ayouby 2002:139). Among young Muslim males of the September 11 generation walking the streets of Detroit and Sydney, it is not uncommon to see Islamic inscriptions such as "Warrior of Allah," "*La Ila Ha illAllah Muhammad ar Rasulullah*" (There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger), and "*Mujahideen*" (People of *Jihad*) tattooed on their bodies as young Muslims appropriate these tattoos as forms of religious pride amid using Islam to respond to Islamophobia and intense securitization facing their communities. This is a fascinating development that deserves an in-depth study of its own which this article cannot expand within its constraints.

In Singapore, however, the tattooing culture among Muslim youth involved in gangs is marked by what I call its "antipodal" nature. The adoption of antipodal tattoos is a function of the power relationships in Singapore. On the one hand, young Muslim boys who exist at the peripheries of Chinese gangs, appropriate tattoos that conflict with their master status as Malay and Muslim, as a strategy to gain acceptance into the groups. On the other, it is the result of the state management of Islam that has curtailed the effervescence of an overt Muslim identity from forming within the city state (Kamaludeen, Pereira, and Turner 2010). Hence, young Muslims appropriate the binary oppositions of the Chinese–Malay and East–West dialectic to assimilate into local youth culture. The "aesthetic" that is espoused by Muslim youth in the form of Western and Chinese symbols is a dominated aesthetic "which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant

aesthetics" (Bourdieu 1984). In other words, the body is employed to reconcile with a social position that the individual is diametrically opposed to, hence associating with the social status of a higher power. "The 369 gang has many Malay members who wear the shirt with pride as it makes gang members feel strong to be a part of it" (Zaid, former member, interviewed in Berita Harian, January 12, 2013)

"Wearing the shirt" in local street jargon alludes to the display of gang tattoos and dressing the body with gang insignia. Muslim youth have long acquired tattoos to claim a sense of belonging to Chinese gangs (John 2007). As this was also motivated by the need to prevent being easily "eaten up" by opposing gangs, it also points to the sense of power conferred by the act of tattooing (Berita Harian, January 12, 2013). The embodiment of Chinese tattoos constitutes a sacrifice that young Muslims undergo to bring about a greater sense of solidarity and coherence with dominant members of the group. Its significance is shown by how Chinese gangs today reciprocate by dropping initiation rites, such as being sworn in at the temple, in order to better appeal to young Muslim recruits.

However, despite adopting these tattoos, they do not necessarily translate into smooth integration into the Chinese gangs. In my attempts to get the Muslim youth gang members to reflect on their Chinese tattoos and their appropriation of other Chinese symbols, quite a number made reference to the power structure of the gangs they are in and their thwarted attempts at upward social mobility within these set-ups.

> There are all Malay gangs and there are gangs whereby it is of mixed races. But in the mixed race one, the top are still Chinese. The bosses of these rival gangs actually drink coffee together. The founder of the Omega gang (an all Malay gang) is held in five five, a detention center in Tanah Merah prison. When you are caught in secret societies you are listed under whether you are a fighter, head, founder etc. (Haikal, National Serviceman, 18)
>
> When I actually think about the hierarchy of the gang, it is actually a lot like the Singapore government. The top leaders are all Chinese. This is the problem. When we get caught by the police the Malay officers will ask us. Don't you feel stupid fighting for the Chinese? I feel like asking the police officer, then why are you working for the Chinese? (Fazly, former Boy's Home occupant, unemployed, 19)

Haikal, who is currently undergoing National Service, and Fazly, a former occupant of a home for juvenile delinquents, both talked about the dynamics within and between gangs, convinced that ethnicity is the key denominator in the power relationships. Since power is one of the main indicators of prestige and culture is the primary source of group solidarity, the dominant Chinese members act as gatekeepers to the gang culture. Clinton Sanders (1988:395) argues that the tattoo is "both a 'mark of disaffiliation' from conventional society and a symbolic affirmation of personal identity and association." Put in this way, tattoos are appropriated to announce a new communal affiliation for the individual.

In order to negotiate social mobility or even to exercise solidarity with the rest of the group, the Muslim youth gang members embrace this foreign culture. This is demonstrated in the gang-speak and the tattoos adorned by these young Muslims. As the cultural domain is also stratified within the group as a means of maintaining social stability, cultural capital then becomes a prized entity with the capacity to confer prestige to an individual (Kamaludeen 2014a). However, as seen from the interviews, some members do espouse the internal and external conflicts that they face in affiliating themselves with the Chinese gangs. In rebelling against the status quo, the body is used as a site to indicate to the community that a change in social status has taken place. In the case of Muslim youth in Chinese gangs, it is not necessarily a transformation of their identity that leads easily or automatically to an enhancement of their social status. Ironically, the bodily inscriptions could also be interpreted as signs of subservience and a pledge of allegiance to an alternative social order.

These bodily marks serve a dual social function in not only denoting the individual's affiliation to the social group but also marking the individual's location in the group's hierarchy. For example, among gang members, tattoos are also enshrined on knuckles and foreheads to signify that they are "fighters" and to indicate their readiness to go into battle. It is also interesting to explore how the choice of whether to adopt Chinese inscriptions could reflect on how these Muslim youth define

themselves. "Chinese tattoos are actually characters that tell people about my personality" (Yem, a former Boy's Home occupant, 20 years old).

Where these youth have adopted Chinese motifs, a common response is that the tattoos are merely characters expressing the personality of the individual or to be more accurate, a personality or quality he or she wants to be perceived as having. Others alluded to what Kosut (2014) has described as the artification of tattoos. However, some respondents, like Brahim, rationalized abstaining from tattoos which have a Buddhist influence, as they are diametrically opposed to his Muslim identity.

> I put on tattoos because it is art. Nowadays we do not put on Chinese motifs like the dragon or koi. Usually that's the old timers. And I abstain from Chinese tattoos like having Buddhist inscriptions on my body. *Panas* (Scorching), babe … At night cannot sleep. (Brahim, National Serviceman, 21)

In *Culture and Everyday Life*, Inglis (2005:55) discussed in some depth how the practice of art can have a religious dimension and "have the same effects as a genuine religious experience." Here, Brahim problematizes the degree of antipodality of the different meanings he attach to tattoos vis-à-vis his Muslim self. Tattooing is a predominantly Chinese activity in Singapore and thus the very act of tattooing can be seen as an attempt to exude Chineseness, or Chinese piety, as a means to assimilate into gang culture, or at least as an attempt to Sinicize one's identity. However, Brahim makes a distinction between tattoos as art and tattoos that carry religious connotations. While associating the Buddhist faith with the majority Chinese population in Singapore, he went on to describe non-religious-affiliated Chinese tattoos as a matter of taste or fashion and religious tattoos as a category within the sacred realm. In this instance, a classification which divides an inside and an outside of the body is mapped as Brahim described metaphorically how Buddhist tattoos would carry pollution to his "inner self." While managing to reconcile the adoption of tattooing as popular culture or art, the youth gang member recognized a dividing line between his Muslim body and a different religious tradition. In this sense, religious commodification is resisted and in this instance, the body can be multiracial but not multifaith.

To him, despite tattooing being a key ritual in his socialization into gang culture, the tattoos engraved are also individualized. While the Chinese language confers authenticity and symbolic power, the meaning of the characters is a form of impression management and self-expression (Johnson 2006). These "autobiographical statements" can thus be described as "personal objects, symbolic expressions of personality, biography, interests and individual fantasies" and not merely as "ideological loyalties and social commitments." While tattooing in general is viewed as a means to express gang-hood for these young Muslims, it is evident that they still assert a certain degree of choice over how they want to be perceived. To add, as much as the tattoos of these gang members are symbols of social collective affiliations, they are also caricatures of more individualised life events. Of the latter, these tattoos become narratives of life histories and are forms of identity protection (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005:111). Respondents spoke about how their tattoos embody a lasting reminder of specific events in their lives. These function as mechanisms of social memory where significant events are etched permanently and revisited to galvanize the social group. It is not uncommon to see Malay gang members engraving tattoos of teardrops on their cheeks. It signifies that they have lost fellow members in a fight, indicating a form of mourning for their loss.

In these struggles to define the self within the cultural ambiguity of a multiracial society, some gang members, in discussing the rationale behind their tattooing, implicitly accepted the notion of scarring the body as a dangerous practice. It is important to note that, in the apparent chaos of symbols surrounding body art, a system of classification of the sacred and the profane is still maintained.

It is not surprising that tattooing practices are often met with negative responses by other youth. In interviews conducted, young Muslims who refrain from tattooing described their feelings toward the practice. A youth gang member who does not wear a tattoo described some plausible motivations behind the tattooing of his friends:

> Quite a number of my friends have tattoos. I find that those who have tattoos are just showing off, to make themselves look cool, and a way to convey a message to others that they have power and do not mess with them. Apart from that, they are actually nothing. (Jali, Polytechnic Student, 19)

It is apparent that young Malay men who are involved in gang life choose to tattoo themselves because of a variety of reasons. Even within the same gang, the choice to tattoo, or more accurately, the rationalization of the choice to tattoo, very much depends on each individual subject. Some of the salient factors include the dominance of the Chinese social capital in Singapore, the result or the lack of state sanctioned behaviors and the global culture of tattooing that has normalized it for all populations. Interestingly for Muslim youth gang members who do not carry tattoos, a variety of responses were given ranging from the Islamic prohibition against tattooing to their own personal choices. While some had refrained from tattooing for religious reasons, other interviewees referred to the paradox of using religion as a justification for not tattooing, as advanced by some of their counterparts.

> It's not because of religion that I don't put on tattoos because if we want to talk about religion, then beating others up, taking drugs and consuming alcohol is also against the religion. I do not put on tattoos because it's not our interest although we do feel left out amongst other gang members who don them. But there are other ways for me to prove myself in the gang such as showing my courage in fights. I don't have to prove that I am daring just by putting on tattoos. But at the end of the day, it is about yourself. We have the power to make our own choices. Like for me, I don't drink when all of the other gang members drink. (Hassan, former Boy's Home Occupant, unemployed, 20)
>
> Even though I was involved with the gang I never tattooed myself as that is not important. What is important is my involvement in their activities.
>
> (Ruddy, former gang-member, interviewed in *Berita Minggu*, December 18, 2011)

Hassan justified the deviance of his non-tattooed body within the gang set up by triggering the neutralization technique of appealing to higher values that are held in high esteem by other group members such as the allusion to bravery and by extension, the ability to account for themselves well in gang fights. For Ruddy, in exhibiting an internalized sense of identity, being a gangster is thus defined by what you "are" and not how you portray yourself. In this instance, an opposition is thus drawn between "being a gangster" and "doing gang-work," the latter implying a superficial adoption of styles and codes rather than a genuine mode of life. This departs from other studies of tattooed youth that report that peer influence is the key factor in a young person's decision to tattoo (Koch et al. 2005), and corroborates with Muggleton's (2000) study in which he argues that the practice of youth culture has more to do with a philosophy of "personal freedom" than an adherence to a dress code, musical playlist or even favored drug. For these gang members, the motivation and attitudes behind their choice of not to be tattooed are diverse.

Gang tattoos, whether with Chinese or Western themes, can be seen as an identity marker that constitutes membership of a particular gang. However, there are members who manage to avoid gang tattooing and successfully negotiate an identity around this cultural marker. For example it is clear that religion and familial concerns still present themselves as frames of reference in the everyday lives of these Muslim youth. These more traditional values can be seen in their dilemma in grappling with such issues as tattoos and alcohol consumption in the gang set-up. Having recognized this dilemma, it is evident, however, that the individual gang member's commitment to the group can be measured largely by how staunchly he embraces the group's sub-culture and the ways in which he presents himself within the group, although these visual traits and mannerisms vary from one individual to the other.

For young Muslims participating in Chinese gangs, there is often a restraint of the "interior body" as sacred and uncontaminated. Although emblazoned with Chinese and even Western tattoos, the refusal to imprint themselves with foreign religious symbols show a clear demarcation between the "interior" and "exterior" body. At the same time, youth tattooing practices present a response to moral guardians such as religious authorities, potential employers, and family members who proscribe tattooing. They also pose a challenge to the norms of what constitutes acceptable tattooing, as they illuminate how "non-mainstream body practices reflect, and contest, contemporary norms and

values about the body" (Pitts 2003:14). Despite the increasing visibility and mainstreaming of tattoos, many gang members spoke of the social stigma that is still attached to the practice. Rarely does the symbolic capital garnered from tattoos translates into economic capital in the workforce, with many citing the negative job interview experiences they underwent. Hence, the body art practices of young Muslims illuminate the tensions between the effort to reproduce youth body regimens and their regulation in the social space.

Conclusion

Against the urban context of minority living, multiculturalism and state management, the tattooing practice of Muslims in Singapore predominantly takes on an assimilative nature as its practitioners seek to leverage on the cultural capital of the dominant majority. Young Muslims in Singapore appropriate symbols of the Chinese–Malay and East–West dialectic to produce "antipodal tattoos" in order to assimilate into gang culture and to enhance their status, many times to no avail. Similar studies on the tattooing practices of youth may be set against these themes in order to map out their possible trajectories. To be sure, the tattooing practices among young Muslims in Singapore stand in opposition to the adoption of "Islamic tattoos" as part of a global Muslim youth culture that thrive within more competitive environments.

Many current works on religiosity and tattooing have focused on the "magical tattoos" linked to the religious consciousness of aboriginal populations (Krutak 2012). There is a limited number of studies that deal with the attempts of contemporary youth to reconcile their newfound urban piety with their tattooing practices. This lacuna is even more pressing with regard to Islam. To do this, understanding the notion of classificatory transgressions within the psyche of these youth aside, we need to also be attuned to the local factors that are shaping their lived realities. "Antipodal tattoos" are the manifestations of a young Muslim gang member's endeavor to reconcile the power dynamics vested in the state management of youth and religion, ethnic minority–majority relations, and the dominant religious doctrine.

Singapore represents one possible model for examining minority body art in a global city. It is a highly organized and controlled urban space but even in its well-ordered city environment, gangs flourish as a social network for displaced and alienated youth. In this context of ethnically mixed youth gangs, tattooing is a transgressive act confronting orthodox Islamic culture in which body modification is taboo. At the same time, the meaning of their tattoos is ambiguous, uncertain, and shifting. Young Muslims are recognized to have embraced tattooing as proclamations of solidarity, narratives of social memory and a form of artification. The hybridity of the themes of their tattoos—Omega watches, Chinese dragons and characters—illustrates the floating and fleeting subculture of the modern multicultural city.

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