



## Original Research

# Sak Yant as a Cross-Cultural Practice

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**Abstract:** Sak Yants are spiritual tattoos that originate from Southeast Asia. Based on an Instagram sample, this article examines the popularity of Sak Yants in the so-called West, as they clearly differ from other tattoo styles, for example, often emphasize less individuality and imply rules that the tattooee must follow to keep their power. Their cross-cultural adaptation can imply the risk of copies and changes, as well as the commodification of the spiritual art and a connection to eroticism to promote their marketing. Reasons for the cross-cultural fascination these tattoos exert lie in the belief in protection or a general desire for meaningfulness, the constant indexical connection to the master, the expression of cultural openness, and the feeling of community, as well as a holistic approach to the physical and spiritual. This is expressed through the ritual and the new spiritual status tied to certain behaviors. In conclusion, the millennia-old Sak Yant seems to correspond to a specific zeitgeist, connecting body and mind and enabling self-chosen connections to times and places.

**Keywords:** Embodiment, Spirituality, Globalization, Interculturality, Sak Yant, Tattoo

## Introduction

As the world is getting increasingly globalized, aesthetics, beliefs, and knowledge from various parts of the world have become accessible. The Southeast Asian tradition of Sak Yant tattoos has gained increasing popularity with non-Buddhist people across cultures (May 2014). Sak Yants are spiritually empowering tattoos that are executed in a specific way by monks or holistically trained masters and form part of a ritual that includes offerings, prayers, and blessings. In addition, the process is not finished with the execution of the tattoo but also entails certain obligations for the tattooee. Therefore, Sak Yants form not just another tattoo style, but point to a special integration of physicality and spirituality made possible by the tattoo, which makes it worth considering why they fascinate people from all over the world and what implications this may have on the art.

Despite their growing popularity in the so-called West, Sak Yants and their cross-cultural appropriation has not received much scientific attention so far. Based on an Instagram sample, this article aims at analyzing how their popularity may impact the traditional art and at understanding the reasons for their popularity, even though they differ, as will be shown, in many ways from what makes other tattoo styles attractive for (potential) tattooees.

Various fields of research are considered in this article, including the area of spirituality and its connection to (post)modern times (e.g. Boyne and Rattansi 1990; Redden 2016; Slife, Hope, and Nebeker 1999) and of embodiment (e.g. Baender-Michalska and Baender 2014; Ozawa-de Silva and Ozawa-de Silva 2011; Pitts 1998; Sheets-Johnstone 2009; Synnott 1992; Wolak 2008); further, literature on the permanent design of the body, such as tattooing (e.g., Adelowo and Babalola 2021; Beeler 2006; Dey and Das 2017), and on the specific cultural context of the Sak Yant will be considered (Cook 2007; Shaw 1994; Rinpoche and Dahlby 2002; Vater 2011). Digital religion studies also play a role, examining how people use the internet for spiritual purposes (Campbell and Garner 2021).

## The Art of Sak Yant Tattoos

The term “tattoo” “may be associated with certain aesthetic properties or a certain ‘style’ ” (Krause 2019, 3) but also with certain practices. Tattoos and their fascination can be linked to the zeitgeist that is said to produce “a cultural coherence which...is epochal...and transient” (Oergel 2019, 1). However, the last aspects may be contested: just like other tattoo styles, Sak Yants “have been around for over 2000 years” (Karsten 2021) and have crossed cultural borders. Before shedding light on their specific properties, a more general perspective will be provided on the phenomenon of modifying the body with tattoos.

### Perspectives on Tattooing

It is a cultural universal that the body is not simply taken for granted, “(meaning, traditionally, a gift of God); it is plastic, to be moulded and selected at need or whim” (Synnott 1992, 101). One might even add that it is often even expected and socially desirable for people to change their bodies, for example, with sports, yoga, make-up, eating, or even with procedures such as cosmetic surgery, piercings, or tattoos (Sheets-Johnstone 2009). The desire to shape the body can perhaps even be understood as an important aspect that separates humans from their animal relatives. Older literature interpreted tattooing “in a manner that increasingly tied together allegedly savage and barbaric practices of ‘non-Westerners’ to forms of deviant, anti-social or criminal behavior exhibited by ‘uncivilized’ lower-class Westerners” (Pritchard 2001, 28), probably also influenced by the (in some parts) hostile attitude of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam toward tattoos (Scheinfeld 2007, 362). However, more recent literature on tattoos often refers to identity (Dey and Das 2017)—both personal and cultural identity that can be shaped by bodily expression (Merleau-Ponty 1966; Pitts 1998).

Further, tattooing is increasingly seen as art form: looking for a “tattooer” on Google, one gets 6,590,000 results (December 2023), whereas “tattoo artist” leads to 311,000,000. Art is nowadays often understood “as the expression or application of human creative skill” (Messmer 2017), even though the coupling of “art” and “creativity” is historically young (Reck 2019, 537). Following the philosopher Berys Gaut (2003, 150f.), “Creativity is a kind of

making that produces something which is original,” “has considerable value,” and “must involve flair by the maker”; the latter can be understood as skill that cannot be achieved in a purely mechanical way. However, this may be true for some, but not all tattoos. Especially with traditional motifs, which make up a larger part of the Sak Yant motifs requested by customers, creativity understood as originality is often not necessary; yet, because of the necessary skill and spiritual expertise, Sak Yant tattooing has to be considered a kind of art that goes far beyond the application of the motif: tattoo artists produce something of value and have “flair,” and their products can also be seen as “a complete emotion, incorporating myths and beliefs, which have played important and diverse roles in society since the dawn of humankind” (Ghosh 2020, 295).

### Sak Yant as a Specific Expression of the Connection of Body and Mind

*Sak Yant* refers to the piercing of the skin with a long needle (*sak*) and to sacred geometry (*yant*), which can comprise text or/and pictures. During the ritual of drawing or tattooing sacred geometry, spirits are transferred into the design: “Spiritual tattooing functions as the bridge or instrument that connects the tattoo wearer with gods or ‘wild spirits’ in the spiritual realm in order to help him/her” (Phanon 2015, 71). Thus, Sak Yant tattoos should enable “spiritual empowerment” (Phanon 2015, 72). The term “Yantra tattoo,” which is also often used in this context, is loosely translated as “talisman tattoo.” Often Yantras are associated with deities and mantras. Balance is considered very important, so one often finds five elements whose visual balance reflect the balance of the universe. The script used is Pali or Khmer, and depending on the region and cultural context, the designs vary somewhat.

In Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, it is common for lay people to visit famous monasteries to receive blessings and protections, also in the form of tattoos inked in the manner described and executed in a ritual context. The art of Sak Yant integrates with Buddhist worldviews: “Conceptions of the self and the body are central to Buddhist ascetic practice in Thailand” (Cook 2007, 22), and the relation of body and mind is neither viewed “dualistic in a Cartesian sense, nor monistic. Rather, it represents a genuine alternative to these positions by presenting mind/body interaction as a dynamic process that is situated within the context of the individual’s relationships with others and the environment” (Ozawa-de Silva and Ozawa-de Silva 2011, 95).

Besides, tattoos stand, as shown before, in relation to identity and communicate, at least in the case of visible tattoos, to fellow humans something about the tattooee. Through the Sak Yant, the tattooed person also enters into a lasting relationship with the master who inked the tattoo—the master leaves a trace on his or her body, so to speak. Thus, the own body shows an indexical connection to the master and its spiritual authority, similar to a religious relic. The tattooed body and the associated instructions for the tattooee’s life can, thus, point

a way, even if this very body in Hindu–Buddhist views of life must ultimately be overcome after a long process of reincarnations.

### The Process of Getting a Sak Yant

The process of receiving a tattoo can be described as a ritual. Rituals are defined as “socially shared group activities” and are “characterized by an emphasis on the particular way in which the component behaviours are performed. Thus, the actions that compose a ritual may be carried out in a specific order and/or in a specific location” (Over, Eggleston, and Cook 2020, 3). Sak Yant rituals often begin with an offering that is demanded by the master, for example, in the form of fruits, flowers, incense, cigarettes, rice whiskey, and/or money (Davis 2020). These offerings are meaningful, for example, cigarettes remind on hermits who have to ward off mosquitos, and alcohol is used to sterilize the tattoo equipment, whereas the fruits represent nature’s blessings. For the masters present on Instagram, a fixed amount of money is usually expected, typically besides the aforementioned offerings. However, this is not always the case; for example, in the famous Wat Bang Phra Temple close to Bangkok, only the offerings are compulsory.

The design can be chosen by the client as well as by the master. In this context, the term “master” sometimes refers to a Buddhist monk, but especially in the case of tattoo artists present on Instagram, it often denotes a person who learned the technique and its spiritual meaning from a monk or another master. The term “Arjan,” “Arjarn,” or “Ajahn” translates as “monk,” but also “master,” and at the same time, it means “teacher” or “professor,” deriving from the Pali word “Acariya” (Sharma and Sharma 1996, 35).

During the process of tattooing, the master “murmurs Buddhist chants to imbue the tattoo with special powers” (Cook 2007, 26). The pain experienced by the tattooee during the process is considered an inherent part of the experience: “The pain silently endured...is thought to clear the mind of clutter emotions and be part of the process of imbuing the bearer with protection” (Cook 2007, 26). During tattooing, a trance state can also be achieved through the combination of pain and mantra-like chants: “Tattooing takes over and occupies the place in one’s soul, resulting in ecstatic behavior and the urge to be as close as possible to the temple and the master” (Rastinger 2012, 50). With the finished tattoo the process is not over: in order for it to maintain its power, the tattooee must follow certain rules “stipulated by his master, to receive continuing protection, good luck or power from it” (Vater 2011, 13).

At this point, a specification should be given: this article is about Sak Yant tattoos, which are mostly created by specialized and spiritually trained masters and executed in a traditional manner. Sometimes, variations of Sak Yants, especially of sacred geometry, are presented online, but here, too, a special reference to spirituality apparently often plays a role, such as with the Russian account neobuddhismtattoo. A notable exception is Unalome tattoos, which usually consist of a spiral that leads into a curved line and finally into a line

representing the twisted path to enlightenment. This spiritually loaded but rather simple motif has found its way into mainstream tattooing and is offered by many studios not specialized in Sak Yants.

## **Peculiarities of Sak Yant**

Compared with other common tattoo styles, the Sak Yant has some peculiarities that will be discussed. Since these peculiarities contradict some characteristics of other currently popular tattoo styles, and some of the most important motivations to get a tattoo, it seems even more surprising that Sak Yant tattoos are so popular.

### Individuality

The reason to get tattooed is often about “showing off sense of individuality” (Adelowo and Babalola 2021, 139; Petrova et al. 2019, 111; Dey and Das 2017). A study has shown that “tattooed individuals scored higher than the comparison group on need for uniqueness, but not on the appearance investment measures” (Tiggemann and Golder 2006, 309). As a consequence, most tattoo artists design motifs especially for the customer, and there is the general rule “don’t copy” that applies to both (potential) tattooees and tattooers. As mentioned, tattooers tend to advertise and probably also perceive themselves as “artists,” so mere copying may also not match their self-perception. Of course, there are flash sheets with motifs that are tattooed more than once, but these will often just be small “fillers” or used for a sticker sleeve.

In Sak Yant, one often sees the same designs again and again, which also applies to the sample: more than half of the pictures show repetitions of a handful of very common designs. Among them, there is the *Hab Taew* [Five Lines], the *Gao Yord* [Buddha Peaks], or the Twin Tigers, all chosen very often, as they come with a wide range of blessings covering many desires people have, such as protection, good fortune, and charisma. These motifs can be countlessly repeated, even though they are quite big and intricate and, thus, not small fillers.

The repetition could be seen as opposed to the wish for individuality and, at the same time, in line with Southeast Asian values. If one follows Geert Hofstede (1984, and for a further development, Jung and Kellaris 2001), who presented a widely regarded categorization of cultures based on various dimensions, Thailand, for example, would be classified as very collectivist. However, this categorization has been extensively criticized (McSweeney 2002), not only with regard to the methodology and the Western-centric dimensions, but also with regard to the implication of “cultures as containers” (Bolten 2010, 10). Without wanting to get caught up in this, it is notable that recent studies have shown that, in the countries of origin of Sak Yant, for example, Thailand, there is generally more social pressure on the body (Kawamura 2012, 95), which, one could assume, leads to a firmer canon of motifs.

However, speaking of an inherent lack of individuality with regard to Sak Yant seems wrong due to several facts. First, even in these very common designs, one can recognize the artist's handwriting. Second, there are countless ways to come up with new designs; per se, the Sak Yant is not limited to repeating the same patterns, but instead, new, individual designs to suit the customer's wishes and character are possible, some of them also shown in the sample. Third, it must be noted that, for a "Western" customer, in his or her specific context, the tattoo could be a signifier for individuality, whereas, at the same time, the tattoo creates a link with people from all over the world wearing the same or similar motifs, as illustrated later in this article.

### Control

Another peculiarity is that Sak Yant tattoos are often not executed in the currently popular style, with very accurate, thin lines. This style is often found in mandala tattoos, which may be linked to the Sak Yant: "mandala," from the Sanskrit term for "circle," first and foremost refers to circular designs with intricate lines; however, the term also denotes different curvy patterns such as paisley designs, and further encompasses flowers, primarily the lotus; spiritual symbols, such as the hand of Fatima; and animals. However, different from many mandala tattoos, the traditional method in Sak Yant may not allow for extremely thin lines. In addition, masters do not always use stencils, but, for example, just sketch some lines for orientation, as shown several times in the sample. Thus, the wish for perfectionism may not be fulfilled.

In this context, we can speak of control: in general, tattoos are often seen as an expression of control (Brighton and Sparkes 2014)—the tattooee designs and controls his or her body and its effect on the environment. Thus, a tattoo can be understood as a "very permanent reminder of the ownership I had over my own body" (Ableman 2018). Exerting ownership and control is usually experienced as satisfying (Flammer and Nakamura 2002; Schwarzer and Jerusalem 2002). The process of getting a tattoo, however, always involves, due to its dispositional, a certain relinquishment of control: it represents "an expression of the tattoo artist's desire" (Beeler 2006, 6), and the tattooee must trust his or her artist during the process. In Sak Yant, the spiritual authority of the master may further emphasize the power imbalance during tattooing, and due to the technique, the uncertainty regarding the result is also more evident. On the other hand, the Sak Yant—as long as the rules are followed—allows a special control for the tattooee: it brings protection, luck, or similar, as well as the permanent connection to the master.

### Understanding

As many, sometimes extensive, explanations in Instagram posts show, the sacred pictures and text elements may not be understood by the potential tattooees; sometimes, the potential client may not even know what they are about: "...you are interested in this millennia-old

tradition and would also like to have such a magical tattoo...” (nessa.leyrer February 25, 2023). It can, therefore, be assumed that quite often people who want to get tattooed have neither understood the meaning behind pictorial elements nor can assess whether words were spelled correctly nor can grasp more complex statements in their full interpretative depth without instruction. Of course, something similar can be observed with Chinese tattoos, which have been popular for a long time among so-called Western people who usually cannot read the signs.

In this context, the relationship of pictorial and text elements is particularly interesting. Often, text and image are presented as opposites: “the history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs” (Mitchell 2005, 43) and “words and images...are not merely different kinds of creatures, but opposite kinds” (Mitchell 2005, 47). “Just as language can be used for artistic expression, e.g. in the form of poems or songs or even abstract poetry, text elements can be used for something more or something different than just conveying their literal meanings” (Jerrentrup 2022, 10); in fact, they can primarily be used as visual elements. This has been stressed by Gadamer’s view on aesthetics: the artistic character of text and image, as a common characteristic, unites both. In this context, his thesis of the universal legibility of art is also interesting: for him, the “referential function” is demonstrated by the fact that the work is able to “point away from itself to something else, and so completely that one is simultaneously brought back to it” (1994, 95).

For the tattooees, there may be less concern “with clarity of meaning than with energizing...imagination” (Skolos and Wedell 2006, 146). Thus, there may be a rather personal understanding that is not necessarily based on literal meaning, and also refers to the visual dimension of the text.

## Rules

For Sak Yant tattoos to fulfill their purpose of protecting their wearers from harm, bringing good luck, and helping lead a morally correct life, the wearer must also follow a number of specific rules (Vater 2011). These rules apparently vary; for example, according to the Sak Yant Foundation, having received a *Yant Grao Paetch* (diamond armor), one must not drink alcohol or use other addictive substances, otherwise it loses its power and cannot unfold again (Sak Yant Foundation 2018). For tattoos of the well-known Ajan Mueck, the following rules are to be followed: “Do not swear on parents and teachers. Do not spit in the toilet. Man: Do not have sex with women while having their period. Women: Do not have sex while you are having your period. Do not suck, do not lick. Do not have sex with other’s husband/wife” (Sak-Yant.net, n.d.). Other rules may be even more specific, for example, the rules given by the holy tattoo temple Wat Bang Phra, among them, “Do not eat star fruit, pumpkin, or any other pumpkin type vegetable...Do not eat food from a wedding, or from a funeral

banquet...Do not walk under a washing line or an overhanging building...Do not let a woman lie on top of you, or sit on top either” (Sak-Yant.net, n.d.).

## Research Method

The research method can be described as “digital” in many ways, “(a) focusing on the environment in which the research takes place, (b) highlighting the special set of research tools available, and (c) defining digital research in terms of the unique frame in which research is conducted” (Tsuria et al. 2017, 54). Using a digital method seems appropriate as the marketing takes place in a digital environment, and the research interest refers to global and intercultural aspects.

To gain more insights into Sak Yant tattoos in the context of a global clientele, an Instagram sample was analyzed. Instagram is a social medium often used to connect people, share information, and advertise goods or services. The language used gives a clear hint about the intended audience: if texts are written in English, French, Italian, or German, as in the sample, it is assumable that an international audience is (also) targeted. Further, pictures of “foreigners” getting Sak Yant point out to the target group. In this context, it is important to stress that monetary aspects may also play a role for the account holders, even though some of them are also able to execute tattoos in other styles and, thus, probably do not totally rely on Sak Yants.

In May 2023, I subscribed to the first ten Instagram accounts that were suggested when entering “#Sakyant” and belonged to tattoo artists rather than other artists or tattooed individuals who do not practice the art themselves. In one case, the account did not belong to a tattoo artist, but to an organizer of Sak Yant tattoo events, which she promotes in cooperation with tattoo artists.

Of the accounts in the sample, the last ten posts were considered in each case. The accounts themselves came from very different countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Italy, France, Germany, and Sweden. The accounts that were not from the countries of origin of Sak Yant tattoos either belonged to emigrants or to people who had learned the art with masters, usually in Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia, in order to bring it back to their home country. In some cases, the origin or ethnicity of the tattoo artist was not disclosed.

All accounts regularly posted information about Sak Yant tattoos, explaining the meaning and/or the technique of tattooing. Further, information on booking was frequent. The photos and, less frequently, videos showed not only tattoo motifs and motif suggestions, but also, in almost a third of the cases, the ceremony surrounding the tattooing.

The sample allows conclusions to be drawn about various aspects: it shows which meanings the artists are willing to communicate regarding their product “Sak Yant” and, at the same time, what meanings also fit for the targeted audience in their experience. Advertising is very well suited for analysis when it comes to meanings and values (Bolz 1996,

77), because advertisers assume a “sufficiently identical system of signs” (Haseloff 1970, 195) in the target group, without which the advertising would not be understood or would be misunderstood. Since it usually cannot be expected that potential customers have much knowledge beyond visual impressions, advertisers have the power to ascribe or consolidate meanings themselves.

It has to be added that, as Slife, Hope, and Nebeker (1999) point out, traditional science and spirituality may be incompatible to the point that traditional science and spirituality may be incompatible to the point that science has led to alterations of spiritual ideas. For such topics, they propose the perspective of hermeneutics as a counterpoint to positivistic naturalism, focusing on lived, emic experience; pluralistic voices; and a rejection of the supremacy of a merely scientific understanding of the world, as well as the rejection of expert objectivity. Following this line of thought, the present work can also be seen as an open narrative. The statements that the artists in question make on Instagram should not be confused with an entirely emic perspective, rather they reflect what the subjects want to reveal and what corresponds to their goals. However, these goals seem to be not only marketing, but also marketing within the framework of what the artists consider appropriate, and how they want their art to be understood. Looking at the sample, one will find a high degree of similarity between the artists, but this does not mean that every Sak Yant artist always shares the same opinion.

## **The Appropriation and Adaptation of Sak Yant**

Having presented the peculiarities of Sak Yant, the question now is, to what extent has it been adapted for cross-cultural contexts. This adaptation concerns not only the look, but also the field of meaning.

### The Risk of Copies

In the early twentieth century, tattooists started to draw “flash” designs, and their clients could choose which one they wanted (Rubin 1988)—and, obviously, did not get a unique tattoo. As mentioned, nowadays, the stress lies on individuality (Adelowo and Babalola 2021), so that copying, at least for bigger pieces, is strongly disregarded. However, there may be still a risk, as unlike other motifs, Sak Yant tattoos by their nature do not need to be unique. Especially when images are distributed via social media, there is always a risk for the creators that they will be copied. Therefore, to avoid being copied, some accounts had posted under pictures of exemplary Sak Yant designs that errors were deliberately built in. The pictures of executed tattoos may not get modified. In my sample, I did not come across any “error-warnings.”

A comparable case regarding copies could be seen in Maori tattoos, whose motifs are also globally used in various contexts like tattooing and fashion design. On the one hand, it has been said that “using Maori culture as a point of differentiation” (Lai 2010, 12) allows “Maori”

and “New Zealand” to emerge as strong brands and position themselves globally. On the other hand, intellectual rights are lost, non-Maori people benefit from it, and knowledge of the culture is not necessarily strengthened by interest in the motifs (Lai 2010), which may be perceived only as an aesthetic asset.

However, corresponding risks may be lower in the case of Sak Yant, because as shown earlier, the tattoo is closely connected to the accompanying ritual, which needs a person both mastering the technique and the spiritual aspects of the process. Without any interaction with such a person, the Sak Yant is a mere design not offering the spiritual connection. Further, there may be less risk of copies due to the fact that tattoo artists, out of respect, do not ink spiritual tattoos that do not correspond to their own convictions. Nevertheless, it has to be added that the now much-discussed accusation of cultural appropriation could also play a role in this context.

### Connection with Eroticism

Presumably, in order to be able to advertise the tattoos optimally, sometimes revealing or erotic photos were shared by the tattoo artists in the Instagram sample. Mostly these were reposts from customers, such as Sak\_yant\_pat\_dewan posts a picture of a woman in a bathroom, a towel round her waist, the tattooed back uncovered: “Superbe photo qu’une cliente m’a envoyé. Digne d’un magazine. Qu’en pensez-vous?” [Amazing photo that a client has sent me. Worthy of publication in a journal. What do you think?, December 19, 2022]. The connection between eroticism and spirituality seems rather strange to many people, especially against the Christian background (Carr 2003), starting with the garden of Eden story that linked sexuality to sin. In different cultural contexts, however, the realm of spirituality may be less detached from eroticism and sexuality as, for example, in Tantric Buddhism, whose distinctive contribution “was to integrate intimate relationships and erotic experience into practices on the path to enlightenment” (Shaw 1994, xiv).

However, in this case, the erotic is apparently not a goal in itself or a way to achieve a spiritual aim, but a way to market a product. The fact that (products connected to) spiritualities also have to market themselves somehow is nothing special. In Christianity, for example, it was the magnificent churches that were supposed to give a foretaste of paradise and bring people back to Catholicism at the time of the Counter-Reformation.

The feeling of ambivalence toward erotic beauty may be related to its power and simultaneous externality: “On the one hand, everyone would like to have it, to enjoy it and to feel the power it has, on the other hand it seems to be something which is only superficial and is regarded as a trivial externality” (Wolak 2008, 17). This, in turn, leads to the aforementioned duality with which the body is viewed in Western tradition, which, however, cannot claim any generality.

## Spiritual Longing and Mockery

“I believe that the prime reason for getting a Yant should not be for a selfish one, rather that it should be because one wishes the yant to assist oneself in becoming a better person” (Littlewood 2009), although Ajarn Spencer Littlewood himself admits that at the beginning of his own spiritual journey, he was also driven by egoistic motives.

A spiritual motivation is apparently not only fostered by the Sak Yant accounts on Instagram, but also a driving force for many tattooees, otherwise it would be unnecessary or even hindering that the accounts almost always emphasize the spiritual dimension. Spiritual longing is obviously part of the so-called Western zeitgeist and is also expressed in other practices such as paganism and yoga (Baender-Michalska and Baender 2014). According to secularization theory, spirituality is gaining ground precisely because of growing global problems that modern, especially Western, life cannot solve or for which it offers no support. This includes not only the longing for meaning in life, but also for community. The latter may explain why individuality in Sak Yant tattoos, unlike in other tattoo styles, apparently plays a subordinate role.

However, a spiritual motivation cannot be assumed or even verified for every tattooee—neither for cross-cultural nor for people from Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia. Further, there is a risk of turning the tattoo into a mockery if the rules are not followed (Sak Yant Foundation 2018): “The power of the yant does not rest in the tattoo...but with the secret blessings of the tattoo master, the yant is active and the wearer is bound to follow a set of rules stipulated by his master, to receive continuing protection, good luck or power from it” (Vater 2011, 13). Apparently, the rules set up by the masters present on Instagram are either not fully communicated online, maybe not to scare off customers, or are set much simpler and easier to follow. In general, they very seldom mention rules.

## Changes

Some accounts stress that they use original designs; however, some traditional designs allow for changes, and occasionally, one sees clearly modified patterns. Changes are usually made to better suit either the taste or the story of the customer. With very familiar designs like the five lines, this can be the integration of a lotus flower, for example. However, there are also sometimes reinterpretations of or additions to the style: Vagantestravante\_ink describes under a picture how she got motivated to create a Yantra design for her customers, who work in the show in performance art:

Rest energy. Attesa. Marina e Ulay si incastrano l'un l'altra le pupille, si affidano al peso reciproco e indietro tendono, tendono l'arco. Sulle costole di entrambi, paralleli al cuore, due piccolo microfoni: per quattro minuti ascoltano I reciproci battiti cardiaci. Una delle piu belle opera die Performance Art, mescolate al sigillo dedicato

alle animale gemelle. Il “Terzo Sigillo di Venere” riesce a creare le situazioni e le coincidenze per permettere a chi lo usa, di entrare in contatto e in relazione con la propria persona, o “anima gemella” [Waiting. Marina and Ulay frame each other’s pupils, rely on each other’s weight and back tendon, stretch the bow. On the ribs of both, parallel to the heart, two small microphones: for four minutes they listen to each other’s heartbeats. One of the most beautiful works of performance art, mixed with the seal dedicated to the twin animals. The “Third Seal of Venus” succeeds in creating the situations and coincidences to allow those who use it, to get in touch and in relationship with their person, or “soulmate”].

However, the modification or creation requires in-depth knowledge of cultural motifs and scripture. Further, many people interested in Sak Yant seem to look for the well-known patterns. Therefore, at least in the accounts in the sample, the motifs are predominantly oriented to the typical canon. However, on Instagram, this can be a problem for tattoo artists: even if the customers do not mind the repetition of the motifs, the content is not particularly varied. Consequently, design modifications may be useful from the business point of view.

The placements, as typical of Sak Yant, are almost exclusively on the upper body—the arms, back, neck, and head. An exception has been offered by the account *preservation\_khmer\_sakyant*, which showed pictures of tattoos placed on legs. When asked, the account holder confirmed that the placement of those specific motifs on the legs did not violate any tradition, whereas he posted about another tattoo,

I saw...this Sak Yant tattoo on his [= a man’s] leg and asked to take a picture. This tattoo cannot be tattooed on the legs...Some Sak Yant designs cannot be tattooed below the waist, but some can...tattoo artists need to study and study more, both in Cambodia artists and abroad artist. You cannot only do tattoos for money, but also be clear about what you do. (February 9, 2023)

Thus, as a rule, no placements are made that contradict the Sak Yant tradition. Apart from this, possible customer’s wishes to have a placement done on the lower part of the body are either not executed or at least not presented on Instagram to avoid making Sak Yant be perceived as nothing more than a variable fashion accessory.

### Commodification

Sak Yants are apparently offered as a commodity: the accounts followed on Instagram do not only want to provide information about the art and the culture, but also make money from it. However, paying for art and a cultural experience (Brown and Cave 2010), even if this art is related to spirituality, is not extraordinary. It has been shown that “economic, cultural and social life are deeply imbricated” (Redden 2016, 231), and whereas with regard to the

Protestant tradition, an ambiguity toward capitalism is a recurrent theme (Howe 2001, 299), it is not only “a condition of modern capitalist society that people feel comfortable and are willing to pay for spiritual experiences” (Bone 2015, 123), but also of non-Western societies. The spheres of the secular (earning money, communicating status, producing recognized art) and of the spiritual (performing rituals), as well as the mediation of the spiritual, are mixed in the Sak Yant accounts present on Instagram. This could call into question the spiritual seriousness of the tattoo artist and the tattooed person, but by no means necessarily denies it.



Figure 1: The Artist Vagantestravante\_ink Has Adapted the Motif to Her Client’s Personal Story, 2023

## The Cross-Cultural Fascination with Sak Yant

Even though some features of Sak Yant are significantly different from other popular tattoo styles, it exerts fascination, and according to Da Silva Azevedo Drouyer (2013), its cross-cultural popularity is even growing. In the following, reasons that become apparent from the posts will be discussed. As will be shown, they go beyond the visual appeal of the style, but are intertwined with the visual reminder and signifier they form for the person herself and her surroundings.

### Memory and Experience

Frequently stressed in the texts accompanying the pictures in the sample was the memory of a journey. The association of memory and tattoos has been frequently described, for example, it could be seen as “a memory inscribed on the skin” (Hirsch 2012, 96). Such a very physical asset as memory of something spiritually important is not particular to Hindu and Buddhist worldviews; “Christian communication culture, too, is based on the sufferings of Christ, which, although seemingly disappeared from the surface of the European bodies, the Christian civilization has only unbound itself from it—a memory” (Landfester 2005, 93). Similar to ancient Christian practices, in Instagram posts, Sak Yants have been specifically linked to journeys (as if pilgrimages), usually to Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia: “Travel is made up of little moments that change you forever. From the food you eat to the people you meet, travel changes us all in one way or another. Sak Yant is one of those experiences that touches the soul and never let[s] go” (Arjannengthaisakyant, May 11, 2023). In this post, Arjan Neng also mentions the experience and the transformation the journey offers. The experience first and foremost refers to the aforementioned ritual of getting tattooed (Rinpoche and Dahlby 2002) and the blessings received through the tattoo. This experience can be achieved without much outer journey; however, some kind of inner journey is part of the process and can be compared to a rite of passage, which has been done with tattoos in general (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005) but may be even more applicable in the given context. This explains why sometimes oil tattoos are done for people who would like to undergo the ceremony, but do not want a visible mark.

The pain that arises in the process for the tattooee, in turn, can be associated with the Buddhist view of suffering, but also with the pride that comes with overcoming the pain, which is permanently remembered with the tattoo. This overcoming can further be associated with spiritual discipline, which matches the conception of the Yantra as “a tool intended to help focus the mind” (Vater 2011, 11).

### *Cultural Melange*

In the context of the journey and the experience, hospitality, and associated with it, cultural openness, should also be mentioned: “Come to feel the culture, the spirituality, and the

professional work of Bamboo” (bamboo\_sakyant, May 7, 2023)—this text acts like an invitation, and the person to be tattooed, by accepting the invitation, takes part in the culture quasi symbolically and, even more, carries a piece of it permanently under the skin.

Consequently, he or she also signals cultural openness. The own body, thus, becomes a kind of cultural melange, as many example photos on Instagram of tattooees from different countries show. Often, they already wear tattoos from other contexts with different meanings, plus other features of personal style that are not necessarily a reference to Thai, Laotian, or Cambodian tradition.

### Protection, Healing, and Meaningfulness

Of course, there are also arguments that relate more to the original spiritual meaning. The tattoos shown online are often associated with protection, which suggests that this is also a central aspect for customers, stressed, for example, in a post by Spiritualsakyant on May 11, 2023: “Yant Mongkut Phra Buddha Chao (Buddha Crown). This Yant is believed to make the wearers invincible and unable to be harmed by any weapons, evil sorcery, and provides protection against an untimely death. It will bestow great protection against any form of danger.” With the common stress on protection, the wearer receives something positive, yet not too specific. The mystical, which the Khmer or Pali characters bring by their illegibility, makes it easier to interpret own ideas into a Sak Yant or to regard it generally as a talisman. The practice of religion in a broader sense is also about creating one’s own religious life patterns, or about the pursuit of an identity (embellished with personal stories) in order to live out one’s personal faith authentically (Campbell and Garner 2021). Transcendence is experienced in an individually unique manner—a process that often changes individuals’ perceptions of self, others, and the world (Slife, Hope, and Nebeker 1999) and can be felt in the ritualistic and painful process of the tattooing. In this context, the desire for healing—whether of physical or psychological maladies—can also play a role. The connection between tattoos and healing has already been demonstrated by Ötzi, whose tattoos are located at acupuncture points.

On a more general level, the individual need for meaning may play a role as well. This can be seen in context of the detraditionalized, dynamic, individualized, and secular Western society and the countless options for individual meaning-making it presents (Bachmair 2017). In this line of thought, following certain cultural rules and learning cultural knowledge does not play the central role, but rather choosing for oneself the aspects that best fit one’s own needs, that is, giving individual meanings to practices and elements.

### Community

Nevertheless, community obviously matters as well: “Want to be part of it?” (nessa.leyrer February 24, 2023)—this seems to refer not only to the ritual, but also to the bond that is

created with the master, and, furthermore, with other Sak Yant wearers. Precisely because the tattoo motifs are similar, sometimes even identical, this style may allow a sense of community to a particular extent. The community may be imaginary, but it still gives the wearer a sense of belonging. As mentioned, another aspect pointing to the feeling of community or connection is the indexical relationship to the master and his or her spiritual strength. Here, the commitment given by following the rules probably also plays a role.

### Integration of Physical and Mental Aspects

In the so-called Western tradition, there is a tendency toward seeing the (ephemeral and outer) body as opposed to the (eternal and inner) mind—even though not always seen as a clear-cut difference, as movements like Romanticism show.

However, in other cultural contexts, this differentiation does not necessarily make a difference (Descola 2013). There are, for example, Buddhist practices revolving around the self and the body (Cook 2007), presenting an alternative to a rather dualistic view (Ozawa-de Silva and Ozawa-de Silva 2011). In Sak Yant, this becomes particularly obvious: the body is exposed to pain during the ritual, the suffering of which can be associated with the noble truth *Dukha*, the suffering that life inevitably brings with it. The voice speaks chants during the ritual, and focusing on this can result in concentration pain relief. Finally, the body is permanently changed and, eventually, adheres to certain rules of behavior. Physicality and spirituality, looks and mind, are thus integrated.

### **Conclusion: Overcoming and Integrating Boundaries**

As often when cultural appropriation or inspiration is at stake, it seems difficult to come up with an evaluation. From the point of view of tattoo artists offering their service to people from various countries, it may be simply advisory to harvest all possible markets, even if (parts of) the traditional meaning of the tattoos may be lost. However, Sak Yant artists on Instagram emphasize being embedded in a spiritual system, suggesting that it is either a unique marketing proposition or that they care about finding not just any but suitable customers, or both.

Further, it can be seen as a way to transport something about Yantra aesthetics and meanings to greater parts of the world, leading to more interest, but also to more respect for the cultures of Southeast Asia. Thus, the question about the impact of the cross-cultural popularity of the Sak Yant and resulting modifications, both in style and associations, can at this point be seen neither as mostly positive nor as mostly negative.

Looking at the reasons for its popularity, memory and experience; the expression of cultural openness; and the longing for meaning, healing and protection, and community play a role. If one steps a little back from these quite concrete reasons, a very interesting aspect is the relationship between mind and body inherent in the tattoo. The ritual that accompanies the tattooing emphasizes this dimension, as well as the rules, even though they may be

adapted to allow easier compliance. Both are related to mental discipline. Thus, the physical is an expression of and interacts with the spiritual. This is not a characteristic exclusive to Sak Yant—other tattoos can also be given a specific meaning by the wearer that go beyond the design of the body. The rather fixed meanings of Sak Yant tattoos may, in turn, be personally interpreted by the tattooed individual, and these interpretations can also change over his or her lifespan (Rush 2005). Nevertheless, the connection here seems particularly close.

This interplay of the physical and the mental and the accompanying dissolution of boundaries corresponds to, but also transcends, the zeitgeist of postmodernism. Postmodern perspectives are often understood as “united by a self-proclaimed commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference” (Boyne and Rattansi 1990, 9), as opposed to the way of thinking typical for modernism prioritizing rationality, which has to be questioned as it is a preconceived assumption (Slife and Williams 1995, 3f.). Slife, Hope, and Nebeker even note a persistent historical inconsistency in contemporary theories of spirituality (Slife, Hope, and Nebeker 1999). In this case, however, it is precisely not about fragmentation, but about overcoming traditional boundaries and integrating opposites: tattooees consciously and individually become “architects of their own lives” and “engage in continual do-it-yourself identity” (Elliott 2016, 70), but on the other hand, find themselves in a millennia-old set of practices, aesthetics, and meanings. In spite of overcoming the “Grand Narratives,” the localization in time and space, as well as the unbreakable relationship to a master, play an important role in Sak Yant.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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