

Inter-Cultural Communication in The Tattoo Tradition as a Means of Passing on Values Within Mentawai Sikerei Families

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Abstract

The phenomenon of declining public understanding, including among some Mentawai people, regarding the meaning of traditional tattoos has emerged alongside the influx of modern values, tourism, and external perspectives that often position tattoos merely as aesthetic elements or lifestyle choices. This condition has the potential to shift the original symbolic meanings of traditional tattoos. For the Sikerei family, tattoos hold deep significance as a symbolic language representing spiritual identity, social roles, relationships with nature, and legitimacy within the Mentawai belief system. This study aims to describe the process of intercultural communication that occurs through tattooing practices within the Sikerei family, particularly in the transmission of values, symbol interpretation, and efforts to maintain cultural identity amid the influence of modern culture. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation. The informants consist of three members of the Sikerei nuclear family: a senior Sikerei, an active Sikerei, and his wife. The findings indicate that tattoos function as a medium of nonverbal communication that conveys cosmological values, ritual status, and communal identity. In an intercultural context, tattoo meanings are negotiated through dialogical and culturally sensitive communication.

Keywords: Inter-cultural communications, traditional tattoo, Sikerei, Mentawai families

INTRODUCTION



The fading of tattoo traditions in various indigenous communities indicates that modernization, cultural commodification, and the penetration of global values have shifted the symbolic meanings of cultural practices. UNESCO (2021) notes that more than 40% of ethnic body traditions in Southeast Asia are threatened with extinction not because the physical practices have disappeared, but because their symbolic meanings are no longer fully understood by younger generations. This condition is also evident among the Mentawai people, whose *titi* tattoo tradition has existed for approximately 3,000 years and functions as both a visual identity and a life cosmology.

In recent decades, social change and tourism have caused Mentawai tattoos to shift from spiritual and social symbols to mere bodily aesthetics. Data from the Mentawai Islands Tourism Office (2023) show that 68% of tattoos among younger generations no longer follow traditional motifs, instead adopting modern global styles. Findings by Persoon (2019) and Schefold (1991) further emphasize that tattoos are increasingly viewed as exotic ornaments for tourism rather than as markers of ancestral identity. This shift places the Mentawai tattoo tradition in a critical phase, particularly due to the loss of symbolic knowledge that should be transmitted across generations.

In the context of the Sikerei family, the spiritual figure, guardian of the balance of nature, and leader of tattoo rituals holds a far more complex position. For the Sikerei, tattoos are not merely markers of identity, but also spiritual legitimacy, a sign of readiness to undertake ritual roles, and a representation of the cosmological relationship between humans, spirits, and nature. Tattoos serve as a nonverbal language that depicts spiritual journeys, social status, and life philosophies. However, as the younger generation's understanding of the meaning of tattoos begins to fade, this tradition has the potential to lose its substance. This shift in meaning poses a serious threat to the tradition's survival, particularly because the practice of passing down values in Mentawai culture relies heavily on intercultural communication within the nuclear family. Research contained in the document indicates that negotiations of meaning are increasingly occurring between the traditional understanding of the Sikerei family and the modern perceptions of outsiders, even tourists, necessitating culturally sensitive communication to maintain the sustainability of the Mentawai tattoo tradition.

Theoretically, Hall (1976) explains that indigenous societies such as the Mentawai represent a high-context culture, in which communication is carried out through symbols, rituals, and visual artifacts. In this context, tattoos function as a form of nonverbal communication rich in meaning and cannot be understood superficially. When the cultural context is not understood either by younger generations or by outsiders, *cultural noise* emerges, hindering the intergenerational transmission of meaning and reducing tattoos to mere aesthetic expressions (Samovar et al., 2010).

Previous studies on Mentawai tattoos have largely focused on motif documentation, visual history, cultural commodification, or cultural identity (Scheffold, 1991; Persoon, 2019; Erwin, 2024; Fadli, 2025). However, these studies have not positioned tattoos as a medium of nonverbal communication within the context of the Sikerei family, particularly in relation to value transmission, symbolic communication, and the negotiation of meaning with external cultures. This indicates a clear research gap.

The novelty of this study lies in its interpretation of tattoos as part of a living intercultural communication system within the Sikerei family. Tattoos are understood as symbolic messages conveying cosmological, spiritual, and social values, and as meanings negotiated through interactions with outsiders. Therefore, the sustainability of Mentawai tattoo traditions depends on the effectiveness of intercultural communication and the process of value internalization within the Sikerei family, rather than solely on the preservation of visual motifs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is the process of exchanging meaning between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds, where differences in values, symbols, thought patterns, and meaning systems are key factors in communication interactions. Gudykunst (2004) emphasizes that intercultural communication is not simply about language differences, but also about differences in how people perceive reality and interpret messages. In the context of this research, intercultural communication occurs when the Sikerei Mentawai family encounters outsiders, such as tourists, the media, and modern society, who bring different value frameworks and perceptions regarding the meaning of traditional tattoos.

Hall (1976) classifies traditional societies such as the Mentawai as high-context cultures, which rely heavily on symbols, shared experiences, and implicit meanings. Cultural messages are not conveyed verbally but are embedded in rituals, artifacts, and the human body. In Mentawai culture, tattoos function as a primary medium of communication that conveys spiritual messages, communal identity, and cosmological relationships between humans and nature. The findings of this study indicate that the meaning of tattoos within the Sikerei family can only be fully understood through direct involvement in customary life.

Intercultural communication studies further emphasize that failure to understand cultural context often leads to symbolic misunderstandings, particularly in indigenous societies (Chen & Starosta, 2020). In the Mentawai context, tattoos are frequently perceived by outsiders as bodily aesthetics, whereas for the Sikerei family they constitute a spiritual language. This difference between emic and etic perspectives creates a tension of meaning,

which Samovar et al. (2010) describe as *cultural noise* in intercultural communication.

Nonverbal Communication and Cultural Artifacts

Nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in indigenous communities, where symbols serve as the primary medium for conveying cultural messages. Knapp and Hall (2010) explain that the human body serves as a social communication tool that conveys identity, status, and cultural values. Body artifacts such as tattoos are a form of nonverbal communication that are permanent and meaningful because they are attached to the body and serve as a continuing identity for the individual.

From a symbolic anthropology perspective, Turner (1967) explains that cultural symbols are not merely representative but also capable of storing and transmitting the collective values of a community. Tattoos on the Sikerei body function as cultural embodiment, serving as a medium for storing cultural memory and cosmological values. The findings of this study indicate that each motif, line, and placement of tattoos conveys a narrative about the relationship between humans and ancestral spirits and nature, which is passed down through intergenerational communication within the Sikerei family.

Research by Sihombing et al. (2021) on indigenous communities in South Asia shows that traditional tattoos function as a nonverbal communication system reflecting clan identity, social status, and spiritual values. This study confirms that when tattoos are separated from their cultural context, their symbolic meaning is diminished. This finding is relevant to the Mentawai people, where tattoos are often interpreted visually without understanding their inherent cosmological value. The meaning of tattoos, therefore, can only emerge through shared meaning within the same cultural community. When tattoos are interpreted outside their community, their meaning becomes vulnerable to simplification and commodification.

Inheritance of Cultural Values in the Family

The transmission of cultural values is a primary mechanism for maintaining the continuity of a society's traditions. Spradley (1997) asserts that the family is the earliest and most effective agent in cultural transmission, as cultural values and knowledge are passed down through direct experience, observation, and participation in daily life practices. In indigenous communities, this process of inheritance occurs informally and continuously, inseparable from social life and rituals.

In the Mentawai Sikerei family, the inheritance of tattoo values occurs through the involvement of family members in traditional rituals, the tattooing process, and narratives about ancestors and the spiritual meaning of tattoos. This research shows that intergenerational communication is key in transmitting these values, with the senior Sikerei acting as a source of cultural authority and the Sikerei's wife maintaining the practice of values in daily household life. Recent studies on cultural transmission within indigenous

families reinforce these findings. According to Raymund (2019), the transmission of values within indigenous communities is experiential learning, that is, experience-based learning that occurs through rituals and cultural practices, not just verbal explanations.

Cultural Contact, Modernization, and the Negotiation of Meaning

Cultural contact is an inevitable reality in an increasingly open and connected society. Ting-Toomey (1999) explains that when different cultures interact, cultural identities undergo a process of negotiation, adaptation, and reaffirmation. In the context of Mentawai tattoos, interactions with tourists and modern media present a clash of meanings between aesthetic views and spiritual meanings.

This research shows that the Sikerei family is aware of these differing perceptions and responds with a selective communication strategy, choosing to explain certain meanings of the tattoos while protecting sacred parts from misunderstanding. This strategy suggests that intercultural communication is used as a tool to protect cultural identity.

Recent studies in cultural anthropology also support this phenomenon. Simbolon (2021) explains that indigenous communities often face the so-called postcolonial gaze, an external perspective that views local culture as an object of exoticism. In such situations, communication becomes a form of cultural resistance, where indigenous communities negotiate meaning to prevent traditions from being reduced to mere commodities.

Intercultural Communication Theory – Edward T. Hall (1976)

Edward T. Hall is a key figure in intercultural communication theory, emphasizing that communication operates not only through verbal language but also through context, symbols, and cultural experience. In *Beyond Culture* (1976), Hall argued that the meaning of a message is highly dependent on the cultural setting in which it is produced and interpreted; therefore, intercultural communication always involves the interpretation of differing cultural contexts.

A central concept in Hall's theory is the distinction between high-context cultures and low-context cultures. High-context cultures convey meaning implicitly through symbols, rituals, social relationships, and shared experiences, whereas low-context cultures rely on explicit, direct verbal messages. Mentawai culture, particularly the Sikerei tradition, reflects the characteristics of a high-context culture. The social and spiritual systems of the Mentawai are expressed through bodily symbols, customary rituals, and collectively understood daily practices.

In this context, Sikerei tattoos are not merely body ornaments but a form of cultural communication that conveys identity, spiritual status, relationships with nature, and social position. Tattoos function as "cultural texts" that can only be understood within the Mentawai cultural context.

Misunderstandings arise when Sikerei tattoos are interpreted through low-context perspectives that reduce them to visual or aesthetic expressions. Using Hall's framework, this study emphasizes that the meaning of Sikerei tattoos is contextual and transmitted primarily through the family as the main space for value transmission. Therefore, tattoos should be understood as living cultural communication practices that are negotiated and sustained amid intercultural encounters.

Alfred Schutz's Phenomenological Theory

Phenomenology is a theoretical approach that focuses on understanding human lived experience as it is experienced and interpreted by the subject. Husserl emphasized that meaning is not objective or located outside the individual, but rather emerges within human consciousness through direct experience and interaction with the social world (Husserl, 1970). In social and cultural research, phenomenology not only describes experience but also reveals the structures of consciousness that shape how individuals understand reality. Schutz (1967) extended phenomenology into the social sciences by emphasizing the concept of intersubjectivity, whereby the meaning of experience is formed through social relations and shared experiences within a community's lifeworld.

The phenomenological approach is particularly relevant to this study because the Sikerei tattoo tradition cannot be understood as a cultural object separate from the lived experiences of its practitioners. Tattoos are experienced as part of one's being, integrated with the body, identity, and spirituality of Mentawai society. Merleau-Ponty (1962) viewed the body not as a passive object, but as a subject that experiences the world. In the context of Sikerei tattoos, the body functions as the primary medium through which cosmological, spiritual, and cultural identity values are embodied and continually present in everyday consciousness.

The development of phenomenology through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) emphasizes a double interpretative process between participants and researchers (Smith et al., 2009). Supported by the concept of embodiment (Csordas, 2020), phenomenology provides a theoretical foundation for understanding Sikerei tattoos as existential experiences and forms of cultural communication that are living, contextual, and rooted in the body and social relations.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which views social reality as the result of meaning construction shaped through human experience and interaction. Within this paradigm, cultural meaning is not considered objective or fixed, but contextual and embedded in the experiences of research participants (Crotty, 1998). The interpretive paradigm is employed because this study seeks to understand how Mentawai Sikerei families interpret traditional tattoos as part of lived experience, cultural

identity, and intergenerational value transmission, rather than to measure or test causal relationships quantitatively.

In line with this paradigm, the study adopts a qualitative approach using interpretative phenomenological analysis. This approach enables the researcher to explore and interpret participants' subjective experiences related to the Sikerei tattoo tradition, including tattoos as spiritual symbols, media of cultural communication, and means of value transmission within the family (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

The research was conducted within the living environment of Sikerei families in Ugay Hamlet, South Siberut Regency, Mentawai Islands. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of three key informants: a senior Sikerei, an active Sikerei, and a Sikerei's wife. This selection emphasizes depth of experience in accordance with the characteristics of phenomenological research (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2013).

Table 1. Informants

No	Informant	The Role of Culture	Reasons for Election
1.	Aman Lepon (Customary Leader) Sikerei Senior	Traditional ritual leader	Having spiritual and historical experiences related to tattoos
2.	Aman Laen Sikerei Aktif	Ritual performers and heirs	Experiencing firsthand the inheritance and shift of meaning
3.	Aman Lepon Sikerei's Wife	Guardian of values in the family	Experiencing the practice of passing on values in everyday life

Source: Researcher's Data, 2025

Data collection was conducted primarily through phenomenological in-depth interviews that were open and reflective in nature, aiming to explore informants' experiences regarding the meaning of tattoos, the process of value transmission, and interactions with external cultures (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were carried out flexibly to allow informants to freely express their personal experiences and reflections. In addition, observation was employed to understand the socio-cultural context in which these experiences take place, particularly nonverbal communication practices and family interactions. Documentation in the form of field notes and supporting visual materials was used in a limited manner to enrich contextual understanding and strengthen data interpretation (Creswell, 2013).

Data analysis followed the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis, beginning with repeated readings of interview

transcripts, identification of significant statements, and grouping them into essential themes representing the informants' lived experiences related to Sikerei tattoos. These themes were then interpreted by linking them to Edward T. Hall's intercultural communication theory to obtain a comprehensive understanding of tattoos as an experience of cultural communication (Smith et al., 2009).

Data credibility was ensured through researcher reflexivity and member checking with informants, as well as triangulation of data collection techniques to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings (Finlay, 2002; Patton, 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tattoos as Lived Experience and Cultural Body Language

The Sikerei family's experience of interpreting tattoos cannot be understood simply as a symbolic practice, but rather as a lived experience internalized in embodied consciousness. This is reflected in the following statement by a senior Sikerei:

"These tattoos aren't just for people to look at. They're a sign of our lives. People who understand Mentawai can see who we are from the tattoos on our bodies." (Aman Lepon)



Figure 1: Aman Lepon (Sikerei Traditional Leader) showing tattoos on his body
Source: Researcher's personal documentation

From a phenomenological perspective, this statement suggests that tattoos are experienced not as external objects, but as part of one's being-in-the-world. The body is no longer positioned as a passive medium, but rather

as a subject that "speaks" and "holds meaning." Merleau-Ponty (1962) asserts that the body is central to human experience, where the meaning of the world is experienced before being verbally articulated. In this context, tattoos become a pre-verbal expression of Sikerei cultural identity.

The phenomenological essence emerging from this experience is that tattoos function as a form of communication that stems from bodily awareness, not from the intention to communicate discursively. The meaning of tattoos is "known" by informants not because they were explicitly taught, but because they are continually experienced in traditional life. Phenomenological research shows that such experiences form what is known as embodied memory, namely, cultural memory attached to the body (Csordas, 2020). These findings reinforce that Sikerei tattoos are not merely visual symbols, but existential experiences that frame how individuals understand themselves and their world.

The senior Sikerei's statement reveals layers of meaning that go far beyond the mere understanding of tattoos as aesthetic ornaments or representational symbols. When the informant states that tattoos are "not for people to look at" but are "a sign of our lives," he is emphasizing that tattoos serve as existential markers, a trace of life that is integral to the journey of the Sikerei's body and soul. Here, tattoos serve as the embodiment of lived experience that is inseparable from the process of becoming a Sikerei. Within a phenomenological framework, this experience demonstrates that the meaning of tattoos does not exist outside the subject, but rather grows out of the intimate relationship between the body, tradition, and consciousness. The Sikerei's body becomes a space where cultural values are actualized, stored, and remembered. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasized, the body is not an object owned by humans, but rather a way of being in the world (*le corps propre*). Thus, tattoos are not affixed to the body as foreign symbols, but rather "born" with the body within the rhythms of traditional life, rituals, and social responsibilities lived by the Sikerei.

The expression that "those who understand Mentawai" can read a person's identity through tattoos indicates that tattoos operate at the level of collective consciousness rather than explicit verbal communication. Tattoos function as a form of cultural body language that can only be understood within a shared horizon of experience, or the community's *stock of knowledge* (Schutz, 1970), thus serving as a mode of intra-cultural communication that does not require verbal explanation.

Phenomenologically, the meaning of Sikerei tattoos does not arise from a conscious intention to convey messages, but from repeated lived experiences through rituals, spiritual practices, interactions with nature, and the social role of the Sikerei. The meaning of tattoos is more "felt" than "thought," distinguishing them from modern tattoo practices that tend to be individualistic and personally expressive.

Within the framework of *embodied memory* (Csordas, 2020), tattoos function as living archives inscribed on the body, simultaneously recording

individual histories and the community's cosmology. Each motif and its placement constitutes a nexus of experience that connects ancestral heritage, present identity, and the continuity of future generations.

Thus, tattoos on the Sikerei body can be understood as an existential framework that guides how individuals understand themselves, their relationship with the community, and their place within the natural and spiritual order. This finding strengthens the argument that Sikerei tattoos are a form of cultural communication that is embodied, pre-verbal, and existential. They are not simply symbols to be read, but rather lived experiences lived through a body language that not only "speaks" but also enlivens Mentawai culture itself.

Spiritual Identity as Internalized Moral Consciousness

Another phenomenological dimension emerges strongly in the experiences of active Sikerei, who interpret tattoos as a binding force of spiritual responsibility: "If I don't wear this tattoo, I feel incomplete as a Sikerei. The tattoo is a reminder of my responsibility to my ancestors and nature." (Aman Laen) This quote demonstrates that tattoos are experienced as moral consciousness, namely, an awareness of responsibility that is constantly present in everyday life. In interpretive phenomenology, this kind of experience is understood as a form of self-identity formation, where identity is formed through the relationship between the body, values, and spiritual experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In the informant's experience, tattoos not only mark who they are but also bind them to a set of ethical obligations towards their ancestors and nature. This suggests that tattoos function as structures of meaning that continually guide life's actions and decisions. A cultural phenomenological study conducted by Doran (2021) explains that body symbols in indigenous cultures often function as "permanent ethical reminders," reinforcing an individual's commitment to collective values.



Figure 2: Tattoos as Spiritual Identity
Source: Personal research documents

The active Sikerei's statement that he or she is "not complete as a Sikerei" without a tattoo reveals that spiritual identity is not understood as a formal social status, but rather as a state of being experienced through the body. This elaboration demonstrates that tattoos are not symbolic accessories, but rather the primary medium for internalizing moral and spiritual values. Here, the body functions as an ethical space where responsibility to ancestors and nature continues to be present in everyday consciousness. Within a phenomenological framework, this experience confirms that moral awareness is not solely present in rational reflection, but rather resides in the recurrent experience of the body. Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasized that values and meanings are not primarily "thought" but "lived" through the body. Thus, Sikerei tattoos become a concrete manifestation of embodied morality—a morality that is not taught as doctrine, but remembered and lived through the presence of the body itself.

The phrase "a reminder of my responsibility to my ancestors and nature" suggests that tattoos operate as a mechanism of ethical continuity. Tattoos do not exist as neutral symbols, but rather as affective and normative structures that guide the subject in decision-making and action. From the perspective of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), as formulated by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), self-identity is formed through an ongoing dialogue between personal experience and collective meaning. Tattoos, in this case, serve as a meeting point between the individual Sikerei life narrative and the broader Mentawai cosmology.

The ethical relations embodied in Sikerei tattoos affirm that spiritual identity is relational, grounded in responsibility toward ancestors and the natural world. This perspective aligns with Levinas's ethical phenomenology (1991), which understands responsibility as the foundation of subjectivity, where becoming a self means being bound to relations with others, both ecological and transcendent.

Tattoos function as "permanent ethical reminders" (Doran, 2021) because they are continuously inscribed on the body, ensuring that moral awareness remains present in everyday experience. The intimate connection between the body and the symbol enables a deeper internalization of values than that achieved through formal, external norms.

Phenomenologically, tattoos are experienced as a living moral consciousness rather than merely visual or ritual markers. The loss of tattoos is therefore perceived not simply as the loss of a visual sign, but as a rupture in spiritual identity and responsibility. In this sense, tattoos constitute an existential nexus that unites the body, values, and cosmology in the formation and maintenance of Sikerei spiritual identity.

The Inheritance of Values as Lived Experience, Not Taught.

Phenomenology is also evident in the experience of Sikerei's wife, who describes how the value of tattoos is passed down within the family: "The children learn not from us explaining at length, but from seeing their father,

hearing stories, and participating in ceremonies. From there, they gradually understand." (Sikerei's wife)

In this context, children's understanding of tattoos develops through bodily presence, participation in rituals, and observation of social relations within the family. Schutz (1967) explains that social meaning is formed through intersubjective experience, that is, shared experiences without always having to be formalized. The findings of this study indicate that the inheritance of tattoo values in the Sikerei family occurs through a continuous intersubjective process. Children do not "learn about tattoos," but rather "live with them."

Van Manen's (2016) phenomenological research on cultural education confirms that the most profound learning occurs when meaning is practiced in everyday life, rather than conveyed as abstract knowledge. Therefore, the phenomenological essence of this inheritance process is the involvement of the body and emotions as the primary medium for transmitting values. The Sikerei family serves as a space for experience, not a space for instruction.

For the Sikerei family, the inheritance of tattoo values occurs through implicit and layered life experiences. Observation of the father's body, participation in traditional ceremonies, and involvement in family stories gradually shape understanding, without the need for formal instruction. Thus, the learning structure that occurs is not based on verbal knowledge transfer, but rather through existential engagement in the lifeworld of the Sikerei family.

From a phenomenological perspective, this experience confirms the existence of tacit knowledge, knowledge internalized through practice and togetherness, rather than through conceptual language. Children understand the meaning of tattoos because they grow up in an environment where tattoos are a natural part of everyday life. This meaning appears as something that feels "normal" and "natural," as it has become integrated into the rhythm of family activities. This process demonstrates that cultural understanding is initially pre-reflective, emerging before children are able to consciously and articulately reflect on it.

Schutz (1967) explains that social meaning is formed through shared intersubjective experiences within the lifeworld. In the context of the Sikerei family, the children's lifeworld has been filled with consistent cultural signs from the beginning: the father's tattooed body, ritual gestures, and the persistent ancestral narrative. The children do not require detailed explanations because they already share the same world of meaning with their parents. Tattoos become part of an assumed reality (taken for granted), not something to be questioned or taught didactically.

The process of "seeing their father, hearing stories, and participating in ceremonies" demonstrates that learning occurs through the presence of the body and affection. The body becomes not only an object of observation but also a medium for transmitting meaning. This experience aligns with Merleau-

Ponty's view that understanding the world is rooted in bodily perception; children learn through what they see and experience directly, not through explained concepts. In this case, the value of tattoos is embedded as an emotional and somatic experience, not simply symbolic knowledge.

Van Manen (2016) asserts that the most profound learning occurs when meaning is lived in everyday practice, not when it is conveyed as abstract knowledge. The findings of this study indicate that Sikerei families function as experiential spaces, where cultural values are passed down informally yet effectively. Children are not positioned as subjects to be "taught," but rather as part of the practice of life itself. Because the value of tattoos is constantly present in everyday life, children begin to understand not only "what a tattoo is," but "what it means to be a Sikerei."

The phenomenological essence of this experience lies in the way values are passed down through bodily involvement, emotions, and shared life. The inheritance of tattoos is not an instructional process, but rather a process of becoming. Children gradually develop an internal readiness to accept these cultural values because they have long lived within them. This explains why, in the Sikerei family, the value of tattoos does not feel like a burden or an imposed obligation, but rather a natural part of their life journey and the identity they will eventually carry.



Figure 3: The Sikerei Wives in the essence of tattoos on the body
Source: Personal research document

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Mentawai Sikerei tattoo tradition is not merely a visual or aesthetic practice, but a lived experience embedded in the body, identity, and spiritual consciousness of the Sikerei family. Through an interpretive phenomenological approach, tattoo meanings are understood not as formal knowledge but as experiences repeatedly embodied in everyday life, customary rituals, and family relationships. Tattoos thus become part of one's being, guiding individuals in their social, spiritual, and cultural roles.

The experiences of the Sikerei family reveal that tattoos function as a medium of nonverbal communication within a high-context culture. Their

meanings are conveyed through symbols, ritual practices, and shared experiences, and can only be fully understood within the Mentawai cultural context. This affirms the relevance of Edward T. Hall's intercultural communication theory, while also indicating that interpretations outside the cultural context risk producing a reduction of meaning.

This study further emphasizes that the nuclear family is the primary space for the transmission of Sikerei tattoo values. Cultural and spiritual values are passed on through shared lived experiences and direct participation in customary rites, with complementary roles played by the senior Sikerei, the active Sikerei, and the Sikerei's wife. In encounters with external cultures, the Sikerei family engages in selective meaning negotiation to preserve the sacredness of tattoos as markers of identity and customary responsibility. The sustainability of the tattoo tradition depends on the continuity of cultural experience and intergenerational communication within the family. responsibility, the tradition will remain alive, even amidst increasingly complex social and cultural changes.

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