

# **The Cultural Significance of Tattoos in Jibaro: a visual narrative in the colonial**

## **background**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the cultural significance and narrative function of tattoos in Jibaro within the historical context, analyzing their role in reflecting personal identity, cultural recognition, cultural fusion, and social hierarchy. By combining the real historical background of the story, tattoos symbolize resistance and cultural continuity, while also hinting at the development of the plot.

### **Key words**

Jibaro, tattoos, visual narrative, cultural identity, colonialism

### **Introduction**

Jibaro is a short film in the Netflix series Love, Death and Robots, directed by Alberto Mielgo, who was nominated for an Oscar for Best Animated Short. The story is set during the Spanish colonization of Latin America, it tells the story of an encounter between a deaf Spanish knight and a siren in the deep forests of Latin America. What makes this film unique is its impressive visual design and how the director accurately expresses the story setting and narrative through visual elements and design without dialogue through animation.

In Jibaro, tattoos are not only decorative elements. Instead, they serve as visual representations of the story's colonial context, playing an important role in shaping the narrative. Although tattoos might be easily overlooked because of their decorative appearance, they carry deep symbolic meanings that reflect the cultural and historical

aspects of the narrative. This thesis aims to explore the cultural significance of tattoos and their narrative function in Jibaro by analyzing the historical context and the contributions tattoos make to the plot development.

### **Literature Review**

Although tattoos have been widely researched in various cultural contexts, their role in the colonial context and visual medium has rarely been studied by scholars, and even the literature on the study of tattoo design in animation and film and television productions is limited.

Therefore, this study aims to review the following articles for analysis and comparison in order to discuss the cultural significance of tattoos from the background of colonial context.

The article "Literature review: The Taíno -- connecting erased histories and contemporary ethnographies" written by Chitwood, K (2015) reflected the history background of Taino people under the colonial time of the Great Voyage Period, it mainly discusses the cultural plight of the Taino people, whose history and traces of existence were erased by the Spanish colonists. At the same time, the author affirms the important role played by the Taino people in the formation of the "New World". The Taíno, as a long-term migratory people, were familiar with interacting with both neighboring and foreign groups. When they encountered Columbus, and their knowledge and traditions were passed on to the Spaniards, who further disseminated them across Europe (Chitwood, 2015).

By exploring the relationship between tattoos and identity, Chapter 2 explores how

tattoos serve as markers of both personal and cultural identification. “The tattoo as ancestral legacy and dichotomic element of national identity (Trujillo et al., 2021)” analyzes the origin of the world's earliest tattoo from a 5300-year-old mummy, the Tyrolean iceman.

In addition to the macro context and origins, the article “Ink with meaning: What we can learn from the tattoos of our ancestors (Simons, 2015)” proposes tattoos as an emerging form of permanent body paint, as a sign of access to the world's cultural repositories. At the same time, tattoo is mentioned as a kind of design and projection of self. This is further proof that tattoos have more than just aesthetic visual meaning.

By exploring the fusion of indigenous and urban cultures, Haynes (2022), in “Inking Identity”, highlights how tattoo practices embody a "diffusion" of traditions, blending ancestral heritage with modern identity. This view emphasizes the tattoo as a medium for a certain level of irreversible fusion of the city's cultures and the interaction between traditional and modern cultures, blending people's sense of identity. While “Bodies of inscription: A cultural history of the modern Tattoo Community” by DeMello, M. (2004) further discusses the semiotic value of tattoos, tattoos represent certain class and social hierarchy, people will even associate negative stereotypes with tattoos, which indicates in Chapter.3 below.

### **Chapter1. A microcosm of history**

An important scene in Jibaro portrays the knights' greed for jewels and wealth, where they engage in brutal killings over material possessions. As figure 1 to figure 3 in Appendices shows, this highlights the colonizers' insatiable desire for wealth and the

violence that arises from such greed.

This behavior serves as a reflection of the colonial plundering, with the knights symbolizing the Spanish invaders. Their greed for the siren's jewels represents the harsh exploitation of resources, particularly those of the Taíno people. The Spanish colonization of Latin American natives led to widespread disease, enslavement, and death, as well as the plundering of vast treasures and artifacts. Such exploitation and destruction led to the loss of many cultural relics, and historical research has been hindered by the lack of surviving materials. As Dr. Anna Peterson emphasized, "The study of the Taíno is still, largely, an archaeologist's game. With that said, there is a burgeoning recognition that to truly appreciate the Taíno and their enduring significance it is increasingly salient to engage in interdisciplinary study that incorporates not only the work of archaeologists' usual partners (art historians, geographers, geologists, etc.) (Chitwood, 2015)." The tragedy of the Taíno civilization is reflected in the siren's body in the film, which is marked with wounds after the jewels are taken, as shown in figure 4.

This demonstrates the widespread influence of colonialism on local cultures and the widespread destruction of cultures. This view explains the dual role of tattoos in Jibaro: not only as a symbol of status, but also as a cultural resistance to historical erasures. Although tattoos appear on Spanish knights, they also reflect the cultural mixing and conflict of knights when they came into contact with indigenous cultures. As a visual symbol, tattoos not only reflect the persistence of Taíno culture, but also represent the resistance and enduring strength of the culture.

The heart-shaped lake in the film corresponds to the historical Fountain of Youth, which Spanish colonizers sought in the Caribbean. After the siren was killed by the deaf knight, red water flows from the main artery of the heart-shaped lake as figure.5 and figure.6 shows in Appendices, it brings the dead siren back to life. Unaware of its effects, the deaf knight consumes the water, regaining his hearing. Ultimately, after restoring his hearing, he is drawn into the lake by the siren's song.

## **Chapter2. Tattoos: personal identity and cultural identity**

Tattoos are not only a powerful visual element, but also an important medium for individuals and groups to express their identity, cultural background, and storytelling. The type, size, style, and color of a tattoo can say a lot about a person's personality, status, and way of doing things. It is part of human identity, and tattoos can be used to infer a person's cultural background and upbringing.

Tattoos are significant visual elements that serve as mediums for individuals and groups to convey their identity, cultural background, and narratives. The type, size, style, and color of tattoos can reflect aspects of a person's personality, social status, and behavioral tendency. As a visual marker, tattoos often contribute to an individual's sense of identity and may provide insight into their cultural background and personality. Tattoos "reflect a journey through the symbology of the human being. They are traces which shape our identities from the resistance of not detaching ourselves from our roots to raising new imaginaries that improve pride and appreciation of our own" (Trujillo et al., 2021).

In this cultural context, tattoos are no longer simple body decoration, but also an

expression of personal and collective growth and struggle. Simon defines tattoos in 2015 as a permanent form of identification, as a projection of the individual to design the self and define the self, rather than something to be inherited. This can indicate that tattoos can be seen as some external feedback of psychology and experience. Combined with the analysis of the history and the short film Jibaro, the tattoo may represent the confusion of identity. Some Spanish conquistadors settled in Latin America and raised families with the local population, and their mixed-race descendants often faced confusion about cultural identity. This mix of identities often leads to confusion about the culture of the settlement to which the individual belongs. The tattoos in Jibaro may symbolize the identity crisis experienced by the knights, influenced by the contrast between their Spanish heritage and the local cultures they encountered as shown in figure.7. This is similar to Haynes' concept of "suffusion" in 2022, where she argues that culture is like a liquid that seeps in and then irreversibly spreads and changes what it seeps into, and that the indigenous cultures of native peoples have been slowly seeping into urban areas and reshape the space.

### **Chapter3. Tattoos represent occupation and social hierarchy**

Second, in specific cultural and religious contexts, tattoos are often used to express the identity of individuals and groups or organizations. In tribal cultures, tattoos are often seen as an extension of totems. It symbolizes the close connection between the individual and the collective. As DeMello mentioned in 2004, tattoos symbolized the occupation and class of the group, and during that period they were a distinctive sign of the working class, often associated with labourers, sailors, and even individuals

commit in criminal activity, while those in the upper classes would not have tattoos.

In Jibaro, the symbolism of tattoos also reflects the social hierarchy. The knights as a collective, all have different tattoos on their facial designs, while the missionaries have no tattoos, as shown in figure.8 in appendices. This contrast reflects the class structure of the society, as missionaries often belonged to the aristocracy, a group that typically did not have facial tattoos. Therefore, the use of tattoos as a design element not only emphasizes the characters' social status but also signifies the occupational and societal hierarchy within the historical context.

#### **Chapter4. Tattoos and narrative in Jibaro**

The design of the knights in Jibaro creates a strong sense of contrast with the extensive use of impressive facial tattoos. Although knights in the historical period of the Grand Voyage do not get tattoos, in the film the tattoos convey narrative information to the audience for the subsequent plot.

For example, when the knight first enters the forest, he has a circular tattoo (as shown in figure.9) near his hairline. In another shot, there are some circular patterns at the water's edge of the lake (as shown in figure.10 and figure.11). This swirl-shaped design may symbolize the power of the Sirens, implying their connection to the forest and hinting that the knights have entered the Sirens' territory.

The knight has a tattoo of a hand with a scar near his ear (as shown in figure.12), which indicates a shot in the story when his hand is cut by the Siren's jewels as a result of his greed (as shown in figure.13).

#### **Conclusion**

As an important medium, tattoos appear on the face of jibaro's characters, which not only reflects a personal character and cultural identity in the cultural confrontation, but also reflects a tenacity of Taino or tribal culture in the colonial background. Tattoos provide a narrative of dynamism and continuity in Cultural Significance even though they are extinct in the oppression, their culture is still blending with us. They are also a special symbol, reflecting social class and the group to which an individual belongs. Additionally, as a narrative device, these visual elements serve as subtle clues, hinting at events yet to unfold in the story.



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## Appendices



Figure. 1. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*



Figure. 2. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*



Figure. 3. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*





Figure. 4. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*



Figure. 5. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*

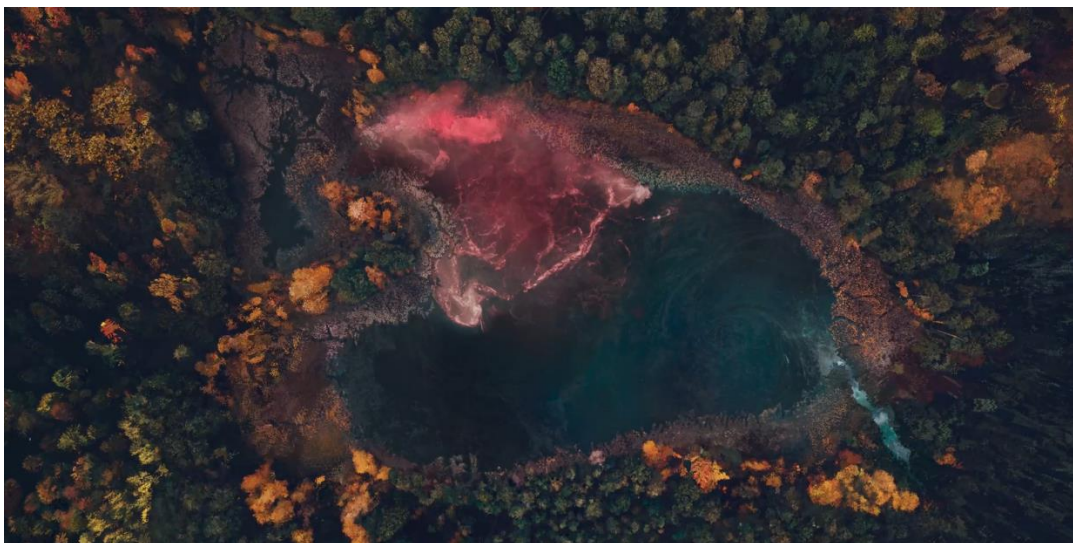


Figure. 6. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*

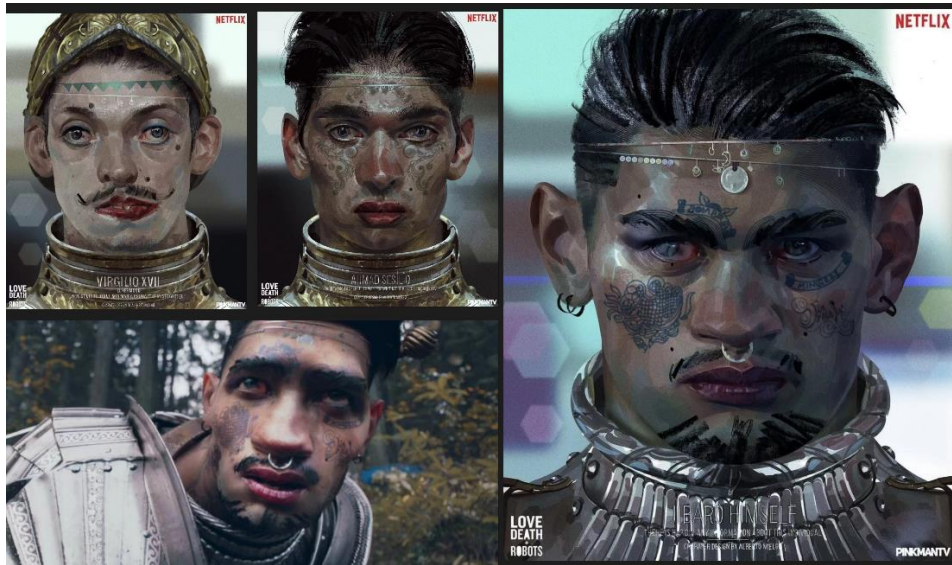


Figure. 7. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*



Figure. 8. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*



Figure. 9. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*





Figure.10. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*



Figure.11. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*



Figure.12. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*



Figure.12. Mielgo, A. (2022) *Jibaro: Episode 9 of Season 3 Love, Death & Robots, Netflix.*