

This issue's historical article will be on the vertical or horizontal piercing of the glans of the penis.

In Sulawesi it was called Kambi or Kambiong; in the Philippines, Tugbuk. In southern Borneo it was called Kaleng and while the Kenyah called it Aja; the Kayan called it Uttang or Oettang. A few anthropologists made the Iban's name for it the most famous: Palang or Ampallang. An Indian scholar gives a description of it and calls it Apadravya.

First of all, a surprising fact is that what we have all called the Ampallang and the Apadravya piercings are, historically, one and the same. This article will cover origin, practices, and mythology regarding this extreme and very ancient piercing.

As to the exact origin of this piercing, nobody knows. Scholars have devoted their careers to dissecting trade patterns, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. The complexities of the influence of trade over time can most simply be described as the overlapping of cultures, like waves crossing from different directions. Based on the knowledge that all known occurrences of this custom are recorded on the same trade routes, and the intense nature of piercing and healing the glans of the penis, one can safely deduce that this piercing custom did not spontaneously originate in various locations, but was shared.

The only known reference of the Apadravya is the 6th century Kama Sutra. I know of no other mention or art depictions of the piercing in India. If the practice survived until substantial European contact, in the 17th century, then surely there would have been some recording. One can only speculate that this piercing was probably neither widespread nor lasting in the Indian culture.

According to Vatsyayana, the author of the Kama Sutra, apadravyas are any one of a number of devices that a man "puts on or around the lingam (penis) to supplement its length or its thickness, so as to fit into the yoni, (vagina)." The people of the Southern Countries think that true sexual pleasure cannot be obtained without perforating the lingam, and they therefore cause it to be pierced. "Now when a young man perforates his lingam he should pierce it with a sharp instrument, and then stand in water as long as blood continues to flow. At night he should engage in sexual intercourse, even with vigor, so as to clean the hole. After this he should continue to wash the hole with decoctions and increase the size by putting into it small pieces of cane... and thus gradually enlarging it."

There should be some debate on the definition of the term "Southern Countries" used in the Kama Sutra. It could mean Southern India or it could mean Southeast Asia. If it does refer to Southeast Asia, this would again demonstrate that the origin of the piercing is probably not in India.

The first known depiction is on a bronze dog from Southeast Asia, 4th century. The earliest record in European literature of the piercing on a man is from 1588. The explorer, Cavendish, is said to have been to the island of Capul, (Philippines), "Every man hath a nayle (nail) of Tynne (Tin) thrust quite through the head of his privie part (glans of his penis)...." <sup>2</sup>

Though the Indian Culture was extremely prolific, there is another good argument against Indian origins. Statuary predating Hindu influence in Bali, depict possible penile piercings. One anthropologist has cited the visual influence of certain indigenous rodents and the rhinoceros on the island of Borneo,

who naturally have barbed penises, as the origin of inspiration for the piercing.<sup>2</sup>

The only traditional practice of this piercing still known to exist is on Borneo. The Kayan people are believed to be the oldest practitioners of the Palang. All current tribes practicing the palang give credit to the Kayan. This is interesting since they are inland and considered by anthropologists to be the most isolated and oldest inhabitants. Current history dates the palang to other tribes only about 100 hundred years.<sup>3</sup>

Just as interesting as the mysterious origins are the variations of materials, practice, and mythology around this extreme piercing.

Other than the mention in the Kama Sutra, the oldest accounts of this piercing come from the Philippines. Popular in the Philippines, was a device called Sakra, (believed to be a derivative of the Indian Sanskrit word chakra – a center of force or energy). The apparatus could be a round wheel with projecting points, (like a spur held in place by the pin), stars, rings, fine twisted wire, pig bristles, bamboo shavings, seeds, horn, coral, agate, hornbill ivory, beads, broken glass, and in one case an object that looked like a snake head. Quills were used as nonfunctional retainers. The early explanations from the Codex say the woman insisted upon [the piercings] to discourage the men from sodomy. The Spanish quickly set about eradicating the behavior as "A custom invented by the devil..." <sup>4</sup>

1 [Male Infibulation](#) , by John Dingwall  
2 [Tom Harrison](#) is an anthropologist from the 1950's and 60's. He wrote several articles, a book and collected artifacts on the Palang, for the Sarawak Museum, Kuching, Malaysia. This author was able to go there and obtain photocopies of his work.

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Certainly the greatest volume of documentation for this piercing is from the Borneo. The Iban would sometimes tattoo a rosette or a fish-hook to show they had a palang. Palang in Iban means “cross or cross bar.” The pins would be made of gold or brass. Often a bushing, (sleeve insert to reduce friction) was in place and the pin could be removed as desired.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes up to 3 Palangs would be worn at a time.<sup>6</sup> The Iban also refer to the Ampallang as Burah Palang or Tanduh Duri, which translates as spout thorn, or point. The ends of the pin could be smooth or may be “little pins, coins discs, brushes, rings/rowels.”<sup>7</sup>

For the actual piercing procedure on Borneo and Sulawesi a splint is used to hold the penis. It varies in length from several inches to a foot, approximately a 1/2” thickness with a hole in both sides.<sup>8</sup> The slats are placed on either side of the penis and then tightly secured, flattening out the penis. After sufficient time has past for the lack of blood and cold water to decrease sensation, the penis is pierced.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes a Pigeon’s feather is used, anointed with oil, taken out and freshened each day. The piercing takes about one month to heal. The word Ampallang is the name given the DEVICE inserted into the piercing.<sup>10</sup>

There are many myths of origin for this piercing. The Kayan say a woman complained of a man’s penis size saying it was no better than a rolled leaf used to give her satisfaction. The insulted male ran off to the woods and pierced himself. The Kelabit say a visiting Kayan warrior used his piercing on a woman causing her death, but she was so satisfied the Kelabit continued the practice.<sup>11</sup> “The lady had various ways of indicating the size of the ampallang desired. She might hide in her husbands plate of rice a betel leaf rolled about a cigarette, or with the fingers of her right hand placed between her teeth she will give the measure of the one she aspires. The Dayak women

have a right to insist upon the ampallang and if the man does not consent they may seek separation. They say that the embrace without this contrivance is plain rice; with it is rice with salt.”<sup>12</sup>

In the mid 1970’s, Doug Malloy labeled the vertical piercing of the glans as “Apadravya” and horizontal, “Ampallang.” Doug passed this folklore onto Jim Ward, founder of Gauntlet and editor of Piercing Fans International, Quarterly.<sup>13</sup> For posterity it is important that the Piercing community knows the historical origins. However, continuing the practice of differentiating the same piercing as two, honors our own western traditions.

3 [Tom Harrison](#)

4 [The Penis Inserts of Southeast Asia](#), Donald E. Brown, James W. Edwards, and Ruth P. Moore

5 [The Sexual Relations of Mankind](#), (SRM) (per researcher Von Graffin), by Montegazza

6 [A Stroll through Borneo](#), by James Barclay

7 [Tom Harrison](#)

8 (Kayan- Ketip Utang widespread Borneo called Katiputan Iban called Selong; if left in place as a retainer, is called a semong)- Tom Harrison.

9 SRM, states, they will sometimes leave the device on for 8 to 10 days. (?! An Iban personally told this author, “2-3 hours”.

10 SRM

11 [Tom Harrison](#)

12 SRM

13 per telephone conversation with Jim Ward, August 3, 2002.

**My usual disclaimer: I am not an anthropologist. From time to time there will be errors. Please be understanding and forthcoming if you have any information you would like to share.**

**Paul King  
c/o Cold Steel USA  
610 22nd St #101  
San Francisco, CA 94107**

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**Nape and related placements**

Healed: 35.29%  
Pending: 58.82%  
Removed: 5.88%

Out of a total of 17 clients

**Madison and related placements**

Healed: 68.75%  
Pending: 18.75%  
Removed: 12.5%

Out of a total of 16 clients

**Forehead/Eyebrow and related placements**

Healed: 44.44%  
Pending: 44.44%  
Removed: 11.11%

Out of a total of 9 clients

**Collarbone/Chest and related placements**

Healed: 71.42%  
Pending: 14.28%  
Removed: 14.28%

Out of a total of 7 clients

**Wrist/Forearm**

Healed: 60%  
Pending: 0%  
Removed: 40%

Out of a total of 5 clients

**Ribcage**

Healed: 75%  
Pending: 25%  
Removed: 0%

Out of a total of 4 piercings

**Pubic/Christina**

Healed: 50%  
Pending: 50%  
Removed: 0%

Out of a total of 4 piercings

**Back/Shoulder**

Healed: 50%  
Pending: 50%  
Removed: 0%

Out of a total of 2 piercings

**Vertical Chin**

One client pierced, healed

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