

# Origin, Types and Cultural Significance of Tribal Marks Amongst The Yoruba Tribe.

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## ABSTRACT

A tribal mark is a specific mark which comes in different shapes and sizes, common among the Yoruba tribe. It is used commonly for identification, beautification and even for inoculation against childhood diseases. It is an ancient practice and fast fading out. But the consequences of the practice call for revisiting the practice in the light of HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B & C as well as body image and its perception.

**Key Words:** Tribal mark, Yoruba tribe, Ancient practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Tribal marks known as “ILA” are very common among the Yoruba tribe especially in the olden days. They are scarifications which are specific identification marks designed on the face or other parts of the body of an individual. They are part of certain culture and are usually inscribed on the body by burning or cutting of the skin during childhood. They are mostly given to people at a very young age most especially when they are babies. This is because at that age, the child doesn't have a say on decisions. The primary function of the tribal marks is for identification of a person's tribe or family and it is a key factor to the people's survival and existence. Across the major and minor tribes in Nigeria, they have become a way of identification. In addition to identification, they are also used for beautification and inoculation against diseases especially to children; however, the tradition is fast fading out. Also used in archeological and historical reconstruction, scarification can also be viewed as a test of courage.

The amount of scarring on a person's body correlates directly with his/her strength. These marks are made with the use of razor blades or sharp knives to cut the face and then native dye, pigmentation or black paste usually from ground

charcoal is put in the wound to stain the marks and also to stop bleeding.

## HISTORY/ORIGIN OF TRIBAL MARKS

It is hard to come by detailed documentation about the history of tribal marks because of the time period and number of tribes; but it holds a fixed place in Africa's history. It can be traced to some foreigners who were living in Egypt in the 5th century BC. A Greek historian, Herodotus wrote about some foreigners living in Egypt who cut their foreheads with knives to differentiate themselves from the Egyptians. This practice was further adopted years later when several kings of various kingdoms in Africa started invading other kings and their people for land and other resources. The invaders marked themselves as well as their family members to differentiate themselves from the captured kings and their family members whom they regarded as their slaves. During the Nigerian civil war from 1960 to 1967, troops used tribal marks to identify their enemies.

In Yoruba land no one can say exactly when the art of tribal marks began. A story was told about a certain king named Sango who sent two slaves to a distant country on an important mission. In due course they returned, and he found that one slave had achieved

successfully what he had been sent to do, while the other had accomplished nothing. The king therefore rewarded the first with high honors, and commanded the second to receive a hundred and twenty-two razor cuts all over his body. This was a severe punishment, but when the scars healed, they gave to the slave a very remarkable appearance, which greatly took the fancy of the King's wives. Sango therefore decided that cuts should in future be given, not as punishment, but as a sign of royalty, and he placed himself at once in the hands of the markers. However, he could only bear two cuts, and so from that day two cuts on the arm have been the sign of royalty, and various other cuts came to signify the marks for different tribes.

From the Yoruba perspective, tribal marks came into Nigeria during the colonial era. When the colonial masters were capturing people and taking them to foreign countries for slavery, people started giving their family members marks to locate them if ever they were captured and to recognize them when they were freed. These permanent marks are ways of identification passed on from family to family, members of the same village, identification of royal lineage and people from the same lineage.

## TYPES OF YORUBA TRIBAL MARKS

Since tribal marks are used mainly to differentiate ethnic groups, they vary. There are marks on the cheeks, forehead, on the temple, under the chin and so on. There are vertical lines, horizontal, both vertical and horizontal, slanted lines on both cheeks. These marks are in patterns based on the ethnic group of their bearer and have different meanings and different names.

The Yoruba tribal mark is one interesting feature of Yoruba physical appearance used to enhance physical beauty. Although no longer common or in vogue, it is fast disappearing due to extant laws and international campaign. The popular tribal marks are known by specific names and verbs expressing how they are made. The tribal marks of the Yoruba are usually horizontal and vertical concentrated on the face from the cheek bone to the jaw. The marks could be thin or wide and are usually parallel.

One of the most popular facial marks is the **Abaja** (Fig .1,2,3,4); consisting of three or two sets of three

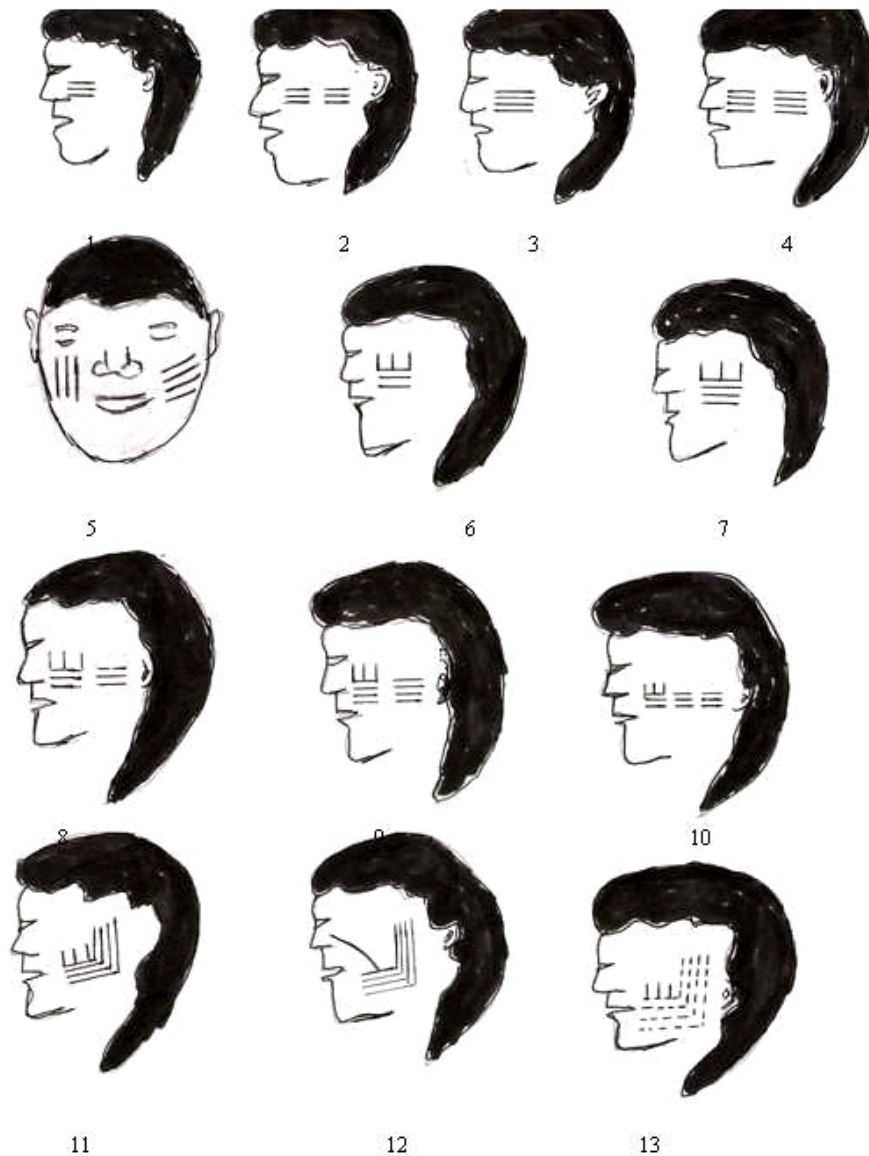
horizontal marks. There are about eight types of this and they are common among the Oyo, Owu, Egba, Egbado, Osun and Ofa. The **Eyo** mark is seen amongst Oyo slaves who were born within the palace or those closely related to the Royal family. It was reserved majorly for members of the royal family. It is drawn along the whole length of the arms and legs. Also common in Oyo is the **Gombo** (Fig.1.8,9,10) (also known as Keke). It has thin vertical lines which reach to the head across the temple. They occupy the space between the auricle and the cheek bone; and three small perpendicular lines are placed on the horizontal lines on both cheeks. They are referred to as Keke when the lines are wide and bold. The **Pele**, is a four-horizontal-line; an-inch-long mark made on the cheeks on both sides of the mouth seen amongst the Ijesha. **Soju** (seen in Ondo); are half-an-inch-vertical lines on both sides of the nose down to the mouth. The marks are thick and long. **Jaju, also seen in Ondo is a single horizontal line on both sides of the face.** Other Yoruba tribal marks include Ture, Mande, Bamu and Jamgbadi.

## COMPLICATIONS OF TRIBAL MARKS

Due to the fact that these marks are created through poor hygienic and careless procedures, numerous medical complications could arise from these procedures. These complications could be local or systemic. The local complications include; trauma, bleeding, abnormal scar formation like keloid scar, and contact dermatitis. The systemic complications are transmission of infections such as HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B and C. Sharp instruments used by the locales to inscribe the tribal marks are not sterilized, thus exposing children, even adults, to the risk of HIV/AIDS.

## TRIBAL MARKS TODAY

This interesting feature of Yoruba physical appearance is fast disappearing because of the extant laws and international campaign. The use of tribal marks as a means of identification and beautification among the Yoruba tribe is no longer a norm. These days, people view those with marks with disdain. Though, culture plays significant roles in traditional medicine, it is gradually becoming



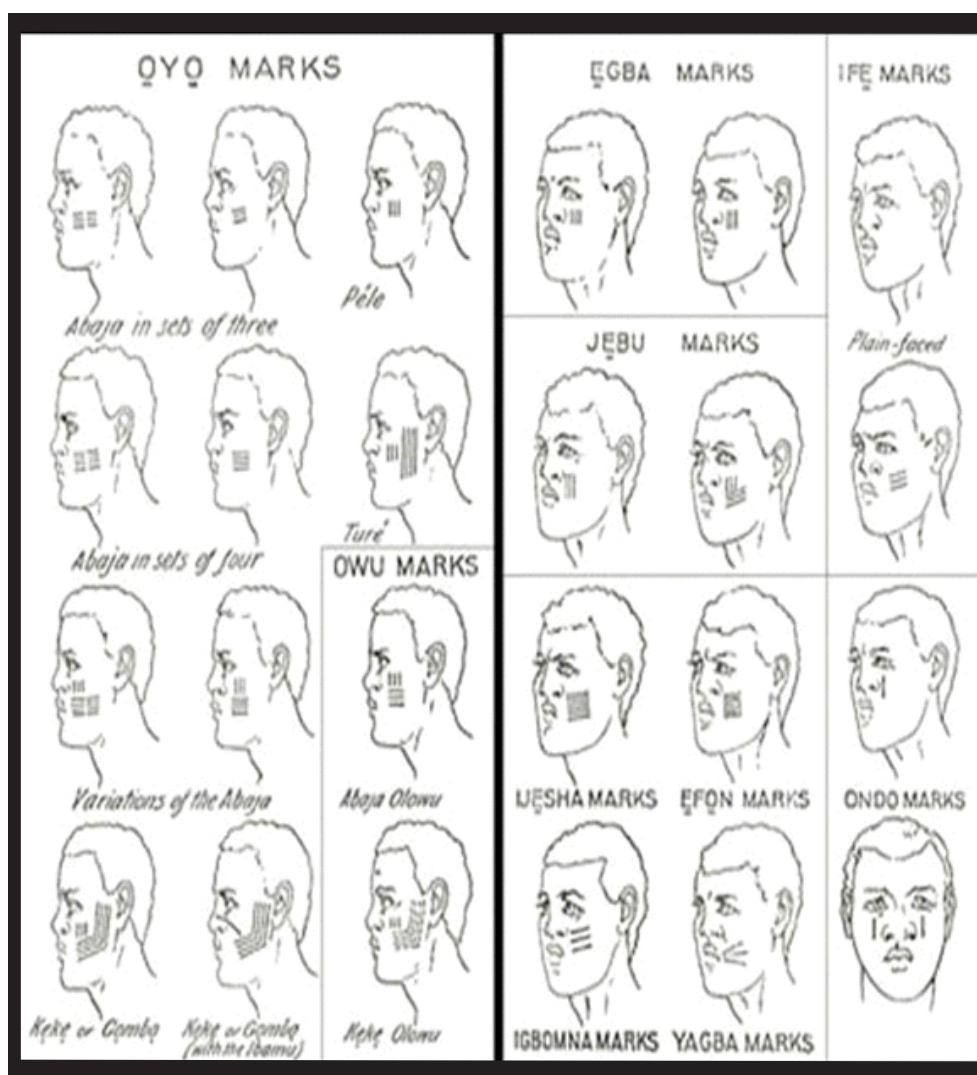
**Fig. 1: Tribal Marks in Yorubaland**

eroded due to modernization. Effort has been made to outlaw scarification. In Oyo State the prohibition of tribal marks is an integral part of the state Child Rights Law, a law that imposes a fine or one-month imprisonment or both for violation. According to the law, Section 24 says; “No person shall tattoo or make a skin mark or cause any tattoo or skin mark to be made on a child”. Ayo Fayose, the former governor of Ekiti State, also made facial marks and tattoos illegal in the state in 2006 in line with its Child Rights Law. The former governor of Osun State, Olagunsoye Oyinlola, also banned people in the state from giving

facial marks or tattoos to their children. Those who were guilty were to pay fines or to be put into prison.

## CONCLUSION

Tribal marks a means of identification and beautification have become dying mementos of an ancient era. Nowadays tribal marks are no longer given to children. The art is barbaric and parents should not put tribal marks on the face of their children. Because of its health implications and abuses, it has become an outlawed practice.



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