

# Perception and Attitude of Contemporary Ibadan Indigenes on Tribal Marks

**Akinbode H. O.**

*Department of Yoruba, Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Science and Technology,  
Omu-Ajose, Ogun State.*

## Abstract

*The study examined the perceptions of Yorubas' about tribal marking. One hundred and seven (107) Yorubas were drawn from Ibadan in Oyo State through simple random sampling technique (SRST) only one research instrument was used: Tribal Marking Questionnaire (TMQ) Data Collected were analysed using simple percentage. The result shows that 70(65.4%) respondents believed that they are for recognition, 39(36.4%) strongly agreed that tribal marks are part of the body decoration, 38(35.5%) strongly agreed that tribal marks belong to indigenous form of communication. 39(36.4%) believed that tribal marks are desirable for beauty while 61(57.0%) disagreed that there are no differences between wearers and non-wearers of tribal marks/while the majority 40(37.4%) strongly agreed that tribal marks are signs and symbols. In conclusion, the purpose of tribal marking is for cultural practice, body decoration, beauty, signs and symbols as well as penning message. It is hereby recommended that the current wearers of tribal mark should feel proud about the marks on their cheeks because it is their cultural identity as well as a means of decoration and a specimen of beauty. However, tribal marking should be discouraged now due to civilization and health issues attached to it.*

**Keywords:** Perception, Attitude, Facial marks, Contemporary, Ibadan indigenes

## Introduction

In Yoruba culture, facial markings have been used for centuries to mark a person's tribal heritage. The practice involves cutting and burning the skin with sharp objects and then adding black paste, usually from ground charcoal dust, to the open marks Akinwande (2021). Facial marking is part of Yoruba culture and it is a process of marking or cutting an incision into human skin and then allowing it to heal, leaving a permanent scar on the face of the wearer (Orié Olanike Ola, 2011). It serves as a communication process disseminating cultural identity, decoration and beauty of the wearers. As a matter of fact, communication is a process of exchanging ideas, views and feeling between two or more people. It is a medium through which information is passed from one person to another or group of people. Communication is one of the bonds that hold the society together, and without it there would be no coordination, no cooperation and indeed, no social organization. Communication itself involves conscious effort of transmitting meaningful signals to a receiver for the purpose of affecting a particular kind of behaviour in him/her. Communication touches every sphere of human activity. It informs all of man's action because it is occasioned by his needs to interact with his fellowmen. Communication is not restricted to verbal form, it also involves non-verbal method such as the use of signs and speech. That is why tribal marks act as a means of cultural communication most especially among the Yorubas. The Yorubas constitute an ethnic group where tribal marking is part of their culture. Like every other ethnic group, they possess their own culture. Tribal marks are one of such widespread practices. And hardly could you

see a household in a typical Yorubaland without some of its member having tribal marks except in Ekiti villages.

According to the Naqiba Muhammed (2022). Tribal marks are lacerations made on the face practiced by parts of the Yoruba and the Hausa tribe in Nigeria. In the olden days, it was practiced and was symbolic. In the Yoruba and Hausa Fulani tribes and Benin tribes in Nigeria, these incisions were form of identity as the different parts of the land and various families had distinct ways of making the lacerations on the face.

According to Negri (1976), in Yoruba land body-markings were of two major types and both were permanent. Deep cuts were made for ethnic identity, such as the royal marks of Oyo, drawn as gashes the whole length of the arms and legs. The second types were used more as decoration and fertility symbols. He started further that, permanent marks were given when a child was an infant and not so sensitive to pain, a child does not have the power to decide whether he or she wants it. It is a traditional sign of honour and a clear indication that the child is not a bastard, as it identifies the family or the person's origin. Tribal marks were given to every firstborn in some part of Oyo state regardless of sex to show that the child is a legitimate born child, a one-in-a-kind birthright Urenna (2018). Conditions under which the marking was done were far from ideal and some children died as a result. This naturally discouraged the practice of marking while the traditional Yoruba society still cherishes this idea of tribal marks, there are suggestion that the contemporary generation has a different view. The former President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, proudly flaunts his Owu tribal marks as he once described it as his "natural

identity card". According to Awake Magazine (1999;17), People with facial marks, these days, at least in the cities like Lagos, are in the minority and come in contact with people who ridicule them.

It states further that; It very common to hear people refer to an Individual as a colonel, only to discover that.

He is not a member of the Armed Forces, but That the stripes of his/her cheeks resemble the Stripes on the Uniform of a colonel in the Army.

Historically, in those days, slavery was rife. Wars were waged, people were captured sold and bought and transported to places distant and unknown. And only people with smooth faces were taken for slavery and sacrifices. In order to give the idol worshipper and slave traders bad impression, and to free people invented heavy facial marks. Each family decided to pattern its own marks. It serves as an address for tracing a member of any family. For example, the royal family and warrior-Basorun are recognized by the ABAJAS." The noble service of tribal marking is a peculiar job in the family known as the OLOOLAS. MARK-CUTTING was a hereditary profession, handed down from father to son. The families normally formed themselves into a union, in order to protect the secrets of their art and livelihood. They sometimes travelled many miles to perform this service. Akinbode [1991:3) state that it was Ifa oracle that instructed Oduduwa, the leader of the Yorubas to put marks or sign on the cheeks of his people according to each clan for recognition purposes because of unforeseen wars that might scatter them on the way to their new settlements after they had been chased out of the middle East by rebellion and wars. Daramola Jeje (1975;77) said that the fashion might have come from the east from where the Yoruba people migrated to their present settlement. The author agree that it used to be for identification of tribes, and their families during the tribal slave trade. Eventually, marking came to be used as a means of beautifying the face. Babalola <1967) said in the oriki of the lineage of If2 people that Tribal marks is used to beautifying the face.

He says:

{m[ Oju r'abe sa.  
Arabesa ko ko peeli abe.  
{m[ b'uju ba ti r'ejo a ta warawara.  
A sa keke ogun, aajo ewa ara wa l'a fi nse.  
A b'abaja ovon, aajo ewa ara wa l'a fi nse...

The above oriki shows that tribal marks were used as a means of beautifying the face and body.

Also, two other sources are worthy of note. Abimbola (1976) and Johnson (2009). One Odu-Ifa, Idinsaa, said to be the patron of mark-makers.

The Odu says.

Idin Saka  
A difa fun Olowola

{m[ Asamoo logbe]vowo  
Ti nwon ni ika ni yio se la...

Idin Saka.

Ifa divination was performed for Olowola  
Offspring of Asamoo logbe]vowo  
(He who cuts a child to receive money)

They said he will be harming to succeed in life.

The story goes that Esu was the one who taught Olowola how to make marks on people. It was Esu also who deceived people to think that marks would beautify them and pushed them to ask Olowola to make marks on them for money. Johnson (2009:150) says, when Sango became king of the Yoruba, he felt ashamed that he could not tell the name of his mother. Therefore, he commissioned a Tetu slave and a Hausa slave to proceed to the Tapa country, to his maternal grandfather Elempe a Nupe king, for the purpose. He gave them kolanuts, money, a horse, a cow, and sacrifice materials. The king's charge to these messengers was that; they should listen carefully to the first name uttered in the invocation which evidently would be his mother's name.

One of his servants was said to have drunk himself to senselessness and could not comprehend what names were being mentioned while other was sober and attentive. On their return, the Tetu slave who had faithfully carried out his order was highly rewarded, and the Hausa slave severely punished. The punishment meted out to him was 122 razors cut slashed all over his body as a lasting warning for all time. But as the marks healed, the women in the palace began to admire the marks on the culprit. The Yoruba adage says, "Tita riro la n ko ila, to ba jina a di oge". "The incisions is very painful, but when it gets healed, the marks become a beautiful thing to admire". When Sango queried the case of such deep admiration, the queens exclaimed that the slave looked handsome with marks on him and advised his majesty to have some too. Sango took this advice, but could stand only two cuts on each arm and forbade the Olowola (the marker) to proceed further. This is what is termed as EYO. The marks are to this day retained in the royal family of Oyo as a distinctive badge of royalty, hence members of the royal family are termed AKEYO (the one with Eyo marks). Adekunle (2016) said only slaves were known to wear tribal marks. It is a sign to identify and distinguish a slave owner from another.

### Types of Tribal Marks

According to Akinbode (1991), the Yoruba people are very rich in culture and this is shown in various ways of which tribal marking is one.

For instance, Oyo have sets three or four parallel and horizontal line or their variation on each cheek. The lines may be single or double, each from 1.3cm to 2.6cm (1/2 inch to 1 inch) long.

In Ibadan, we have different types of tribal marks such as tattoo, medicinal marks and facial marks.

(A) **TATTO:** this regarded as a pattern, picture or message put on the skin by tattooing, that is, by pricking with a pin or needle and then pouring colored dyes in to give skin a blackened outlook. It is done mainly for decoration/aesthetic purpose. Many of the Yoruba tribes in Ibadan use tattoos, with different decoration for men and women.

(B) **MEDICINAL MARKS:** This is called VERE. It is mark put on the skin with a very sharp blade. Medicinal mark could be incised on any part of human body. It is a vertical mark. The number of medicinal marks to be incised on human body varies. After the incision, a certain medicinal concoction would be rubbed into the freshly made wounds. It is given as charm.

(c) **FACIAL MARKS:** The facial marks are for the purpose of distinguishing the various Yoruba families. Facial marks are incised on human cheeks. These marks were varied from family to family, clan to clan, town to town. As a result of the increasing pace of industrialization of Ibadan city, people from various towns such as Oyo, Ogbomosho, Owu, Ijesa, Iwo, Saki just to mention few, migrated to Ibadan each with their various types of facial marks.

In Ibadan, we haýe "Pele" ] Three ýertiál lines.

Abaja merin]merin <four]four> four horiøontal lines on eaíh iheek.

Abaja mejo]mejo <eight]eight> ] Four horiøontal lines beside another four horiøontal lines on eaíh iheek.

Abaja mefa or Mefa olowu ] Three ýertiál lines upon three horiøontal lines;

Abaja omo oba or mefa]mefa ] <six]six> three horiøontal lines besides another three horiøontal lines on eaíh iheek.

Merin baramu ] Four horiøontal lines with aíross line on the nose.

Mokanla]mokanla <eleýen] eleýen> ] Four horiøontal lines beside three ýertiál lines upon four horiøontal lines on eaíh iheek.

Meje]meje <seýen] seýen> ] Three ýertiál lines upon four horiøontal lines on eaíh iheek.

Gombo] Three ýertiál lines upon four horiøontal lines together with four supported lines against the four horiøontal lines.

Gombo]baramu ] Four horiøontal lines with a line aíross the nose together with four supported lines against the four horiøontal lines.

Abaja]meta ] Three horiøontal lines.

### Attribution of Tribal Marks

It can be noted how each of the principal marks is indicated by a different verb signifying "to mark".

To be marked with Pele is o ko Pele

To be marked with Abaja is o bu Abaja

To be marked with Keke is o sa ] Keke

To be marked with Gombo is wa Gombo

According to Babalola (1967:17) one can even detect the attribute of facial marks from oriki of Ife.

"... Onikeke ogun o gbodo pon mu

Alabaja ogbon o gbodo bu sin ese

Soboro]bon lannuje 'un n'yio pon

do naa gbe..."

"... One with twenty keke marks must

Not drink from the water

One with thirty Abaja faíal marks

must not wash his feet from it.

One who has no faíal marks ] an annoyaníe

to those who haýe ] will drain the water..."

Actually, from the above oriki it is stated that the Ife people are mostly plain faíe <soboro>, they dreaded the knife. But some of them haýe faíal mark.

The Ife marks are three horiøontal lines like those of the original Basorun marks, eaíh being shorter, about half]inih long.

According to Abimbola (1976), the attribute of marks can be detected from the structure of Ese Ifa in the first part of (owonrin meji).

"Onikeke logun

Alabaja logbon

Onikolo laadota..."

He who has keke faíal marks has twenty marks;

He who has abaja faíal marks has thirty marks;

He who has kolo faíal marks has fifty markings..."

It ían be also be deteited from the first part of Okanran meji of ese]jifa:

Keke logun, awo ile Olowu;

Abaja logbon, awo o w[n ode Eyo

Ture laadota..."

Keke is twenty, a priest from the Olowu household

Abaja is thirty, a priest of the Eyo community

Ture is fifty..."

Those ese ifa shows how useful the faíal marks are in the traditional way of the Yorubas in Yorubaland. It shows that the priest from the ýarious town had different faíal marks. People from Olowu, Ode Eyo haýe keke and abaja faíal marks respeítiýely.

### Statement of the Problem

Tribal Marking has been part of Yoruba culture, it had been in vogue, quite a long time among the

Yorubas and it has not yet been eradicated by the level of civilization and education. But because of the influence of Western Civilization, the younger generations scorn and condemn tribal marks due to the health hazards involved. According to Ugorji (1998:5). The incision of tribal marks has a negative biological significance. He further stated that HIV can be contacted through the use of contaminated blades in tattooing, scarification marks and circumcision. Despite the criticism, it is exigent to find out the perception of Yoruba about the practice.

**Objectives of the Study**

1. To determine the perception of contemporary Yorubas of the tribal marking as a cultural practice.
2. To determine the differences in the attitude of wearers and non-wearers of tribal marks towards the practice of tribal marking.
3. To determine the messages tribal marks, pass across among contemporary Yorubas.

**Research Questions**

1. What is the perception of contemporary Yorubas of the tribal marking as a cultural practice?
2. Is there any difference in the attitude of wearers and non-wearers of tribal marks towards the practice of tribal marking?
3. What messages do tribal marks pass across among contemporary Yorubas?

**Discussion**

**RQ 1:** What is the perception of contemporary Yorubas of the tribal marking cultural practice?

**The Perception of the Yorubas on Tribal Marking as a Cultural Practice**

Responses	Frequency	Percentages
Recognition	70	65.4
Beauty	25	23.4
Communication	9	8.4
Undecided	3	2.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100</b>

From table 1 above, 70 (65.4%) respondents believed that tribal marks are for recognition, while 25 (23.4%) respondents believed that they are for beauty, 9 (8.4%) believed that the tribal marks are for communication while 3 (2.8%) are undecided. This implies that tribal marks are for recognition. Akinbode (1991) agreed with the finding, that tribal marks are used for the purpose of distinguishing the various Yoruba families. As a result of ancient tribal wars, the people can be differentiated from enemies by their tribal marks. Facial tribal mark is a form of identity during slave trade. The wearers are

identified by their marks on their faces and absorbed back into their family when they are free. Akinbode (1991) also noted that the increasing pale by industrialization in Ibadan city led to the influx of people to the city from Oyo, Ogbomoso, Owu, Ijaw, Iwo, Saki, among others. These people and their communities are recognized by the tribal marks they wear on their faces. So, it is summed up that facial marks play a significant role in “Yoruba cultural identity”.

**Table 1b. Tribal Marks are Part of the Body Decoration**

Responses	Frequency	Percentages
Strongly disagreed	12	11.2
Disagreed	13	12.1
Undecided	1	0.9
Agree	42	39.3
Strongly Agree	39	36.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1b above indicates that out of 107 respondents 12 (11.2%) Strongly disagreed that tribal marks are parts are part of the body decoration, 13 (12.1%) respondents disagreed, 1 (0.9%) is undecided. While 42 (39.3%) respondents agreed, 39 (36.4%) strongly agreed that tribal marks are part of the body decoration. This implies that tribal marks are also used for decoration. Decoration is part of culture. Urenna (2018) says that tribal marks are cultural practice for beautification. The marks were used as a symbol of honour, beauty and heritage and something worn with pride. Apari & Makinde (2009) noted that culture is the totality of human ways of life in the society. This also includes his/her creativity and how he/she decorates and beautifies himself/herself. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2014) seen decoration as something pretty that you put into something else in order to make it more attractive. This snow balls into fact that tribal marks are decorations that make wearers more attractive.

**Table 1c. Tribal Marks Belong To Indigenous Form Of Communication**

Responses	Frequency	Percentages
Strong Disagreed	9	8.4
Disagreed	17	15.9
Undecided	6	5.6
Agree	37	34.6
Strongly Agree	38	35.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1c shows that 9 (8.4%) respondents are strongly disagreed that tribal marks belong to indigenous form of communication. 17 (15.9%) respondents disagreed, 6 (5.6%) respondents are undecided. While 37 (34.6%) respondents pout of



107 agreed, 38 (35.5%) strongly agreed that tribal marks belong to indigenous form of communication. This implies that tribal marks is an indigenous form of communication. This agrees with Mundy and Compton (1995) who say that indigenous communication is an important aspect of culture, and the means by which culture is preserved, handed down, responds to new situation. Afolabi (2023) noted that the Yoruba people are the second most populous tribe in Nigeria with unique features that make it easier for other people to identify them. The features include bodily adornment such as language, dream, music, food and mark pattern such as tribal marking. All these put together constitute Yoruba culture.

**Table 1d. Tribal Marks are Desirable and Beautiful**

Responses	Frequency	Percentages
Strongly disagreed	10	9.3
Disagree	14	13.1
Undecided	11	10.3
Agree	33	30.8
Strongly Agree	39	36.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1d above, indicates that out of 107 respondents, 10 (9.3%) strongly disagree, 14 (13.1%) disagreed, 11 (10.3%) respondents could not decide. While 33 (30.8%) agreed, 39 (36.4%) strongly agreed. Therefore, the majority strongly agreed that tribal marks are desirable beautiful. This agrees with Akinbode (1991) who noted that since tribal mark in part of culture, it is a desire of individual in Yoruba culture to wear tribal marks. More so, it is a means of beautifying themselves in the culture. Afolabi (2023) stated that such marks serve as embellishment and reflection of prevailing fashion trends. This means that one of the significances of tribal marking is beautification. This confirms an adage in Yoruba which says, it pinches, it pains and the process of marking, when it heals, it heals, it becomes a pride of beauty for the mark wearers.

**RQ 2:** Is there any difference in attitude of wearers and non-wearers of tribal marks towards the practice of tribal marking? Significance of tribal marking is beautification.

**Table 2a. Is There any Differences in the Attitude of Wearers and Non-wearers of Tribal Marks**

Responses	Frequency	Percentages
Yes	46	42.9
No	61	57.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100</b>

The table above shows that 46 (42.9%) respondents agreed that there are different between the wearer and non-wearer of tribal marks. A total of 61 (57.0%)

respondents disagreed that there are no differences at all. This means that there is no difference in the attitude of wearers and non-wearers of tribal marks. The findings show that there is no difference in the attitude of wearers and non-wearers. Tribal marking is an aspect of Yoruba culture, so there cannot be negative attitude towards the wearers. The non-wearers too many not suffer any form of negative opinion since there is general acceptability for Christianity and civilization.

**RQ 3:** What messages do trial marks pass across among contemporary Yoruba?

To answer this research question, items 18 a, e, f and 19 will be used.

**Respondent Perception 3**

**Table : Tribal Marks do pass Message to Other**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	4	3.7
Disagree	15	14.0
Undecided	1	0.9
Agree	37	34.6
Strongly Agree	50	46.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100</b>

The above table indicate that 50 (46.7%) strongly agreed that tribal marks do pass messages to others while 37 (34.6%) agreed, 15 (14.0%) disagreed, 4 (3.7%) strongly disagreed thus, 1 (0.9%) undecided. Therefore, the table shows that the majority of the respondents strongly agreed that tribal marks do pass messages to others. This agrees with (Sola 2000; Adesanya and Kehinde 2020) that communication is a process which a message is conceived by a sender encoded, and relayed through a particular route to a receiver, who then decode and interprets it and finally confirm to the sender that it has been understood. In this case, tribal mark is the message of identity encoded to the receiver who quickly decodes that the wearer of the tribal marks is from a particular place or he is handsome or she is beautiful.

**Table: Tribal Marks are Sign/symbols**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	3	2.8
Disagree	5	4.7
Undecided	1	0.9
Agree	58	54.2
Strongly Agree	40	37.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100</b>

The table above indicates that 3 (2.8%) strongly disagreed, 5(4.7%) disagreed, 1 (0.9%) could not decide. While 58 (54.2%) agreed, 40 (37.4%) strongly agreed. Fadehan and Baber (2021) agrees with this finding that tribal facial mark could be describe as one of the elements of Yoruba Semiology which is referred to the study of sign and symbols.

Therefore, the majority of respondents agreed that tribal marks are signs and symbols. Tribal marks are signs and symbols or identity. These signs show that there is a mark of identity on the wearer's cheek. This sign is a shape or symbols that have particular meaning and represent an idea of the den or the family the wearer hails from.

### Conclusion

The tribal marking is part of Yoruba culture, and it is common among the Yorubas' except those from Ekiti state. The study has been able to reveal people's perception about tribal marks most especially the younger generation of Yorubaland. It is a process distinguishing the wearers from family to family and town from town. The significance of the mark is for decoration, beautification, identity and cultural practice, as well as message. It is important to note that, there have been a lot of social changes even, the practice is no more in vogue as it used to be, it has been turned into the things of the past hence, it should be discontinued.

It was very obvious that though the younger generation among the respondents are aware of the practice of the tribal marks among the Yorubas and that the practice still exists but, nevertheless, they despise it.

Although some of the respondents felt tribal marks are appreciated for its beauty and recognition yet they want it stopped since a lot of things have changed so much that the practice has no positive advantage anymore. In the nutshell, there should be an end to it.

### Recommendations

On this note, the researcher therefore suggests that since majority do not feel comfortable and in support of this practice anymore so it should be eradicated. Also, the health issues need to be put into consideration, a lot of people died through this practice. Apart from that, in the world where diseases seem to be growing at the same rate as human beings, HIV/AIDS happens to be killer disease that can be contacted through unsterilized instrument like the one used in the practice (The Tribune 2017). Furthermore, if at all tribal marks should be given, it should be some hidden part of the body that will not be so obvious as to expose them (wearers) to ridicule and jest from their counterparts. The practice of having tribal marks is fading. It is now abhorred by most parents and some individuals who term themselves unfortunate for having these marks are sometimes ashamed of them and trying to cover them with makeup Urenna (2018).

The researcher also suggests that there is no need in making people to have inferiority complexes about themselves at a social gathering civilization has come, therefore, there is no need to have social identities, although war and slavery is still on in some part of the country but there is no point for any mark to be put on one in other to show identification. Thus, it should be abolished.

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