

Chapter One:

BODY ADORNMENT: A RE-INTERPRETATION OF THE ART OF BODY PAINTINGS AND OTHER ADORNMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Man has always attempted to preserve truths and ideals through writing, in one form or another. Many civilisations employ alphabets to stand for sounds, words to stand for ideas, ideas to stand for words, and combinations of these to narrate stories, ask questions, direct actions, or describe events. What the alphabet would represent in other societies already denotes concepts and facts. Thus, throughout history, we have had figures representing concepts or even entire stories, such as the Greek, Hebrew, Roman, Sanskrit, Arabic, Japanese, African, etc., even in what we formerly considered basic societies, such as the Inca of South America.

In general, man has made extensive use of body decoration. The human body is created and used as a canvas by artists in an ancient type of art. The tribal peoples of Africa have a long history of tattooing their bodies to signify different life stages, as is common in many cultures around the world. African women display customary tattoos from their tribe, which serve as a sign that they are available for marriage. Their tribe's marriage and courtship customs heavily rely on this practice, which is a part of a lengthy tradition of body ornamentation. Similar to how lip and nose piercings, which were once uncommon in Western society, became more and more accepted by the late 20th century in Western culture as a way for people to express their values and cultural aesthetics. Like the tattoo on her African counterpart, her body piercings can reveal information about the period, location, and society in which she lives. People throughout the world have altered and/or ornamented their bodies over the centuries with tattoos, piercings, and other body art. Numerous of these customs are culturally specific and frequently denote a person's position or rank within a group. For instance, several tribes in Southern Asia and North Africa have decorated their bodies with henna. Many people in sub-Saharan Africa use lip plugs or plates to denote their social status. Tattoos are currently widespread in the West, despite being historically associated with criminals and soldiers. What role did tattoos and other body art serve historically?

Since they most likely first became humans, humans have been decorating and altering their bodies for thousands of years. Every civilisation has made an effort to alter its physical appearance to adhere to social and/or religious duties as well as cultural standards of beauty. People also alter and embellish their bodies as a part of the intricate process of constructing and reconstructing their social and personal identities.

Body adornment is the activity of enhancing one's physical appearance, such as through jewellery, clothes, makeup, fingernail art, body painting, hair styling, and nail decoration. By

definition, body jewellery is transient. Body modification, on the other hand, describes physical changes made to the body by the use of procedures including surgery, genital mutilation, implantation, tattooing, piercing, scarification, branding, and other methods.

Every culture in the world now practices tattooing, scarification, piercings, body painting, and other permanent and temporary body modifications. These practices are frequently used as outward indicators of age, social status, family position, tribe affiliation, and other social characteristics. The researchers who have looked into these markings have found that these displays build, communicate, and uphold status and identity.

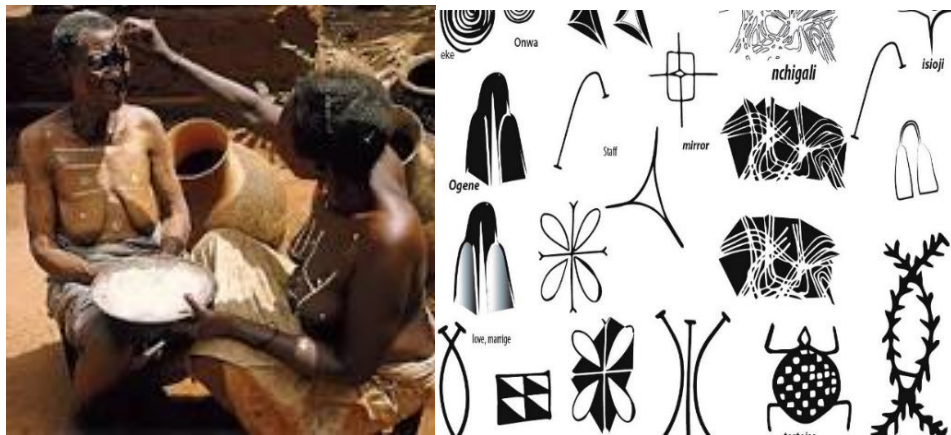


Plate 1: Scarification motifs, figurines and are also found in woven cloths

Not just in ancient civilisations, but also in contemporary, pluralistic states, has this been observed? Simply said, the alteration of the body is the simplest way to transform humans into social beings—they progress from being "raw" to "cooked" as the body gets covered in marks to become marked. According to theorist Michel Thevoz, "there is nobody but the painted body," since the body must always bear the stamp of culture and society to function within the social channels of exchange.



Plate 2: Uli's body designer at work.
Photo: Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh

Nigeria, a diverse and energetic nation in West Africa, has a long history of body ornamentation customs. These customs, which have deep cultural roots in the nation's diverse ethnic groups, are potent tools for aesthetic improvement, social identification, and cultural expression. Nigeria's body decorating customs, which range from detailed scarification patterns to ornate jewellery and body painting, reflect the history, traditions, and beliefs of the nation. This essay examines the importance and variety of body ornamentation practices in Nigeria, illuminating their cultural, social, and artistic facets.

The intricate history of Nigeria and its relationships with surrounding nations have had a long-lasting impact on the country's body ornamentation customs. Terracotta sculptures from the Nok culture (500 BCE to 200 CE), which represent people wearing intricate jewellery and headgear, are the earliest examples of body decoration found in Nigeria. The body decorating traditions of Nigeria were further enhanced by succeeding empires like the Hausa Kingdoms and the Benin Empire by introducing fresh materials, methods, and designs.

Traditional Nigerian culture distinguished between permanent and transient marks made on the face and body. Sometimes a lot of scarification was applied, maybe to keep the bearer safe from capture during the slave trade era. When necessary, these tribal markings allowed people to locate lost children and relatives. It was fairly simple to identify people at a glance since facial marks had distinct forms to distinguish different families within a tribe or geographical area. When a child was young, usually when they were still infants and less sensitive to pain, permanent markings were often given.

Types of Body Adornments:

1. **Scarification:** In Nigeria, the deliberate cutting or branding of skin to produce permanent designs has great cultural and aesthetic importance. The scarification customs of several ethnic groups, including the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa, vary. These markings, which are frequently made on the face, chest, or limbs, act as indicators of identity, social standing, and tribal membership.

2. **Jewellery:** A vast variety of materials, including gold, silver, beads, and cowrie shells, are used to make jewellery by Nigeria's numerous ethnic groups. For a variety of events, such as weddings, festivals, and religious ceremonies, jewellery such as necklaces, bracelets, anklets, and earrings is worn. Each ethnic group's jewellery has its distinctive designs, themes, and meanings that reflect its cultural past.

3. **Body Painting:** Another common type of body ornamentation in Nigeria is body painting. Nigerians use clay, charcoal, or plant-based natural colours to create beautiful body art for ceremonies, rituals, and festivals. These images frequently represent spiritual convictions, cultural stories, or act as a means of self-expression.

4. **Cultural Significance:** Body ornamentation in Nigeria is of great cultural significance since it serves as a visual language for expressing identity, social standing, and cultural beliefs. During rites of passage, such as weddings, initiation ceremonies, and funerals, adornments are frequently worn to symbolise the change from one stage of life to another. Additionally, they help to preserve

cultural legacy by teaching younger generations about their ethnic customs through the process of bodily modification.

Social Significance

Body ornamentation is extremely important for social interactions and communal cohesion in Nigeria. Adornments can serve as a social cue and a connection-building tool by communicating a person's social standing, clan membership, or marital status. They also allow people to express themselves creatively and in their own unique ways, serving as a means of self-expression.

Artistic Expression

Body ornamentation customs in Nigeria are not only significant from a cultural perspective, but they also exhibit astounding creative craftsmanship. The unique patterns, motifs, and methods used in body painting, jewellery creation, and scarification showcase the artistic talent and originality of Nigerian craftspeople. These ornaments frequently act as wearable works of art and are prized for their aesthetic value and symbolic significance.

Body Cut in Some Part of Nigeria

An abnormal growth of scar tissue called a keloid develops at the site of cutaneous damage.



Plate 3: body cut leading to an abnormal growth.

When tiny incisions are first cut in the skin of the face or torso, keloid markings that resemble microscopic barriers rise up. Small wads of fibre or palm leaf were inserted inside the wounds after they had been spread open. For the purpose of darkening, kerosene and soot were rubbed in. In order to prolong healing, the procedure was repeatedly carried out until the marks were extremely elevated.

Mbubu Keloids, A young Igbo kid, suffered from keloids. Three rows of tiny keloids were carved down the chest and around the waist to create these significant markings. Similar berries were sliced and strung around the face and neck like a necklace.

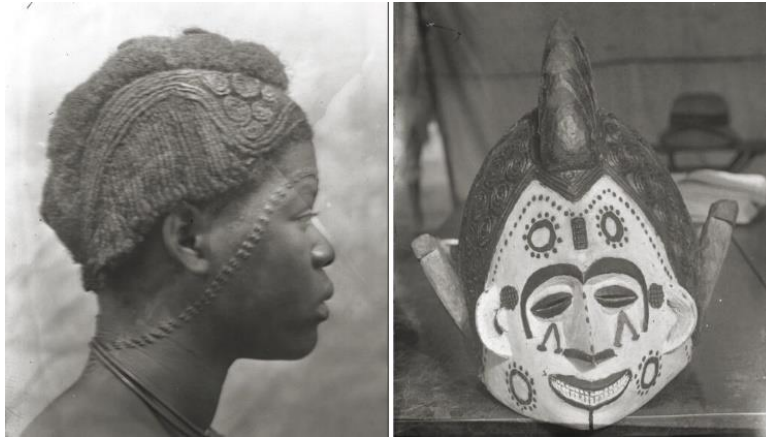


Plate 4: Facial incisions also replicated on the Adamma mask

Uli motifs are a component of a larger aesthetic vocabulary that also includes facial and hair scarification design. In these images, a young woman from Igbariam's feminine hairstyles and scarification patterns are contrasted with those found on the maiden spirit' mask that Thomas acquired in Agukwu Nri. 'Girl with (?)ohgba hair', taken by Northcote W. Thomas in 1911 in Igbariam, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria (NWT 3853, RAI 400.19946); 'Isi Agboefi' maiden spirit mask, taken by Northcote W. Thomas in Nimo, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria (NWT 2970, RAI 400.16379).

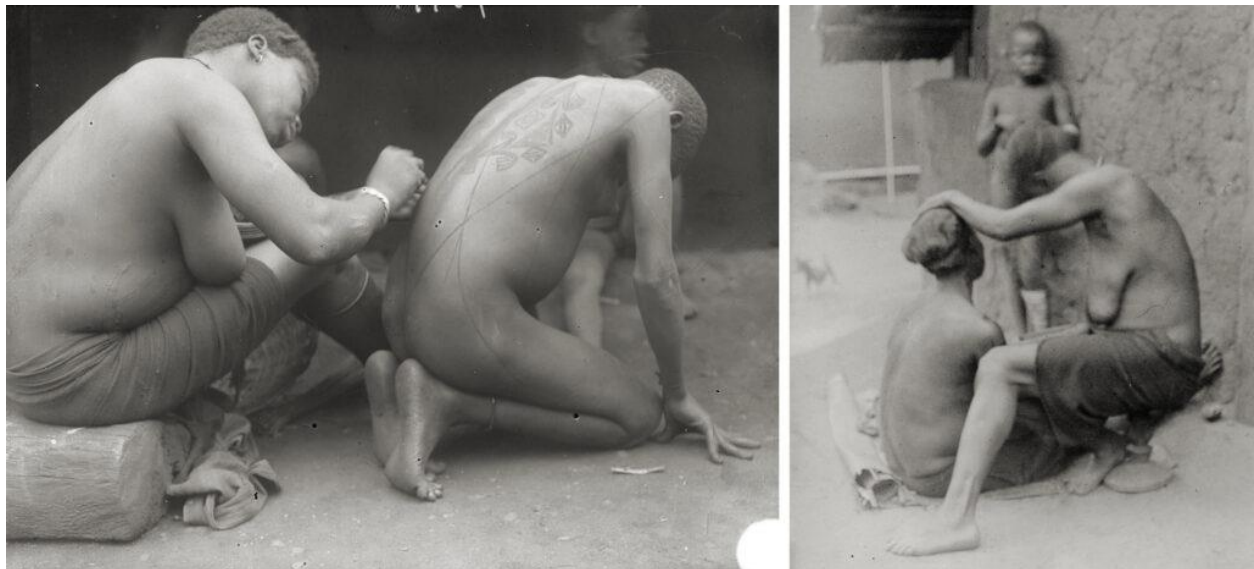


Plate 5: Uli body designer at work.

Left: "Body painting," Fugar, in the modern Nigerian state of Edo. Right: "Two women making uli," Achalla, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria, as captured on camera by Northcote W. Thomas in 1909 (NWT 1072, RAI 400.19719). Northcote W. Thomas took the picture in 1911 (NWT 3751, MAA P.31898).

Yoruba Body-Markings

In Nigeria, there are two main categories of Yoruba tribal marks, both of which were permanent. The royal marks of Oyo, which are drawn as gashes throughout the entire length of the arms and legs, are an example of a deep incision done for ethnic identity. The second kind was used more for adornment and as a symbol of fertility.



Plate 6: The Yoruba tribal marks in Nigeria

The other traces, known to the Yoruba as fin-fin cuts, were made in clusters that covered practically the entire woman's body in geometric designs. These marks were created gradually; to enhance their visibility, the patterns were rubbed with a charcoal and indigo mixture. In remote rural places, older women's bodies may still have these traces. Although the majority of markings had ornamental or symbolic meaning related to marriage and birth.

Owu

Owu tribal markings are unique to natives of Owu, a historic city in Abeokuta, the capital of Ogun State in Nigeria, and consist of six incisions on each side of the cheeks. The Yoruba people also have the tribal marks Ture, Mande, Bamu, and Jamgbadi. The former president, Olusegun Obasanjo, is quoted as saying the following in November 2014 as he picked up his electronic national identity card from the National Identity Card Commission (NIMC). The Owu natives of the Ogun State capital, Abeokuta, have distinctive markings on their cheekbones, including six lines on each side.

My tribal marks are my identity – Obasanjo.

“Not many people know that I have three identity cards. The first is the international passport; the second is the national identity card, and the third is my tribal marks.”

Benin

Almost every man and woman in Benin has a certain scar pattern or tattoo on their face to signify their tribal affiliation. Mamadou is from the Bariba tribe and has three uncomplicated but recognisable facial scars. His arms and legs also have similar markings. Children's first cuts are definitely not an experience for the weak of heart, with writhing bodies, piercing screams, and rivers of blood pouring into every imaginable orifice. Unbelievably much blood is flowing, and when a youngster starts gurgling in the pools that enter his or her quivering, it's almost too much to bear!

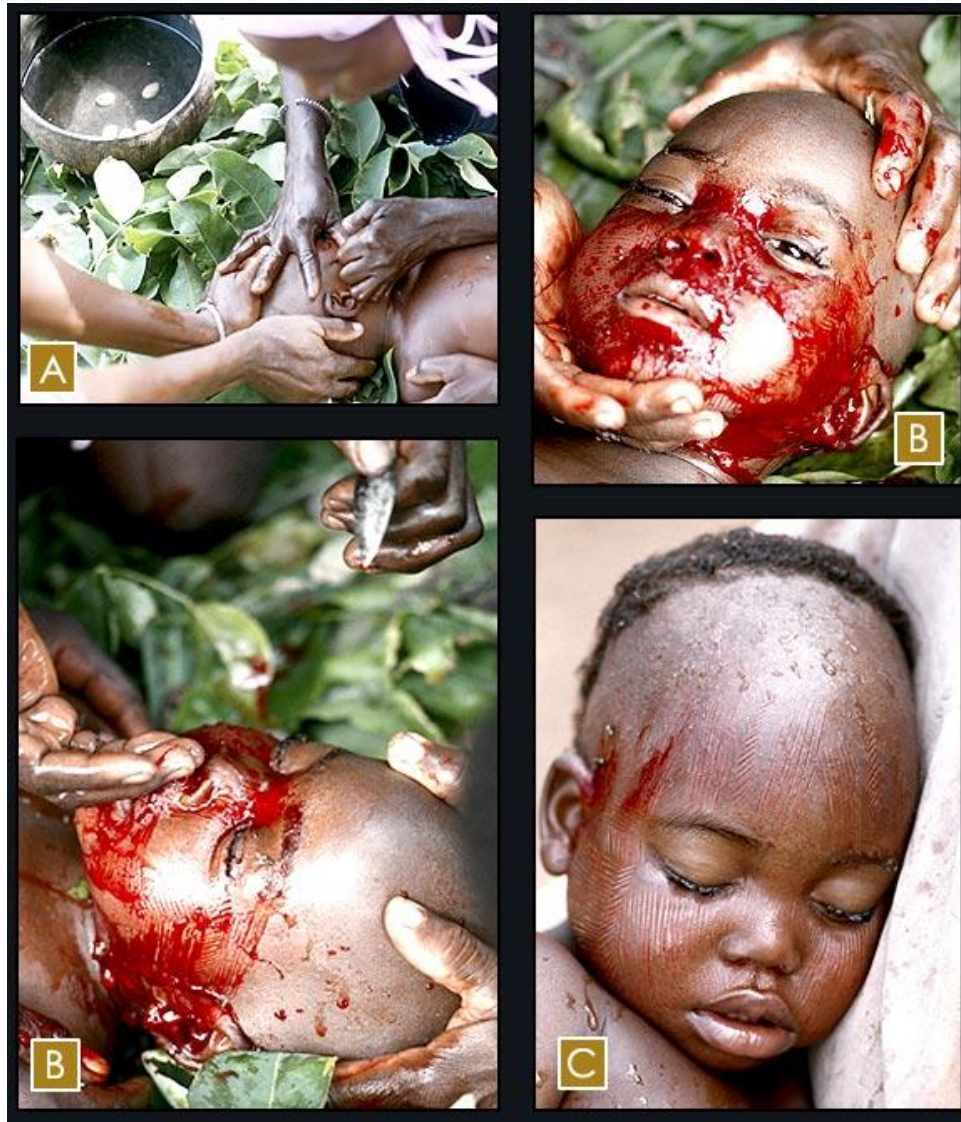


Plate 7: Permanent facial scarification.

This is an illustration of Lars Krutak's permanent body masks. The procedure of scarification for the face is shown in these collections of images. Cowrie shells placed in a water pot are used to first determine the scar pattern. The kid is then laid on a bed of leaves, and the cutting on the temple starts. Every youngster who was being cut in front of me yelled and writhed in agony. One fell unconscious in the middle of the cutting, but he came to toward the finish and started wailing again. Every youngster finally appeared to fall asleep quickly after the shea butter was given to the wounds for healing, which was a comforting sight. With such a burst of physical and mental stress, in particular, I can only imagine how their body would respond to shock, especially at such a young age!

Benefits of Body Adornment

Body adornment, such as tattoos, piercings, and other forms of body modification, can have several benefits:

- 1. Self-expression:** Body ornamentation enables people to showcase their own personalities, worldviews, and morals. It may be a means for someone to express their originality and uniqueness, making them stand out and be known for their own particular sense of style.
- 2. Meaning in terms of culture and tradition:** Many body adornments have significant cultural and traditional connotations. They can serve as a means of preserving cultural traditions and connecting with one's ancestry by representing a person's heritage, beliefs, or social standing.
- 3. Increased self-confidence:** Body decoration can empower some people and increase their self-esteem. It enables individuals to love their bodies and experience more self-awareness. It can also act as a reminder of one's accomplishments, significant anniversaries, or personal development.
- 4. Deep emotional and spiritual significance:** Body adornment may have significant emotional and spiritual meaning for a person. It may be used as a remembrance of a loved one, a mark of personal development or healing, or a lucky charm or talisman.
- 5.** Body ornamentation is frequently regarded as a sort of wearable art. It enables people to use their bodies as canvases and work with talented designers to produce one-of-a-kind, eye-catching creations.
- 6. Connection and community:** Body adornment can promote social interaction and a sense of community. It can be a topic of conversation, enabling people to meet people with similar interests or tastes in artistic expression. It's vital to keep in mind that the advantages of body modification are arbitrary and can differ from person to person. When thinking about any type of body modification, it's important to do your research, put safety first, and work with recognised professionals.

Conclusion

The customs of body decoration in Nigeria are a reflection of the nation's rich cultural heritage and the wide range of ethnic groups who call it home. These adornments, which range from jewellery and body painting to scarification patterns, are potent forms of aesthetic expression, social identification, and cultural expression. Body ornamentation practices in Nigeria remain a dynamic and essential component of the nation's cultural fabric as it continues to develop, maintaining and honouring its rich heritage for future generations. Numerous design conventions from traditional civilisation have been abandoned, including tribal and facial marks. While there is no denying that body designs (whether permanent or temporary) are crucial to the socio-cultural life and continuation of traditional African civilisations, many urban elites view facial marking as linking them to an antiquated past. The vast potential abundant in African body design traditions is evidenced by the fact that these design processes play significant roles in a wide range of ceremonies dealing with rites of passage, healing, war, agriculture, and many others.

Body designing, which is still practised by various ethnic groups in Nigeria, serves specific purposes. On the one hand, decorating serves a functional purpose, but on the other, it provides details about social standing and membership in various organisations. Thus, body designs have a role in one's personal growth from childhood to adulthood. They are also frequently employed in

ritual initiations as a visible indicator of one's social advancement. The shape and style of the designs about a woman may reveal whether she is married, single, engaged, a mother or a widow.

Questions

The following research questions guided the study; they are as follows:

1. What are the reasons for body adornment?
2. What are the adornments commonly used in Nigeria?
3. What is the adornment theory of fashion?
4. What is the difference between body adornment and body modification?
5. List the three types of adornment used by men.

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