



The Tribal Marking Among the Kanuri People of Borno, Nigeria

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Abstract:

Tribal marks are also known as facial scarification was a long cultural heritage that has been in practice in various ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Kanuri of Borno is not an exception to this traditional practice. These unique marks cannot only be seen in the face alone rather they can be seen in another part of the body including the belly. The cultural practice of facial marks has been performed among the Kanuri of Borno for several reasons which include fashion, identification of culture, security, beauty, and inordinate self-esteem. Apart from these, it is also very similar to today's International Passport for the Kanuri wherever they found themselves Abubakar (2017). The process of marking face starts from the early stage in life especially during the infant stage and when the child grows discovers the cultural symbol on his face that represents its history, tribe, and origin. The facial scars vary from one ethnic group to another. Kanuri people encompasses subgroups and dialect groups and some of them feel distinct from each other that is exactly what classifies them into different clan and dialect distinctions. The objectives of the paper are to examine tribal marks among the Kanuri in Borno. its history. classifications. and significance in society.

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Abstract

Tribal marks are also known as facial scarification was a long cultural heritage that has been in practice in various ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Kanuri of Borno is not an exception to this traditional practice. These unique marks cannot only be seen in the face alone rather they can be seen in another part of the body including the belly. The cultural practice of facial marks has been performed among the Kanuri of Borno for several reasons which include fashion, identification of culture, security, beauty, and inordinate self-esteem. Apart from these, it is also very similar to today's International Passport for the Kanuri wherever they found themselves Abubakar (2017). The process of marking face starts from the early stage in life especially during the infant stage and when the child grows discovers the cultural symbol on his face that represents its history, tribe, and origin. The facial scars vary from one ethnic group to another. Kanuri people encompasses subgroups and dialect groups and some of



them feel distinct from each other that is exactly what classifies them into different clan and dialect distinctions. The objectives of the paper are to examine tribal marks among the Kanuri in Borno, its history, classifications, and significance in society. The article is ethnographic research that employed both primary and secondary sources of data. The paper shows that Kanuri ethnic groups have more than one facial mark and classify them under group and subgroup. It is through these tribal marks that one can be identified which part of the Kanuri clan, family, or patrilineal heritage he/she belongs to. The study also indicates that the tribal marks could also be used not only to trace the original homeland of a particular Kanuri man but also for fashion, identification, security, beauty, and inordinate self-esteem.

Keywords: Kanuri, Tribal, Facial Marks, Scar, Borno, Nigeria





1.1 Introduction

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the struggle between continuing and change of cultural heritage and tradition. Tribal marks are one of the long cultural traditions that have been in practice by many African states and other continents of the world. The practices have been transformed while others were completely vanished due to modernization and other factors of social change that affected the long cultural heritage. Uzobo et al. (2014) in Giddens (2001) opined that the emergence of colonialism, westernization and other events that accompany the industrial revolution has swept a significant aspect of African cultural heritage replacing it with global cultural trends of modernization. In some parts of the world, this cultural practice has been discarded while others are bound to fade away. In Nigeria, people from the southwest, northwest, and north-central are also known for these outstanding cultural practices but to some extent, the tradition has come to stake. Indeed, among Kanuri, this tradition is still active and practiced by the people despite the threat lingering the tradition by modernization and western culture.

The Kanuri also known as Bare-bari, Bornowaji and Kolejo are the dominant ethnic group occupying the central and northern parts of the Borno region. Borno¹ possessed a rich but diverse and reputable cultural heritage which is pluralistic in an ethnic composition composed of well over fifty languages that spanned well over a millennium. The Kanuri of Borno is rich in culture and they are the custodian of cultural tradition that survived for more than 1000 years according to oral tradition. Kanuri culture has manifested in their language, dressings, marriages, values, tribal marks, etiquettes. Indeed, the efforts and commitment of Kanuri in sustaining and promoting their cultural heritage made their culture unique. One such long-existing culture is tribal marking. However, there is numerous issue surrounding the practices because the scarification takes place during the infant age and when the child grows up discovered the incision marks on his/her face. Indeed, some are not comfortable

¹ Borno which is located in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria was mostly likely the first political entity with a form of centralized government in the country. At the peak of its power, the polity had its influence expanding north to Fezzan and South into Borno. Indeed from the era of Mai Dunoma Dibalemi in the 12th century to the period of Mai Idris Alooma in the 16th century, the empire had emerged as the single most powerful state of the Western and Central Sudan.



with the family decision while others are too comfortable and proud to be. However, some of these facial marks start from the forehead to the cheek and chin in vertical form. In the cheek, from the left to right be four-four make it eight while in the forehead one that's make it nine. Furthermore, for another dialect of the Kanuri group who are from the descendant of the Sayfawa dynasty known as *Mami* their facial marks are eight from each of the cheeks starting from the head to the chin horizontally. The classification of the tribal marks, their significance, and their role is wide and differ depending on the tribe and dialect one comes from. The main objective of this paper is to examine tribal marks among the Kanuri in Borno, its history, classifications, and significance in society

1.2 Concept of Traditional Mark

Tribal marks is a socio-historical concept described by many scholars from a different perspective. This is so because marking the face can be done by cutting some parts of the body. It can be done for many reasons some are medicinal, aesthetic, identification, security, and much more. Uzobo et al. (2014) (2014) aptly pointed out that laceration involves cutting or making an incision into the skin and then allowing the wound to heal itself, leaving behind a permanent scar on the body. This process is known as the small incision made into the body with a lancet, bistoury for different purposes. According to Segen's Dictionary (2011), laceration or scarification of the body for (tribal) marking must have to do with the practice of beautifying the body with piercing, colorations, tribal marks, or scars. The process is well organized during the traditional initiative by the scarificator and it has been in existence for several centuries. However, scarification is an ancient context of discourse that contain processes and procedure in which in some communities has spiritual benefit as well. Ayeni (2004) closely observes that there is sufficient evidence about the spiritual healing or curative role that laceration has been playing for various ethnic groups in Nigeria. According to Osanyin, among the Yoruba for example herbal doctors, body artists, and priests of the god of herbalism administer a huge number of medicines via incisions on the body.



1.3 Facial Tribal Marking in Historical Context

The practice of tribal marking on the face dates back to the fifth century B.C. when several foreigners were said to have trooped and lived in Egypt. The foreheads of these foreigners, according to Herodotus, were cut with knives, creating marks that differentiated them from their hosts proving that they were not Egyptians (Adeoye 2013). Uzobo et al. (2014) argue that tribal markings as a practice originated from Australian aborigines dating back to 60,000 BC, various elements of laceration were scattered, borrowed, and adopted by different communities across the world, continuing up till today. Tribal marks, as earlier noted, have a very long history in the African tradition, most significant of which was the period when having a sense of identity was important to people. It has been reported that this practice was adopted in African empires and kingdoms, particularly at a time when kingdoms were conquered and most of their people were abducted. As such, families began marking their respective members to distinguish themselves from others and also to be capable of identifying where a person belonged to. This explained that slave raiding and trade was the primary reason for the advent of tribal marks in Nigeria, although it became a fashion trend over time (Adeoye 2013).

However, tribal marks incision is not only restricted to the Kanuri people rather another part of the world is into such rich cultural practice and it is a traditional legacy that is sustainable to the present generation which is enculturated in people activities. For instance, the encyclopedia (2007); MacGaffey, (2000) described that among the Tiv women, for example, tribal marks are made on faces for beautification and fertility purposes. More so, among the Yorubas and Lubas, body lacerations or markings are purposely made for aesthetic reasons and at times to accentuate the splendor and beauty of their women. Ossai-Ugbah & Ogunrombi (2012) rightly observe that body marking among various tribes in Nigeria is to clearly display stages of positive development or spiritual rites of passage as in the case of the Ga'anda and Kao people of Nigeria, body marking especially for young girls shows each significant stage of their positive development into womanhood.



Today, the Federal Government of Nigeria has decided to ban the practice through the law, but many states in the country have not yet endorsed the law. Many human rights organizations argue that the scarring of children is abuse in the eyes of law. Therefore, it should be banned by the government at all levels.

1.4 Tribal Marking among the Kanuri

As earlier mentioned, the Kanuri of Borno like many other ethnic groups in Nigeria has its unique and beautiful tribal marks. The most popular tribal mark among the Kanuri is the one that has nine marks on the left and right of the face with one of them drawn from under the forehead directly down to very close to the nose tip. It is difficult to say exactly when the practice of tribal marks began among the Kanuri of Borno due to the absence of accurate data. However, the silence of our sources on the date of its commencement among the Kanuri, lends itself to two postulations made by scholars: The first postulation argues that tribal marks were first beginning among the Kanuri of Borno before the time of slave raiding in Africa. Submitting that by the beginning of the Trans-Saharan trade or even earlier, the practice of tribal marks had started among the Kanuri. It is generally believed that at this time, the tribal marks served as a modern-day visa for easier identification wherever one found himself. During the pre-colonial period and in more recent times, many families are making sure that their children have tribal marks. Despite the health hazards that were associated with open wounds when people had tribal marks, many families continued with the practice even though its importance is on the wane today.

The first postulation argues that tribal marks were first started among the Kanuri of Borno during the time of slave raiding in precolonial Africa around the 14th to the 18th century when the slave trade was its peak Abubakar (2017). During this period, the Africans from weaker empires and kingdoms were captured and sold into slavery. Although Africans from the powerful empires like the Kanem-Borno and the Songhai Empires were not captured due to the fear of reprisal attack by these empires for kidnapping or enslaving their citizens, the Kanuri began to use tribal marks. Because during this period, the tribal marks identify who



belongs to what territory, kingdom, empire, or tribe or even if the person with the marks lives outside his ancestral territory. Kanuri tribal marks during this period, therefore, serve as an identity, protection, and International passport for Kanuri man to go wherever he likes with self-confidence and self-assurance, easy identity, and without fear of being captured by slave raiders. Abubakar postulates that it is because of the powers of the Kanuri tribal marks that made even other ethnic groups Marghi, Babur in Borno adopt or borrow this aspect of Kanuri culture Abubakar (2017). He goes further to speculate that this was the reason why there was no Kanuri who was captured and sold into slavery by either mighty kingdom or slave raiders. According to him, this is so because among all the slaves taken from Africa none have the record of Kanuri tribal marks on his or her face Abubakar (2017). This culture is still actively practiced among the Kanuri but over 70% of them are no longer making these tribal marks Abubakar (2017).



1.5 Classification of Tribal Marking among the Kanuri of Borno

A tribal mark is a specific mark that comes in different shapes and sizes, commonly found on the face; which gives it another name of 'facial marks.' There are various tribal marks, by different dialects groups within Kanuri-speaking people and different places in Borno. Some of the popular tribal marks among the Kanuri are known by specific names and verbs expressing how they are made. The tribal marks of the Kanuri are mostly vertical lines on the face from the cheekbone to the jaw. Therefore, the tribal marks are classified into various sizes, designs, and directions but it would be done vertically as we mentioned before depending on the Kanuri dialect the person comes from. The marking is normally done during the naming ceremony on or before the seven days of childbirth. These unique marks cannot only be seen in the face alone rather they can be seen in another part of the body including the belly. Indeed, these processes are similar to the *Wa* tribe in northern Ghana. Lauren (1998) posits that:

Tribal marks are given during the naming ceremony which falls on the eight-day after the baby has been born. In Wa, which is a patrilineal, heavily Islamic society, the naming ceremony is held in the house of the father and if the parents are from two different ethnic groups the child will receive the father's tribal marks. During the ceremony, Islamic scholars pray for the health and survival of the baby and announce the name the parents have chosen for the child.

It is a similar tradition among the Kanuri people of Borno but the scarification process and



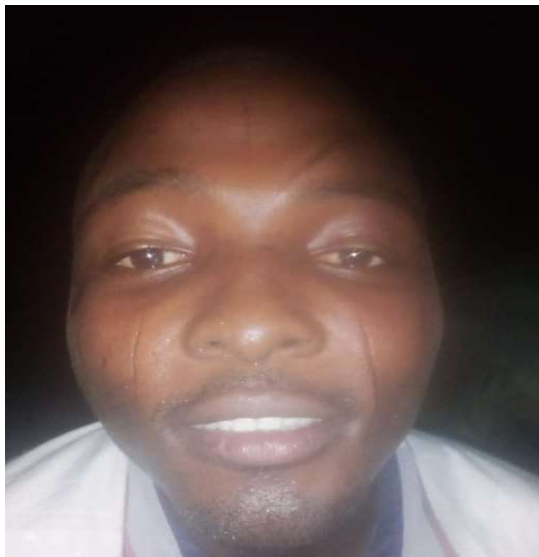
procedure differ from one another. There are many dialects within the Kanuri-speaking people and some are nomadic, trading business, royalty, farmers, gold smelting, fishing, horse rearers, miners among others, they belong to one sect of Kanuri dialects to another. Abubakar (2017) clarified that there are many different types of Kanuri dialects within the Kanuri language some of which includes the Kanuri



Wuje, Gumati, Manga, Bodoni, Kanembu, Kwayam, Kuburi (Kuwuri), Suwurti,

Source: Researcher

Bodoi and others. However, some of these people have distinct tribal marks especially the



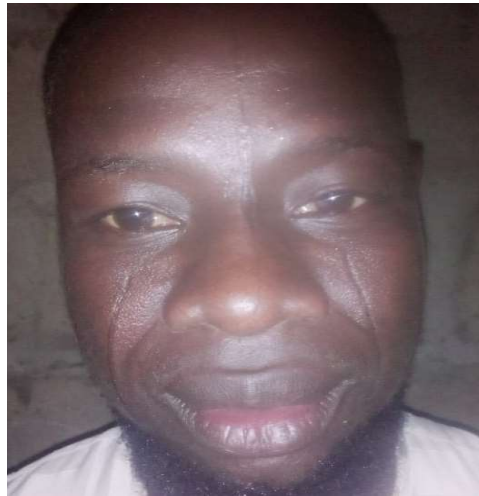
method, size, and design of the scarification but the process is almost the same thing. They can be also identified through language spoken which the accent or oratory sound bit differs from one another. However, this is a general type of scarification that has been done to normal people in the society and it is common and well known among the younger generation refers to as *Susa'na* in those days which means normal citizens that do not belong to any traditional

political class. Furthermore, these type of tribal marks is done vertically four from each side of the face and one from the forehead. The two marks from the top cheek and two from the main cheek that makes it eight from both left and right and one from the forehead make it nine marks.

The tribal marks among Kanuri are regarded as a sign of identification, aesthetic and dialect representation, pride, and recognition. However, there are different types of tribal marks among the Kanuri people of Borno which below scarification represent the *Mami* dialect among the Kanuri who are claimed to be descendants of the Sayfawa dynasty who is either a prince known as *Abba'a* or related to the royal family.



Nevertheless, the *Mami* dialect group and their tribal marks are not common among the Kanuri of today due to inter-marriages, assimilation, and reintegration of the people. Furthermore, these dialect groups claimed their ancestors migrated from Yemen to Jilmi later to the Ngazarkamu before the fall of the Kanem-Borno Empire. Abubakar (2017) narrates that the Kanuri people come from the Arabian Peninsula and made their stronghold at about 640 kilometers north of the present-day Lake Chad which later emerged as the great Kanem-Bornu Empire. Indeed, it was from there that the *Mami* disperses among the ordinary people and it is rare scarification that one can hardly find among the youths of today. The tribal marks start from the up-head down to the cheek and they are seven in number and one from the forehead makes it eight. It was done vertically and bold enough to be recognized by people from the distance.



Another set of dialects among the Kanuri is known as *Buduma*. These people are naturally tall and giant creatures and their traditional marks are similar to that of *Susa'na* but their own is bolder and wider than the *Susa'na*. This set of people are found around Lake Chad areas of northern Borno close border with Niger and Chad republic. Their main occupation is rearing animals, fishing, hunting, and cultivating the land. Indeed, these tribal marks of *Buduma* can be seen among the people in Borno both in the elder generation and the younger ones because the people are so much custodian and like to transmit their culture to the generation to come. However, many people from this dialect are considered to be warlords and warriors because of their expertise and skill in hunting and strength.



1.6 Conclusion

We have examined in some detail the tribal marks among the Kanuri in Borno, its history, classifications, and significance in society. The examination revealed that the cultural practice of facial marks has been performed among the Kanuri of Borno for several reasons which include fashion, identification of culture, security, beauty, and inordinate self-esteem. Apart from these, it is also very similar to today's International Passport for the Kanuri wherever they found themselves. We have also found out that some ethnic groups Marghi, Babur in Borno adopt or borrow this aspect of Kanuri culture while the Shuwa people have the same culture as the Kanuri in terms of their tribal marks.



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