

# **An Ancient Practice:**

## *Scarification and Tribal Marking in Ghana*

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## Abstract

My research on tribal marking and face scarring took place in various parts of the country, but much of the information comes from the residents of Gwollu. By interviewing different people belonging to different regions and ethnic groups throughout the country, I was able to discover the main uses for marking: medical use, decoration, spiritual protection, and tribe or family identification (these marks specifically for ID can be referred to as tribal marks). This paper sweeps over the origins of marking and how it became quite important during slave raiding, but has various uses and implications in modern times. This paper will delve into a mixture of individuals' views of marking and how it affects certain people's lives, depending on the type of mark received. The findings in my research point to a diminishing of the practice of marking for reasons like prejudice, government regulations, and medical complications. Further, my research will give opinions on why the practice should or should not be considered a negative/ positive practice. Lastly, I will offer what may be future implications for scarring and tribal marking, as well as suggestions for future research to add to this body of knowledge.

## Introduction

Upon meeting my neighbors in my Cape Coast village, I noticed the various scars they acquired on their faces: some had vertical lines on either cheek, some with one horizontal line upon the left cheek, and others with longer and more noticeable scars that engulfed their faces. I asked where they were from and they responded: “the Northern part of Ghana.” They were also Muslim, and I wondered in what context these scars were made, for what reason, and what purpose they might have served, (or might still serve) to the individual bearer. I began asking many people walking around in the market place, as well as my neighbors, what the marks meant. I often received responses like: “They are much more prominent in the North,” related by my neighbor, a father of three daughters and one boy, and who is also an education officer (EO) at Elmina who teaches history at Peter Holdbrooks Smith Senior High School. Although tribal marks are used everywhere, the Northerners use them much more and in different ways. In the Southern part of Ghana “they have diminished,” he says. However, tribal marking is still practiced in the South, but this is mostly in relation to traditional medicine, and not as much identification to a specific tribe. Thus, “it is easy to spot a Northerner in Cape Coast,” as they usually have the longer, more protruding scars that extend from the nose to the bottom of the cheek (EO).

While there are various reasons and meanings behind the tribal marks, they are usually all made during infancy and early childhood, which refers to anywhere from eight days after birth, to 4-5 years (EO). Many children are given the marks at their “outdoor ceremony,” (or naming ceremony) eight days after birth. The marks can be

made for decoration, identification, spiritual protection, or health. The practice appears unique to West Africa, yet can indeed be seen in certain other cultures in the world, like in Australia (Mumuni).

Upon coming to Ghana, I had not been familiar with the practice of scarification, and when a young Ghanaian man with confusion asked me: “do your people in America not mark themselves?” I had to respond “no.” Yet I now can see the different ways we have of marking in my culture, just through different avenues like tattooing, yet it is not to the same extent or same significance it has here. I knew also that this topic would be unique in that I would be able to talk to the people directly, and would be able to learn from field research, as there is a limited amount of literature on the practice of tribal marking and scarring.

In Capt. R.S. Rattray’s Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland, there is a description of various groups of the Ashanti who scar themselves. Rattray attributed much of the marking to issues of slave raiding in the past and the way that certain raiders would mark their captives with their own *Zabarma* marks (Vol. I, II). This was to distinguish the captives of different raiders, as well as identify escaped slaves. Peter Barker’s People, Languages, and Religion in Northern Ghana, also points out that while indigenous slavery was quite different than slavery in the new world (with the brutality of the cotton, rice, and indigo plantations), slaves could never become chiefs even when rising to positions of authority. The tribal marks could therefore be used to cause public ridicule and keep one’s caste.

Even with this literature, it is evident through the study of other avenues, that scarring and tribal marking have origins much earlier in the history of West Africa than

the 17<sup>th</sup> century slave raiding. In an essay by the Senegalese writer and philosopher, Sembane Ousmane, a story or legend about the way marks emerged is extended to the audience. Yet what I'd like to purport here, are the questions raised by his essay: Why do we not see this practice in the Americas? Why did this tradition not translate across the ocean through the Atlantic slave-trade to places like Haiti, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Brazil, and the Carribean?

Ousmane offers the fact that the history of slave buying and selling sought to deal with Africans like commodities. When being bought or sold, the slightest imperfection, blemish, or sign of unhealthiness, could cause the merchandise (the slave) to go unsold. Therefore, apart from the small mark made by the slave raider as a stamp of ownership, the slaves bought more readily, had fewer marks (Ousmane). This of course does not explain fully why the practice of marking did not translate across the ocean, since African religions and languages did often survive for long periods of time in the Americas, however it offers us the idea that marking must have been a practice started long before slave raiding. How do we know this? If we look to the art, especially sculpture found in the Northern parts of Ghana of terra-cotta figurines, wooden masks, and carvings, it is evident that they depict marks on the faces and bodies of the figures. Some of the figurines date back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, before slave raiding dominated the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Rattray). Even the bronze terra-cotta figures of the "Ile Ife" culture in Western Nigeria show tribal marks, and these date back to 1000 B.C.E. Therefore the origins of the practice are more or less draped in obscurity, while the failure for the practice to extend to much of the African Diaspora, also lies in mystery.



Upon undergoing my research project, I had not anticipated the wide array of reasons for the marks. Similarly, I had not anticipated the various different issues, political and personal, this study would reveal about the marks. Yet over the course of my project, I began to see how different people interpreted the meaning of the marks, as well as the repercussions that may follow when wearing the mark for a lifetime. The array of responses I received left me with a wealth of questions surrounding the future of tribal marking and what the potential loss of this practice might mean for the future of a tradition passed down throughout the centuries. Many of my respondents thought that it was the right thing to ban tribal marking and scarring altogether, while others saw this kind of restriction as a kind of undermining of traditional culture and neo-colonialism.

It is also important to note that the practice of scarring and tribal marking in Ghana can not be generalized to conflate the whole of the West African practice into a simple four-category practice. This is an ancient tradition that has its roots cutting across West Africa, and is different in each and every region, tribe, and family. It is important then to look at each interview as a case study, only adding to the body of knowledge acquired on the subject of scarring, but not as a conclusion or generalization.

## Methodology

The research obtained for my project consists supremely of interviews from willing participants. I traveled throughout the country for my ISP, so I was able to speak with a variety of individuals from divergent areas in Ghana. I sought to learn as much as possible about all the different types of tribal scarring, focusing primarily on face marking. While many of my interviewees come from Gwollu, I was able to get a broad perspective on the practice of marking by speaking with a myriad of people from many different regions of the country including: the Central region, Northern region, Eastern region, Volta region, and the Asante Region.

My interviews took the form of mostly informal, and no cooperation from any participating agency was required. Occasionally, I was lucky enough to simply begin a conversation with an individual on a friendly basis, and then bring up the issue of tribal marking along the way, obtaining information through his or her willing participation, general knowledge, and personal experience. On other occasions, Gbemmie, my translator in Gwollu, acted as my infiltrator, aiding me in finding individuals willing to speak with me about the often deeply personal and sensitive act of marking. During these interviews, Gbemmie helped me introduce myself to different people in the community, easing their possible trepidations about the information I was willing to extract from each interview. After a brief introduction and the consent of the interviewee, I would ask a set of questions to each participant, often obtaining vastly novel and different information from each person. The structure of each interview was completely open-ended and I

allowed the conversation to deviate where it seemed there was an important tangent to explore.

While I had no set group of people or tribe to interview, I wound up acquiring information from a wealth of different ethnic groups. In light of this, the information I obtained reflects the opinions and personal experiences of an array of individuals, thus no one meaning can be attributed to a mark or a set of marks, as the meanings are quite diverse pending on the microcosm of the population interviewed. However, there is much to be said here of the uses and symbolic nature of the different marks based on all the research I've done.

An example of the initial questions and information asked of my participants is as follows:

1. Background/ family origin of individual: geographically and/ or by tribe or clan.
2. What are the reasons for having your specific mark?
3. When, why, and where did you obtain the mark? Was it during a ceremony?
4. By who was the mark made?
5. Do others in your family have the same or differing marks, and why?
6. Has the mark ever elicited prejudice or negativity in your life? How do you see the mark/ how does it identify you with others in the environment around you?
7. Is it important for your children to be marked?
8. Why is this practice more associated with the Northern parts of Ghana?
9. Is the practice dying out and why?

From these more personal questions, I obtained information about all the divergent types of uses for the marks: medical, spiritual protection, identification, and decoration. Yet more than this, I was able to begin to see why the marks held certain meaning for each person, or community of people, deeper than just the level of what we may perceive as a scar only “skin-deep.” Therefore, after asking these more

straightforward questions, I came up with a new line of questions that got more to the depth of the way marks can dictate the way a person experiences the world around him or her. I became interested in finding out about the certain regulations that forbid marking and how the people felt about this law, or if it affected them at all. Also, I wanted to get to the bottom of the main reasons why such a law would exist, i.e. due to physical danger, because of child rights, due to prejudice, et cetera. Therefore, my next line of questions, while not able to be answered by all my interviewees, was as follows:

1. Are there any medical complications that can arise due to tribal marking?
2. Are medical marks done in clinics, or at home?
3. Did you know about the law forbidding tribal marking or when it was deemed unethical or illegal by the government?
4. Are there any regulations in place to make sure marks are not being done?
5. Do you see the law as fundamentally good or bad?
6. Is there a North-South divide that elicits prejudice against certain Northerners with the bigger marks? Do you think there is a North-South divide regardless of marking?

The information I subsequently collected threw me into a deeper array of questions that included issues of chieftaincy disputes, genital mutilation, and regional tensions in Ghana, all of which I will come to in the latter chapters of my paper.

Throughout my time traveling, I was able to infiltrate the community of Gwollu the most, since I had the help of my incredible translator and friend, Gbemmie Bernard Bukari. Gbemmie is a well-known and respected member of the community, thus allowing me to speak with a wide array of people of all ages, social positions, and town locations. However, on occasion, I would hit an interviewee who was quite vague and answered questions without much enthusiasm, thus giving me the impression that I was missing some important information. It was also difficult to get my questions answered in a straightforward way a lot of the time due to language barriers, as well as the nuances of

my questions lost in translation. For this reason, I know that it was possible for me to miss out on much of the depth and passion that my interviewees' wished to convey to me about their own marks.

In other parts of the country, I hit language barriers frequently. Often, I would be in a different region speaking a different language on a daily basis, thus limiting my ability to infiltrate. Because my research was so widely spread, I also now see how hard it is to make any generalization about tribal marks or scarring in any way, as they differ from region to region, tribe to tribe, and even family to family. Therefore, my research is ultimately limited by my narrow outsider's perspective and my own defined terms. I initially used my own conception and terminology, asking what people knew about "face scarification." I often received blank stares. Then, as I touched my face and made gestures, many individuals turned to me and said with emphasis, "Oh, you mean Tribal Marks?!" I realized I had surpassed the first barrier of communication, and proceeded from there using the terminology of the people I encountered. So for this reason I will refer to what I deemed "scars," as tribal marks, yet only when referring to the marks made for identification by tribe or family. Otherwise, I will drop the "tribal" and just say marks or scars, since medical marks, protection marks, and decorative marks, should not be confused with "tribal markings," as their purposes differ greatly. Although my outsider's perspective limits my ability to justly define certain terms, using the appropriate terminology for such practices is supremely important, so I will attempt to use the wording of my interviewees.

Other limitations certainly existed in terms of the sheer amount of time I would have liked to have. With more time, I could have stayed in many different communities

for extended periods of time, learning about each divergent form of marking and what significance it holds for each member of a certain family or clan. Field research was supremely important to me, and I would have liked to be able to stay in Wa longer to delve more deeply into the chieftain disputes that have been rampant in the North, and further how the marks can cause paradoxically, both detriment and privilege in a person's life.

However, with a few secondary resources, I was able to find some information about the past violence that has erupted in the Northern region due to these disputes, as well as how the North-South divide has grown substantially due to these historic events. In light of this, tribal marks can take the form of unwanted identification markers. IN light of this, I would have like to study more countries in West Africa and how their tribal marking practices differ or remain constant to the ones in Ghana. With the limitations of time, I was unable to study how the practice has progressed or regressed within many of the different countries in West Africa.

## Chapter I: Decoration

I thought it important to start this project with a chapter about face marking as a means of decoration, mostly because it is the topic that brings about the least confusion, controversy, and deviating tangents for discussion, which I wish to save for later. While marking for decoration is an important means of marking, there is less to be said about its surrounding significance. Marks to “beautify” can be made on both males and females, but are more popularly practiced among females. While most individuals acquire decorative marks during their teenage years, it is also possible that a *wanzan*, a specialist who performs tribal markings and circumcision, may give them to an infant during his or her naming ceremony (Deen).

I spoke with a man in Gwollu from the Wulijuah part of town, A. N. Deen, a tailor, who told me of his own experience of having decorative marks. He acquired one small mark on either cheek, both vertical lines, almost resembling tears. He related to me the interesting fact: that “in the Northern region, most Dogomba have these marks, but they are *not* tribal marks.” Rather, these marks can be for decoration or medical purposes. Further, the marks meant something meaningful to him individually, as most of his siblings acquire the same marks. His father was the one to make the incisions for both him and his siblings, but once his father died, the last-born child did not get the mark as the father could not be there to make it. Thus the decorative marks also served as family marks of bonding, but not by tribe. Even though most of the people in his region have similar marks, he does not consider them to be for the same purpose, or for identification at all, but generally for adornment and family association.

Later the same day, I spoke with another woman in Gwollu, N. Mumuni. I was initially intrigued by the two vertical, parallel lines on her right cheek, so I asked Gbemmie to help me interview her to figure out the reasons for these marks. She laughed a bit when I asked, so Gbemmie related to me that “she says they are for beautification.” She had given herself the two marks when she was a teenager and likes what they bring to her face, but are not for identification.

Additionally, in other villages outside Gwollu and Wa, I found that many people acquired small tattoos on their faces. For instance, the shape of an “s” on the forehead or between the eyebrows in black ink, was quite popular. This decorative piece was often complimented with other decorative marks, like the vertical lines on either cheek for beauty. These types of marks should not be confused with tribal marks, especially after speaking with one woman, a seller from Gwollu, who deemed all tribal marks as “ugly” and “unappealing,” yet she herself obtained a small vertical “beauty” mark on her right cheek.

In one village, Ginkpan village, outside Wa, most of the people had decorative marks gracing their cheeks. The males often had one vertical mark on the right cheek, while the women had two, along with the “s” tattoos on their foreheads. It is interesting to note that although decorative marks can be widely practiced in the same design in a region or village, they are not deemed tribal marks, as they do not necessarily signify a group identity.



## Chapter II: Spiritual Protection

Marks of “protection” are often made throughout Ghana and can be for people of all groups, tribes, families, and religions. While speaking with E.M. Wright in Abrobiano, a village outside Komenda in the Central Region, I learned that marks of spiritual protection have many mystical powers about them, and that many stories are attributed to this type of marking. “Often, a fetish priest will put the marks on the wrists or hips for protection from evil,” relates Wright. When someone wants to be protected from evil spirits or a demonic presence without anyone else knowing about it or if the individual wants to keep it a private matter, he or she would then most likely get the marks on the hips. Wright further explained that wrist marks are very visible, and that they can sometimes make other individuals wary of you, the bearer. These marks are usually not made in infancy unless suggested by a fetish priest or herbalist. Otherwise, they are usually done when someone is mature and wishes to go on his or her own accord to get the marks. Usually men are the bearers of this kind of mark as they are believed to endure more hardship in life (Wright).

Wright related to me that the marks can be made anywhere on the body. Often the marks can be in clusters on the upper arms, or even on the legs and feet depending on region and ethnic group. When arriving in Gwollu, Gbemmie added to this knowledge by saying that the reason people get these marks are because of the nature of their permanence. For instance, some people or priests used to wear certain clothing for protection spiritually, or a certain ring, “but what if those things are taken off or stolen?”

asks Gbemmie. “The marks are permanent-- and no one can take them from you,” he says.

After speaking with an array of people in Gwollu and elsewhere on the matter, it became clear that there was not necessarily a specific ceremony for this kind of mark, but that there was a medicine put inside the cut. This concoction is usually made from a kind of tree bark called *muha*. This medicine is ground up and then rubbed into the mark.

Another woman in Gwollu, N. Koguwe, related to me that the person receiving a mark of protection could also be laid in a bath of water and herbs after being cut so that the liquid rushes into the opened wounds. The solution is also used as a drink. Through these means, the spiritual and “magical” protection is taken into oneself and can never be taken away. It is part of the very essence of the body and can ward off calamity, disease, and curse. The point is to make a person stronger both mentally and physically.

There are many myths and stories associated with this kind of mark. Wright relates that: “You can shoot someone even three or four times, and he will not die because of what he has taken from the fetish priest.” This kind of belief is widely held across many individuals I spoke with in Ghana, and the stories of people being shot or stabbed without any physical ailment following attack are quite prevalent. However, more people do not receive this mark because it can be viewed as a sign of witchcraft and evil (Wright).

### Chapter III: Medical Marks

Although many people I spoke with in the divergent regions I visited referred to them as “Ashanti medical marks,” the medical mark, which often graces the right cheek, is practiced all over Ghana independent of tribe, region, or family affiliation. This use of the mark in the divergent regions points to the fact that there has been much migration within the country of Ghana to spread the practice from the Ashanti region throughout the other regions. The medical uses of the marks are far-reaching, and they are still used in both the Northern and the Southern parts of Ghana.

The first man I came upon in Cape Coast, a shopkeeper at the Black Star Bookshop, told me briefly about his small horizontal mark on the cheek. He acquired a smaller horizontal mark on his left cheek which he referred to as a “bird mark.” While he spoke little English, I was able to relate to him on a basic level, and could understand a bit of what he said. He told me that when he was very young he grew sick, so he was given a cut on the cheek, and then “they filled it with medicine.” He further said that “it can also be a symbol of origin in the spiritual tradition,” but for him, it was a sign of his near-death experience.

Swiftly after speaking with this generous man, I found another shopkeeper near Cape Coast Castle who was able to share his experience of being marked. His name is Blessed. He was born in Ghana, but grew up in Germany. He too had what the previous shopkeeper had deemed a “bird mark.” “When I was very small, I just collapsed. They said I was hit from above, so they took me to a voodoo priest to give me the mark,” said Blessed. There is orature that relates the story of the “nobile bird” who flies overhead and

infects children with disease when they are very young (Balaibala). Blessed had claimed to be struck by this very bird, and so the mark was made in an attempt to “revive him” to the realm of the living. Similarly, the education officer from Elmina told me that when his brother was very young, he had experienced convulsions. “He experienced constant convulsions, so small marks were made on his cheek. Then he had a bigger attack, so a much bigger mark was made to prevent him from having another convulsion,” offered the school teacher of his older brother’s experience. “He looks like he could be a Frafra now,” he added. He went on to say that the Frafra are a people from the North who often have large marks all over their faces to identify their tribe, yet his brother’s mark has nothing to do with tribe and is strictly medical.

B.S. Balaibala, a woman on the tourism committee in Gwollu, related to me that she too had experienced a sickness from a certain bird called “Diwie” (as they call it in the Sissala region). “The sickness can paralyze you, suffocate you, make you have a seizure, or make your eyes roll around and stay wide open. According to my mother, I was just a small child when I got it. They call it a ‘bird mark.’” In fact, as I was sitting and talking to a group of women sellers in Gwollu about this very type of mark, a large group of children gathered around us to see what was going on. I noticed that at least ten out of the fifteen children had the small bird marks gracing their cheeks. “Not all these children could have had convulsions in youth,” I thought to myself, and surely enough, a young man, W. Haara of Gwollu, assured me that the marks could also be for prevention of illness, like an inoculation for the “fever,” which is malaria. Almost every person I spoke with in my travels had, or knew of someone in his or her family, who had a “bird mark.” This type of widespread use of medical marks shows a kind of

transcendence of tribe and region affiliation. Similarly, it also points to the use of traditional medicine as a big part of the Ghanaian way of life and belief system.

Additionally, the medical marks can be made anywhere on the body where there seems to be the need to alleviate pain or ailment. When speaking with a group of women sellers in Gwollu, I questioned one about the marks that lined her neck. She had three lines of marks across her neck that almost looked like three necklaces. The marks were very small and were made vertically all the way across the neck. She related to me that she had gotten sick as a young woman and the marks were made “to prevent adam’s apple, or a tumor or growth” from sprouting up on her neck. Similarly, another small girl pulled up her shirt to show me the marks that were cut around her navel, extending like the sun’s rays around her navel. These marks were supposed to prevent the often physically and socially detrimental navel problem of overgrowth when the umbilical chord is cut improperly. The blood surrounding the umbilical is often deemed toxic, and chronic stomach problems are believed to be cured by this use of marking.

After learning of the different ways medical marks are supposed to cure and prevent people, children especially, from illness, I wondered who specifically made the marks. More often, those individuals I spoke with who bore the “Diwie” marks said that a family member, usually his or her grandmother, had given them the marks. If not a grandmother, than perhaps a mother or father would perform the incision. It is a practice and skill passed down throughout the generations, and is not necessarily performed in a traditional clinic, but often right at home.

If a traditional herbalist does make the mark, instead of a family member, he will use a mixture of herbs and tree bark ground-up to make a fine powder that when added to

water, can be inserted into the cut. Shea butter may also be used to stop bleeding and ensure the healing of a mark within a couple of weeks (Bukarra). However, many of the children who receive these marks must return to less traditional clinics for medical treatment, as the convulsions and fever are often signs and symptoms of malaria.

## Chapter IV: Donkor

Along the same line of ideas associated with the medical mark, is the mark for the “child who goes and comes.” This child is called “Kosan.” The kind of mark is also referred to as “Donkor,” and is meant to protect a child from certain death (EO). This kind of mark consists of three horizontal lines extending from beside each eye, and three horizontal lines extending from either side of the mouth, resembling crow’s feet. These marks may be smaller or larger depending on the amount of miscarriages a woman has experienced.

This specific mark is made during infancy after a mother has suffered the loss of one or more stillborn infants. “We believe in reincarnation in the Sissala region, and many other places in Ghana,” Gbemmie explains. So it is thought that the child, who is born after the death of a previous one, has the same spirit. Thus, this child is thought to be “going and coming” in and out of the spiritual realm of ancestors. The subsequent child who is born and does not die, is either given the “Donkor” marks right at birth, or at his or her “outdooring ceremony” (or naming ceremony), eight days after birth. “The closest link between the living and the unborn is the baby,” offers Aunte Naana in the lecture “Festivals in Ghana.” It is important to give the infant eight days before this ceremony to see if the child will stay in this world, or return to the spiritual world, since infant mortality is a big concern (Agyemang PhD).

Face marking in this context often serves as a means to keep the child in the realm of the living, so he or she will not return to the ancestral/ spiritual realm. It is believed

that the marking of the child will make him or her ugly by disfiguring the face. The group of women sellers in Gwollu say that “the ancestors will look at the child and say ‘He doesn’t look like us! Send him back!’” and the child will be sent back to the realm of the living. Further, “Donkor,” means slave, which is a way to mark the child in a way that will enslave him or her in the realm of the living. The ugly name is supposed to also be unappealing to the ancestors. S. Y. Agyemang’s lecture on Traditional Religion also cited this fact: that if there has been a history of infant mortality in the family, then the subsequent child will be given “an ugly name,” like “slave,” to keep him in this world of the living. However, if the child does die, and another child is conceived, this next child will be given more face marks, perhaps much larger and more protruding (EO).

There are sometimes variations in this kind of mark depending on tribe and region. For example, in a particular part of the Sissala region, the Funsì ethnic group uses the mark of an “x” on either cheek to depict the child who goes and comes. On the way back to Wa from Gwollu, I saw a child with an anklet on her right foot. There was a small pouch of herbs attached to the anklet. The mother of the child said that the anklet was used during a ceremony performed by an herbalist to keep the child in the realm of the living. The child bore an “x” on her cheek as well since she was Funsì.



## Chapter V: Tribal Marks

### *Section 1: Why the North?*

As partially discussed earlier, many individuals attribute the origins of tribal marking to the 17<sup>th</sup> century when slave raiding became rampant, even though its origins are ancient. The reason for this discrepancy are understandable when considering the various ways that tribal marking practices were forever changed and made supremely important during this time of turmoil. As Sulley Kupah, the secretary to the Gwollu Paramoncey describes, marking “became very important during slave raiding because people became displaced and families and tribes wanted to be able to find each other and reconnect again when held in captive.” Slave raiders like Babatu and Samori began raiding communities in Ghana, and indeed West Africa, thus the practicing of marking increased tremendously. The reasons for the marks were not only used for identification, but also to bond and retain the roots of one’s specific culture and ancestry after being captured, and possibly escaping (Kupah). Captives were marked by both themselves, as well as by slave raiders attempting to claim ownership on specific captives. Each raider had a specific mark or brand that signified his or her “property.” As B. Bakarewie, a Gwollu elder relates: “if you belonged to a specific clan during slave raiding, the mark allows you to find your people again if you are missing.”

After asking various people in Gwollu why the practice of tribal marking for identification is mostly deemed a Northern custom, I learned that the prevalence of slave raiding in the Northern areas was much more threatening. It is mostly medical marks made in the Southern parts of Ghana, but not as many tribal marks are found there.

According to a couple respondents I spoke to in Wa, like Dramanni, a twenty-nine year old school teacher of French and English, I learned that some Northerners are “more aware of their identity. There is a kind of group unity, whereas the South does not have this. Slave raiding was much worse here.” When one relates the sights of resistance, (like the slave walls in Gwollu, Salaga, and Sankana), it is easy to see why there would be such a sense of ethnic heritage and pride in these parts of the country relating to ancestry and the overcoming of unforeseen obstacles and turbulence. Thus, through the process of tribal marking, it is evident that one’s identity is preserved, passed down, and never forgotten. This could be a large part in why Northerners are known for the practice of marking.

## *Section 2: Family or Tribe?*

Marks made as a means to identify one’s family, tribe, or clan, differ greatly from region to region and ethnic group to ethnic group. Yet the practice cuts across West Africa (and extends into the Northern parts of Nigeria with the Yoruba). The practice of marking is to differentiate between specific tribes so that when they migrate throughout the country, or to other countries, their identities will be clear (Kupah). For example, many individuals living in the Northern Region and the Upper West Region, have migrated from Burkina Faso and retain their specific marks (Bakarewie). Marking also allows many groups living within close proximity to one another to be able to differentiate between themselves, as there are often unwritten rules that forbid those of the same clan or tribe to inter-marry one another.

While many respondents in Gwollu reported that the tribal marks are not given during any specific ceremony or day, others purported that they were often given on the naming day of the baby. During the ceremony, the child is wished to have a healthy life and proverbs are related to the child to always remember to look beyond hypocrisy in the world (Opoku-Agyemang). Then, a respected family member or a *wanzan* herbalist or priest will make the incision with a razor blade.

One woman I spoke within Gwollu, H. Assana from the Dakuibala area, said that at times, an entire extended family will get together on a specific day and all get marks together. It is not part of a ceremony, but even the adults can be a part of the act, bonding the family together through the physical aspect of getting the cut and retaining it for life. This mark can be deemed a “family” *or* a “tribal” mark quite often. Each family mark usually differs in appearance, yet the majority of the people I spoke with in Gwollu who had “family marks,” adorned a mark that extended from the nose, down the cheek, and stopping at the edge of the mouth. Marks by clan, region, or tribe tended to be more complex in design.

While the people in Gwollu have no tribal or regional mark specific to the area, many of the surrounding areas’ populations’ have very specific marks. For example, one group of Sissala (outside Gwollu) adorn two marks on either side of the mouth that extend from the lips outwards towards the jaw and cheek. I. Nasare, a young man from Gwollu, points out that groups like the “Nyimati” and the “Jaffise,” outside the town limits, also readily practice tribal marking with their own specific designs. They each have three marks that extend from the mouth out to the cheeks and the jaw. “You will see that they all have these marks,” he offers. Even though the line between “family” and

“tribal” mark is not well defined, especially based on the communal nature of what it means to be a “family” in Ghana, it seems that marks within a family are all made by one specific person or family member to all the rest. In addition, family marks usually differ simply by the way the individual defines the mark for him or herself. If the mark identifies oneself with a tribe, clan, or region, (and this is a conscious unity), then the mark is a tribal mark, but the meaning is really left up to the individual bearer.

### *Section 3: Wa: Chieftaincy Disputes, Stereotypes, and Struggle*

Upon reaching Wa, a whole new world of tribal markings was opened up to me. The schoolteacher, Dramanni, was able to help me in most of my research, as he was very knowledgeable about the divergent marks in the region. He first told me of the Mossi ethnic group in Wa. This group migrated from the Upper-East Region and settled in Wa, while others went to Burkina Faso. The group is made up of the landowners, the royal family, and the scholars. In the past, each group had its own specific mark, yet the mark of the royal family is the one that has endured time the most. This mark consists of three lines starting near the jaw line and tracing the shape of the face up to the temples of the head. The marks in the Mossi ethnic group have started to fade away in practice and are not widely made any longer, but the royal family in Wa is still very visible to an outsider. When walking around Wa, I began to see random individuals bearing these huge marks all the way down their faces: three on either side. Dramanni too acquires these marks. The manner in which the Mossi people marked themselves shows a kind of caste or class system can be literally marked onto the faces of certain ethnic groups,

serving to keep certain people in particular social positions. The royalty marks in Wa, no matter one's ethnic group, serve this very purpose. The three large marks are also present in Tamale and can be a signal of region, yet mostly used to show chieftain descent.

I want to relate some of the political consequences and personal consequences a particular resident of Wa related to me of having the larger, protruding, "royalty" marks. Dramanni was nice enough to share his delicate story with me of being marked, as well as the implications it has had in his life. When he was very young, about one week old, his grandmother gave him the marks herself. No one else had gotten the marks in his family, but since he was "the last born, she said I had to get them because one child had to be marked as royalty. It is a mark of kingship." Upon asking Dramanni how he perceived the marks, or if he liked them, his response served as a catalyst for a myriad of new issues I'd never considered.

"I never liked the marks," he replies. "They put me in the line of the chieftain disputes." He went on to explain the rampant fighting and the way the Northern region has been blighted by chieftain disputes for years and years. The reasons for this vary, but are often centralized on ownership of land and authority positions. Traditionally, ownership of the land has been claimed by lineage. Property is obtained through transitory proprietorship through matrilineal heredity. A chief may also grant someone land after a war or battle. Yet land in the North is becoming scarcer as the introduction of new cash crops is beginning to take over larger plots of land. During the dry season, many fights erupt because people must then scramble for another means of making money (IRIN).

The economics in the North are poorer because the bigger factories go down South to the coastal, more urban areas. The regional inequality has only increased since the 1990's, as well as the gap between the people who live in these areas: Christians in the South, Muslims in the North. There is much less investment in the Northern Region of Ghana which leads to more struggle for land and power, especially since the aid of the government is quite scarce.

One of the biggest chieftain disputes took place in 2002 and is known as the Dagbon conflict, erupting in Yendi. The paramount chief was murdered along with 40 other followers. Similarly, in Bimbilla, 1994-5, some 65km away from Yendi, a sparked conflict over the chieftaincy left 200 people dead, over 400 villages destroyed, and 2000,000 people displaced (IRIN). Again in Bimbilla, this year, 2007, violence erupted. The fights are often among political party lines: the New Patriotic Party (NPP) versus the National Democratic Congress (NDC). Being marked can give away your political party if you are from a region predominantly known as NDC or NPP, thus often making it hard to avoid violence (EO).

Further, "Many young men often run away if they are in the line of being chief because they have a different future planned. They will run away for about a year if they must, until the new chief is put on the stool" reports Dramanni. This causes even more dispute. "There were gunshots here in 1981, 2001, and 2004 regarding the chieftaincy." Since Dramanni bears the kingship marks, his life is plagued by being constantly pulled into this dispute of lineage, not only by his community, but also by his direct family who saw a certain future for him, as he is the only one who bears the marks in the family.

Additionally, with all this unrest mostly presiding in the Northern Region, Dramanni's marks act negatively for him whenever he travels. The violent stereotypes of the North are always projected onto him when he travels, especially when going down South. "Because of prejudice, they say you are from the bush, that I am primitive. And I cannot find a job because they'll say I am unfit to work! There are stereotypes of the Northern parts of many countries: Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo. It is said civil wars break out because of the Northerners always, but it's not true!" The negativity, threats, and prejudice experienced in Dramanni's life are often a result of three simple marks on either side of his face. He confessed that he would never mark his children and is glad that the practice is dying out and is illegal. "They stopped that a long time ago because of prejudice," he adds.

I spoke similarly with another Wa-la prince, Aziz, who did not happen to bear the three marks of royalty. This man was born in Wa, but is a road contractor and must travel for work. "I am a prince, but do not bear the marks, so you'd never know. You see, I should have them, but my father said no!" he tells me. "I travel every month or more. I schooled in Cairo, Egypt for six years. I travel so often that I don't consider myself to have a home. Home is anywhere you feel free. With the marks, it would be much harder to travel, so I'm glad I don't have them. I would never want them. No one assumes of me... Sometimes they say you are less civilized with the big marks." Aziz's ability to feel free anywhere, whereas Dramanni's experience is often of dejection and confinement, showed me a whole new political issue that may arise for an individual bearer of these marks. I was fascinated, and I knew I'd stumbled across a very important bit of

knowledge relating to the reasons why tribal marking is starting to become less of a tradition in certain sectors of the population.



## Chapter VI: The Law

After speaking with many individuals in Wa, Tamale, Gwollu, and Cape Coast, I found that many told me tribal marking and scarring were illegal. In Gwollu, however, many people either did not know about the law at all, or referred to genital mutilation when I brought it up. I was intrigued, yet confused at the link between tribal marking and genital mutilation, but quite excited to find out why so many women brought up the topic in conversation. I could find little literature on the topic, yet I did find a vague law enacted by President Rawlings in 1989 against “harmful traditional practices.” Under a report from the U.S. Department of State, prepared by the Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, Office of the Under Secretary for Global Affairs, Department of State, June 2001, I found the legal status associated with “cutting” of any kind, which includes both genital mutilation, and also face and body marking or cutting. This is the report:

*Legal Status:*

*In 1989, the head of the Government of Ghana, President Rawlings, issued a formal declaration against FGM/FGC and other harmful traditional practices.*

***Article 39 of Ghana’s constitution provides in part that traditional practices that are injurious to a person’s health and well-being are abolished.***

*In 1994, Parliament amended the Criminal Code of 1960 to include the offense of FGM/FGC. This Act inserted Section 69A that states:*

*"(1) Whoever excises, infibulates or otherwise mutilates the whole or any part of the labia minora, labia majora and the clitoris of another person commits an offense and shall be guilty of a second degree felony and liable on conviction to imprisonment of not less than three years.*

- 1. For the purposes of this section 'excise' means to remove the prepuce, the clitoris and all or part of the labia minora; 'infibulate' includes excision (Type II) and the additional removal of the labia majora."*

In speaking with N. Mumuni and T. Linedsu of Gwollu, the two women turned to me and asked *me* a question: “Isn’t genital mutilation just another type of mark?” I was confused: What do they mean by this? Then they went on to tell me that the law prohibiting tribal marking must be in relation to this practice of genital mutilation, because both practices do not necessarily give the receiver a chance to consent, they are permanent, and they may lead to complications like physical damage. “It isn’t right to mark or cut anyone anywhere,” says Linedsu. I was so surprised to hear that this was a shared sentiment among many of the women I interviewed. Many brought up the issue of genital mutilation and circumcision.

The medical complications with marking can be avoided, but often take place if the tools used in marking are not cleaned properly, or if the giver of the marks makes a cut too deep or without care. Linedsu claims that if the cut is created without attention, one might lose a lot of blood and become anemic, or possibly even die, especially as a newborn. Other complications include tetanus, HIV infection, or other disease from an uncleaned razor blade. In addition, keloids, larger and protruding growths that result from scarring, may occur. They are very painful, and even when treated often come back and last for life as large and unappealing growths. For all of these medical reasons, it is assumed that the practice of tribal marking falls under *Article 39* of Ghana’s constitution.

In Ekiti State, Nigeria, I found that there is a law against tribal marking due to children’s rights. In *Guardian Newspapers*, the article “Ekiti Bans Tattoo, Tribal Marks,” reports that the state governor, Ayo Fayose, stresses the importance that “the future of the Nigerian child must not be toyed with. Every effort must be made to secure the means for a secure future for children and the protection of their rights from such practices.” Some

responses to this regulation were quite positive. One respondent commented that: “ethnic scarification used to play a big role in pre-colonial West African societies. In the modern world, that role is meaningless. The child should not have to go through the ridicule in life because of a mark put on him or her in which s/he had no part in deciding” (Sayo).

In Gwollu and elsewhere, I had an array of mixed responses when talking about this and other laws regarding tribal marking and cutting. Surprisingly to me, many said that they were glad that the practice is dying out, and that it is bad to mark anyone. The responses from Dramanni and Aziz in Wa also supported this sentiment against marking. However, another group of people had very mixed feeling about any regulation against a cultural tradition passed down through the generations. For instance, to W. Haara of the Wulijua region in Gwollu, marking is a tradition that can be very important to any family. “The medical marks should be ok to do, but I’m not sure about the tribal marks. In the case of tribal and family marks, if most people in the family have them, and then they suddenly have to stop the practice, those who come later in the family will not be able to have marks. I’m not sure how they would feel if they could not bear the marks of their family. This is where the law is bad,” she explains. Indeed, another man I spoke with from the Nadabala section of Gwollu, H. Mama, told me that he once had a family mark on his left cheek, but it disappeared soon after it healed. The rest of his siblings adorn the marks on their left cheeks. He wishes his was still there and “would have liked it if they had marked him again.” This kind of response illustrates the difficult nature of a law that forbids a practice so central to a family, ethnic, and ancestral identity.

In the case of the medical mark, which is still the most widely used mark, many individuals had complaints about its illegality. A. B. Samboribala of Gwollu says that

“sometimes the law *must* be disobeyed. When a child is sick and goes to the medical center, and doesn’t get better, you must use the traditional way. You inject medicine into the cut. What are we to do if not to cut?” The ritual belief is that such a mark can protect against illness and death, so is a person supposed to live with the mental torture of supposing his or her child might die? Or does s/he disobey the government, which does not seem to provide adequate healthcare anyway, and create a mark? As I see the prevalence of medical marks all over the country, I cannot help but see that this *is* an important traditional practice. I also see the shortcomings of the healthcare system through speaking with respondents who claim that the “*only* choice” is to cut a mark on a child. Blessed, a resident of Cape Coast, also sees the medical mark as a means to identify him with his beloved Ghanaian roots, although he grew up in Germany. Blessed says that when he first moved back to Ghana from Europe, they “called me ‘Oboroni,’ but after seeing my mark, they understood: I am a Ghanaian! ...Tourists have impacted the dying of the practice... Christianity as well,” notes Blessed. As the Southern parts of Ghana become more influenced by European and American “Western” powers, the traditional practices die out. “It is very sad,” expresses Blessed. And yet, the marks are still made in families who deem themselves Muslim and Christian, so it is, as Blessed articulates, “one way, in the face of change and diversity, to keep traditional culture alive.” In light of this, the law against marking becomes quite controversial.

Where the situation gets more confusing, is the fact that the law does not seem to be overly effective, present, or even in the body of knowledge of most Ghanaians with which I spoke. In Gwollu, most of the women I spoke with did not even know a law existed suggesting anything about tribal marks or cutting. A few minority respondents did

however tell me that the law was certainly a tangible reason why the practice of scarring has begun to fade out of Ghanaian culture. In relation to genital mutilation again, in the report by the Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, Office of the Under Secretary for Global Affairs, Department of State, the law is deemed difficult to regulate. The information lies herein:

*Ghana protects an unwilling woman or girl against the practice, but there is little real protection to turn to in many rural areas. All levels of government have come out strongly against this practice. Advocacy groups work to eradicate it. There is a history of enforcement against those who practice or threaten to practice FGM/FGC. There are indigenous NGOs and watchdog committees throughout the country who are prepared to intervene and have stopped practitioners by going to the police when necessary. **However, their reach does not extend to many remote communities.** The police are willing to and have cooperated to stop this practice from happening, but the ability of police to respond to remote communities in a timely or effective manner is severely limited.*

When considering this statement, the levels of education on certain laws, as well as the ability to implement these laws in certain areas, whether it be against either traditional practice: tribal marking or genital mutilation, is quite difficult (and in some cases completely unrealistic). I have not found any conclusive knowledge about the law against tribal marking and how exactly it works (or doesn't work), or is implemented in different regions. In speaking with all of my kind and willing interviewees however, I gained a deeper understanding of why such a law might be a good regulation indeed, yet also the implications it might have to stamp out the origins of traditional culture and where the importance of keeping ancestral practices alive might overpower a good regulation.

## Conclusions, the Future of Scarring, and Future Research

Tribal marking and scarification are deeply personal and sensitive topics. Marks are for life and are part of a unique West African tradition passed down throughout the centuries from ancient times. Most of the individuals I spoke with in divergent regions in Ghana told me the practice of marking was a dying one. This is due to new and different means of communication that are arising in a budding age of globalization. People now have new and different ways to identify themselves and one another. Formal education is also tangibly transforming the way people see marks and relate to their roots, which adds to the diminishing quantity of tribal marks (Blessed).

Most of the respondents I spoke with agreed that if their children ever grew sick, they would absolutely give them medical marks. However, when asked about tribal marks, the response was often quite different. There was an array of people who said that they would not give their children tribal or family marks at all, even though they themselves bore the marks. The reasons for this can be attributed to new laws, to the changing times, to globalization, neo-colonialism, and the fading of tradition culture in a world filled with new technologies.

Further, in this budding age of democracy in Ghana, “it is important not to be marked,” notes the education officer from Elmina. When a Northerner comes to the South, he is often ridiculed or viewed staunchly as an outsider, which goes hand and hand with the historical ridicule one receives with “Donkor” markings and markings of social “rank.” “We want to be able to move around more,” expresses the school teacher, “we want to travel more without being marked as someone. People can also assume you

belong to one political party when they see your marks,” he adds. This concern fits in perfectly with the rioting and NPP versus NDC disputes throughout Ghana, as well as the Northern chieftain disputes. Putting oneself in a particular group with a mark is not desirable for physical or emotion safety in an age where people desire upward mobility.

As E. M. Wright points out, the marks can be detrimental to one’s ability to be trusted or respected in certain spaces. He offers me the information: “I know a woman from the North. She now works as a police officer in the Central Region. When she first came down here with her large marks, she was ridiculed. In her line of work, she was also looked as suspicious because she was so visibly a Northerner. And a Northerner policing the Southerners is strange and suspect. So she got plastic surgery. She got the fat from another part of her body injected into her scars to fill them out. This way she could not look as much like a Northerner and be in her line of work without as much harassment.”

Thus, the tribal markings may be viewed as a means of social and physical confinement to some, while to other individuals; the marks are a means of tribal and communal solidarity. However, to explore these findings, I would need to do many more interviews, travel to many different parts of Ghana, and even travel to different parts of West Africa to understand how the bearers of these marks view themselves.

The school teacher continues with his viewpoint that the marks are detrimental by his own experience. He tells me of his father’s negative experience in relation to his marks. He notes that “my dad is from Niger, but was naturalized as a Ghanaian, so it is hard for him to go back and forth between these places to see family because he is marked a certain way.” This issue brings to the forefront the idea of movement, migration, and immigration in this new age of democracy. It has become important to

many individuals to seek to integrate themselves into the new age of communication, travel, and personal economic growth.

Whether or not tribal marks can affect a person positively or negatively depends very much upon an individual's personal belief system and life experience. I personally have no right or knowledge that allows me to tell if any law should or should not be in place to prevent these marks. However, in speaking with a wide array of people in Ghana, I was able to come to a much deeper understanding of why these marks are made and what significance they have personally, as well as externally and politically. With all the mixed opinions I encountered, I cannot concretely say I know what will happen to the tradition of tribal and medical marking in the future, but it does seem that the practice is a slowly dying one. This may very well be due to medical risks, government regulations, social prejudice, neo-colonialism and "Western influence," and an array of other factors. Whatever the main reason may be, there are certainly still many people who perform the act of tribal and face scarring in Ghana, as well as the whole of West Africa.

During my Independent Study Project, I learned more than I ever thought possible about the topic of marking, as well as Ghanaian culture as a whole. The people with which I was able to interact amazed me with their knowledge, enthusiasm, and will to aid me in my search for knowledge. In the future, there is much more to be studied in the way of this topic since there is little literature to be found, or else it is not readily available. The ways in which scarring was transformed as a tradition and practice during slave raiding times should be looked into much more in depth. I would like to know in what regard the practice was altered, how Africans' attitudes changed towards the marks, and if they became much more of a symbol of pride after the slave raiding period. A more



in-depth look at these issues and the metamorphosis of the physical position of the marks of certain ethnic groups might also help trace migration patterns of particular peoples throughout West Africa during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, before, and beyond. Through this lens, one might also wish to study how the effect of the trans-Atlantic slave trade impacted tribal marking and why the practice did not seem to carry over into the Americas, or most of the African cultures in the Diaspora.

Further, after speaking with E. M. Wright about the woman who obtained plastic surgery to remove her marks, I think a good deal of research could be done in this area. Obtaining more information about what clinics do this procedure, when the procedure started being offered, and how often it is done, would be quite helpful and deeply interesting as a means to find out how socially detrimental certain marks can be for certain people. In this same frame of thought, the North-South economic and social divide needs to be regarded critically, as it may add to the social stigma associated with tribal marks in the North. Further researched about how regulations are being enforced over tribal marking, and if they are necessary, effective, or desirable to the people of Ghana, must also be investigated. There is so much to be uncovered in the way of tribal marking in West Africa, yet with the practice diminishing, it is also expected that the orature passed down surrounding its significance will diminish; making this topic one that may lie in obscurity for much time.

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