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# The Meanings Behind the Marks: Scarification and the People of Wa

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# **The Meanings Behind the Marks: Scarification and the People of Wa**

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Independent Study Project  
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CADS, Spring 1998

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Coming to Ghana to live and study for three and a half months has been a wonderful experience for me. “Crossroads of the African Diaspora,” has revealed a history to me that is not taught in the US. “A History” that has not only shaped and changed the Continent of Africa but the whole world. The history of both the indigenous and Transatlantic slave trade, is a history that can not be ignored or forgotten because its effects can still be seen in the world today, especially on the continent of Africa. It is this history, of Slavery that should and must be taught to all students, no matter race, to understand the world we live in today and to stop another human catastrophe from occurring in the future. I greatly thank Naana and Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang for opening my eyes, by not only teaching me but showing me this history and its effects.

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## **ABSTRACT**

My research on scarification took place in Wa, the capital of the Upper West Region of Ghana. By interviewing some of the different ethnic groups in Wa, I came to understand the varying purposes scarification serves. Additionally, I discovered some of the culture beliefs, values and myths of the Wala people. The following report looks into four main aspects of scarification: marks of identification, medicine, protection, and decoration. Furthermore, it investigates the impacts of the slave trade on the practice of tribal marking. Lastly, this paper will describe current opinions and the future implications of the practice of scarification in Wa.

## METHODOLOGY

My research was based entirely on interviews and observations of the people of Wa. I sought to learn as much as possible about the different forms of scarification present in Wa by interviewing the various ethnic groups living within the Wa area. I was able to interview four different ethnic groups: Balumae, Mossi, Dagbanbas, and Sisala's. Though I had objectives for each interview, the structure was open ended. This allowed my interviewees, whom were often the elders of the community, to talk openly and freely leading the discussion in whatever direction they wanted. All the ethnic groups were interviewed twice. During the course of the two interviews the following objectives were met:

- Background information-place of origin, reasons for migrating
- Start of Tribal Marking-Where and why, and what time frame (if possible)
- Changes of Tribal Mark as a result of migration or social change – pictures or drawings of each.
- Impact of slave trade on tribal marks
- The prevalence of tribal marks in the North as compared to the South
- Gender differences
- Medicinal Marks-reasons for, myths or belief associated with such marks, techniques used, medicine used (3 main areas-bird, stomach, the child who comes and goes)
- Marks of Protection
- Marks of Decoration
- Future outlook on the practice of scarification.

In addition to interviewing the elders of the Balumae, Mossi, Dagbanbas, and Sisala ethnic groups, I interviewed two Wanzans, one herbalist, one professional nurse, and four residents of Wa. The following is a list of objectives for each of these interviews.

Wanzan objectives:

- Training
- Years of experience
- Techniques used, i.e. equipment and ointments
- Method of payment

Herbalist objectives:

- Training
- Years of experience

- Marks for medicine purposes and procedure
- Herbs and ointments used for scarification
- Method of payment

Nurse objectives:

- Training and years of experience
- Opinion of healthcare profession on scarification
- Health implications for seeking treatment via herbalist verse hospital or clinic
- Community healthcare education
- Future outlook on scarification

Residents of Wa (young, adults, ranging from 18 to 35)

- Personal opinion dealing with scarification, by means of indirect questions such as
  - Will you give your won children tribal marks or treat illness through scarification?
- Level of education
- Future outlook of scarification

I was very lucky to have a translator who is an active member of the Wa community. With Ibrahim by my side, I as able to quickly gain entry into the different ethnic groups within Wa. Additional, Ibrahim was able to set up interviews for me with community members and ethnic groups he knew would be helpful to my research. Though not understanding any of the languages or dialects spoken in Wa could be seen as a major limitation of my research, my report with Ibrahim allowed the language barrier to be of little significance. Ibrahim actually often reminded me of questions I had forgotten to ask. Further, he knew what terminology to use and the way to phrase questions to my various interviewees better than I, an outsider, did. As a result, my research in Wa went smoothly and I gathered the pertinent information in relatively little time.

However, there are still many factors that limited my research on scarification. Time and money constitute the bulk of my limitation. If I had both more time and money it would have been nice to travel to another region to compare my research findings.

Additionally, it would have been nice if I could have stayed longer in Wa. First, because of the controversy and confusion surrounding the instilment of the New Chief or Na, I was unable to interview the elders of the Royal House and as a result feel that my research in Wa is incomplete. Secondly, it would have been extremely interesting and beneficial to my research if I was able to witness a naming ceremony, during which the new member of the community would be given his or her tribal marks.

## REVIEW OF PAST WORKS

There is not an abundance of literature dealing with scarification but if one looks long and hard a couple of helpful resources can be found. Capt. R.S. Rattray's books, Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland, (Vols. I and II) briefly describes the tribal marks of various ethnic groups of the Ashanti Hinterland and often includes pictures of these tribal marks. Capt. R.S. Rattray claims that the value of tribal marks among the northern territories for identification purposes is now a "somewhat uncertain criterion by which to judge such matters (marks)." He blames this upon the slave raiders (Kazare, father of Babatu, and their henchmen – Ali Mori, Izaka, Bahei-Bisibisi and others) who terrorized the various ethnic groups in the northern territories into hiding. Rattray claims that when these slave raiders captured various people they were accustomed to mark their captives with their own tribal (Zabama) marks.<sup>1</sup> This was done to distinguish the captives of different slave raiders. As a result, among certain ethnic groups, particularly the "Isala's", tribal markings came to have little significance.<sup>2</sup>

Another author, Peter Barker of People, Languages, and Religion in Northern Ghana, wrote about evidence indicating that tribal marks were given by slave raiders to their captives. In his book, Barker included an excerpt from Heinrich Klose's book, Klose's Journey to Northern Ghana published in 1894. Klose wrote,

Naturally, slaves are carefully hidden from whites, but the various tribal marks of young carriers, boys and girls, shows that they have come with the big caravans as slaves.<sup>3</sup>

Not only would slave raiders' tribal marks allow raiders to distinguish their own slaves but such markings would identify an escaped slave. Though domestic slaves were often treated as members of the family and could rise to positions of authority within a community, one with slave ancestry could never become a chief. Therefore, these types of marks would serve as a constant reminder to not only the holder of such marks but to all who see him of his past history and enslavement. Even today, with slavery long ago abolished, (legally in 1807 by Britain and in the indigenous system of slavery in 1908) one's slave ancestry can be used to defame one's character or to cause public ridicule.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rattray, Capt. R.S. Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1932), p. 329

<sup>2</sup> Rattray, p. 514

<sup>3</sup> Barker, Peter. People, Languages, and Religion in Northern Ghana: (published by Ghana evangelism committee in association with Asempa Publishers, 1986), p.40.

<sup>4</sup> Perbi, Akosua. "The Legacy of Indigenous Slavery in Contemporary Ghana," (Fass Bulletin, 1996) p.83-91.



As a result of discovering this new information I decided to investigate if anyone in Wa knew if or about slave raiders marking those they captured. As you will read in the pages to follow, the ethnic groups I interviewed in Wa (Balumae, Mossi, Dagbanbas strongly contented that tribal marks were started and practiced as a means of identifying one's ethnic group before slave raiding began. They claimed that indeed slave raiding increased the rate at which tribal marking was practiced and the significance of them. Markings of identification were one of the only means by which one could retrace his roots or unit with members from his own ethnic group. They did not recall or believe that slave raiders marked their captives but admitted that it was possible that the new master, slave owner, could give his slave his own tribal mark to show ownership.

Lastly, Araba (Davis) Mills' thesis, "Body Art and Its Religious Implication among the Western Fante," has a large section on the scarification among the Western Fante people and includes pictures of the different marks researched. Though Araba's thesis dealt with scarification in the southern part of Ghana, her research provided me with a knowledgeable understanding of scarification before I stepped out into the field to do my own research.

### *The Meanings Behind the Marks: Scarification and the People of Wa*

## INTRODUCTION

Scarification is a unique feature of West African culture and can be seen not only on the faces and bodies of West Africans but through their various works of art, such as poems, short stories, terra-cotta figurines, artistic wooden masks and carvings.<sup>5</sup> Presently, on display at Cape Coast Castle, are terra-cotta figurines of the "Koma Culture" found in the Sisili-Kulpawan Valleys in Northern Ghana. Facial scarification is present on some of these figurines which date back between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, scarification can be found on the bronze terra-cotta figurines of the Ile Ife culture of Western Nigeria. These date back between 100 A.D to the 1600's.<sup>7</sup>

In order to understand the prevalence of scarification in different art forms and to come to identify the marks on the various people of West Africa as something much more meaningful than just scars or random marks, I spent the remainder of my time in Ghana researching scarification.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Professor Anquandah, Archeology Dept. at the University of Ghana, Legon 13 April 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Cape Coast Castle Museum, 30 March 1998

<sup>7</sup> Anquandah, 13 April, 1998

As an outsider from the US, scarification was an unknown practice and while the meaning were unknown to me at first, I always felt that there had to be significant reasons for one to mark their body permanently. By investigating scarification, I theorized that would learn more about some of the beliefs, values and myths present in Ghana. Knowledge of which, I simply could not have learn by reading a book or even briefly living in Ghana.

Slowly, I started to realize that there are many different reasons for scarification, the most popular being for identification, health, protection, and decoration. However, this is a practice that is fading away and therefore not dominant in every region of Ghana. I decided to conduct my research, dependent mainly on interviews, in the Northern area of Ghana, basically because this is where I was told scarification was most prevalent. I set out to Wa, the capital of the Upper West Region of Ghana, with the following questions to research and understand:

1. When did the practice of scarification start and why?
2. What are the various reasons for scarification? What meanings to they hold for the people who take part in this practice? What cultural beliefs, values, and myths associated with these marks?
3. Is there a special time when certain marks are given?
4. Is there a specialist who does these marketing?
5. why is the northern part of Ghana more well known for scarification? (For example, why do most people associate scarification with the north) Is there a significant historical reason for eh prevalence of scarification in the North?
6. what effect did the slave trade had on scarification?
7. why is the practice of scarification diminishing
8. what is the present opinion of scarification among Ghanaian young adults and what does this mean for the continuation of the practice of scarification into the future?

I have learned over the past month, that cultural traditions and historic events are often not remembered by everyone in the same way. Therefore the researcher, as well as, a reader of oral history, has to continually search for new truths and discoveries through differing stories and memories of the past. This paper on scarification is just a brief investigation in to the practice of scarification in Wa. It deals primarily with the memories of the elders of the differing ethnic groups of Wa. It by no means is representative of all reasons for and meanings of scarification. Infact, I challenge others to find other “truths” to this finding cultural practice.

Author's note: for the following report, the term scarification will be used in reference to all types of marks (identification, health, protection, decoration). While the terms tribal mark will be used in reference to marks of identification only.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Tribal Marks**

The people of Wa are a conglomerate of various ethnic groups. For this reason I was able to research the tribal marks of four different ethnic groups: Balymae, Mossi, Dagbanbas, and Sisala. Tribal marks served for all of these groups to be marks of identification, indicating one's ethnic background and at times, the ethnic groups historical migrational pattern. All the ethnic groups presently living in Wa have origins outside of Wa, part of the Upper East and Northern Region. When these groups eventually settled in Wa, for reasons of agriculture and trade of kola, they brought with them the practice of scarification.

Therefore, as these groups traveled they kept their identity with them. Three out of four ethnic groups claimed that the reason why tribal marks started was to differentiate between various ethnic groups that levied within close proximity to each other and to distinguished status groups within a singular ethnic group. For example, the elders of the Mossi ethnic group claimed that Chief Naabawugdi, the Chief of the elders of the Mossi people while lived in the present day areas of Burkina Faso, invented the idea of marking to distinguish the various status groups within the Mossi ethnic group.<sup>8</sup>

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 mark. 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.<sup>9</sup>

Also at his time, as the practice is in Wa, the baby's head is shaved because the hair is believed to be dirty and circumcision takes places. The *wanzan* is the name of the specialist who performs the tribal markings, shaving, and circumcision.<sup>10</sup> It is only right, that as the child is formally recognized and welcomed into this world by being named, that he is also indoctrinated into his ethnic group by being given his tribal marks.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mossi elders, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1998

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Seidu Gobewura, 21 April 1998

<sup>10</sup> Gobewura, 21 April 1998

## **Balumae Ethnic Groups**

The Balumae's, originally from Nalerigu of northern Ghana, were the first settlers of Wa. They did not settle in Wa as result of tribal wars but because they sought to learn more about the surrounding areas. They liked the land of Wa, settled and started establishing present day Wa.

The tribal mark of the Balumae people is a set of three lines. The significance of these three lines to the Balumae people is that the number 3 is their sacred number; perhaps signifying eternity. These three lines can be found on the face, forearms, upper arms, chest, stomach, thighs, and shins. These marks are always on both the right and left side of the body. For example, on both the right and left arm and leg. The elders of the Balumae community in Wa can be seen with these tribal marks on each of the body parts listed above (see figure 1).

Recently, as a result of education and people's personal preferences tribal marks within the Balumae community have diminished. Currently, if children are not given tribal marks on their face or other body parts, the community is trying to make sure babies are still given their tribal mark on the stomach. This mark can be covered up by clothing and thus does not take away from the appearance of the face. (figure 2).

## **The Mossi Ethnic Group**

The Mossi community is believed to originally come from Gambaga of the Upper East Region. They then migrated to areas now in Burkina Faso in the 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century or as they put it, "before the whites were present in Ghana. Members of the Mossi ethnic group eventually settled in Wa as a result of selling kola.

Within the Mossi community are three different groups: the Tendambas (landowners). Royal Family, and Yivisi (muslim scholars). Originally, the Royal Family and the Tendambas each had their own tribal marks while the Yivisi never had any. Though, in this way, the Yivisi can still be identified as the Muslim scholars because they are the only group without any markings.

The Royal Family's tribal mark consists of three lines which start near the jaw line and trace the shape of the face to the other side of the mouth. Additionally, a diagonally mark is made on the left cheek for males and on the left cheek for females. Once members of the Mossi Royal Family came to settle in Wa, they also received tribal marks. However, these future generations were not given the exact markings. Those born in Wa are only given the mark given on the left or right cheek depending on gender. (Figure 3). As a result of this change it is possible to tell where certain members of the Mossi Royal Family are from.

The tribal mark of the Tandambas are similar to those of Royal Family except the mark on the cheek is on both the left and right cheeks. Today, the descendants of the Tandambas no longer receive tribal marks. The reason given for this was social change; the passing of time, the changing of ideas as a result of western education.

### **The Dagbanba Ethnic Group**

The Dagbanba people migrated purposely from Savelugu in the Northern Region of Ghana to Wa to make a living through trade or agriculture. The practice of tribal marking started in the Savelugu for reasons of identification. The Dagbanba ethnic group had several different tribal marks to identify the different Dagbanba clans or families. Many of these markings are no longer practices. Today, the tribal mark which has survived years of migration and social changes is made up of small, short vertical lines on both cheeks. These vertical lines can number from one to four. The amount of lines given is determined by one's parents. (Figure 4).

### **The Sisala Ethnic Group**

The Sisala ethnic group also claimed to be originally from Nalerigu. The Sisala people migrated creating settlements in Kundugu, Finsi, and Kadgu Kperi before some members eventually settled in Wa. The Chief of the Sisala people in Wa, Alhaji Issah Abdulai, as the only man to specifically cite the event of the slave trade as starting the practice of tribal markings. He stated that the slave trade created the need for markings of identification. As Alhaji Issah Abdulai explained it, tribal markings resulted by various ethnic when the slave raiding of Babatu and Samori threatened their unity and solidarity.

Sisala people started the practices of tribal marking for identification purposes so that if unfortunately one was captured and taken away, his/her identity would forever remain intact. It was hoped that these tribal markings would help one identify other members of community that were captured. Additionally, these marks could be used to retrace one's roots, to return home.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of the different Sisala settlements created, there are several different tribal marks among the Sisala people. One of the Sisala tribal marks present in Wa, is that of the members from the Finsi settlement. The tribal mark for the Finsi people is a long mark coming down from the nose over the cheek. For males it is on the left cheek. For females its on the right cheek and said to be of the same size though I did observed some female Finsi members having a particularly shorter mark. (Figure 5).

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Alhaji Issah Abdulai. 20 April 1998

## **The Wanzan**

As mentioned earlier, the wanzan is the specialist who deals with tribal marks which are given during naming ceremony which official welcomes the baby not only into the world but into his ethnic group. The two wanzans I interviewed were both males, however, a wanzan can be of either gender. Infact, the elders of Mossi ethnic group stated the their wanzans in Burkina Faso were always females.

The knowledge and marking techniques of the wanzans are passed down from one generation to the next. Both wanzans in Wa claimed to have been taught by their fathers. One wanzan, Seidu Gobewura, even filled me in on how his grandfather came to become a wanzan. He told me that infact his grandfather was born with a knife in his hand. When he became out enough he took that knife and begin the practice of circumcision and pass his knowledge on to Seidu's father who finally pass it on to him. However, Seidu was not willing to pass his knowledge of the herbs used healing tribal marks onto me. I guess you have to a member of the family!

When asked how Seidu takes care of his tools to avoid passing on germs or certain diseases, I was told that a traditional belief is that the wanzan's tools can not transmit diseases. Whethere Seidu does or does not clean his tools I am not sure. Possible he was just trying to amuse me with African myths and beliefs. However, this does lead to the health concerns of scarification.

Dealing with the health concerns of scarification I interviewed Hajia Mariama Adama. Her main concerns were the spread of infections, keloids, and excessive bleeding. Infections can quickly spread if unsterilize equipment is used to make incisions. One inferction she cited as resulting form bacteria left on tools was tetanus. A mark that is made too deep may result in an overgrowth called a keloid. Keloids are very painful and though they can be treated in the hospital the overgrowth tends to come back. If excessive blessing results from scarification one may develop anemia.<sup>12</sup> However, both the wanzans and herbalist claimed to have a remedy to stop the bleeding caused by the marks they make.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Hajia Mariama Adama, 23 April 1998

## Chapter II

### Impacts of Slavery on Tribal Marks

While tribal marks may not have started as a result of slavery, as the majority of my respondents claimed, the slave trade or rather slave raiding is responsible for the continuation and dominance of this practices throughout, not only Northern Ghana but possible all of West Africa. It seems that then slave raiders, such as Babatu and Samori, actively started raiding, the practice of tribal markings increased tremendously. By the late 1800's, tribal markings became highly important not only for ethnic identification but because they allowed one to retain their roots even if they were captured and taken into slavery. Once taken into bondage, tribal marks allowed slaves to unite with other members of their ethnic group who had been captured. Additionally, if one was set free or escaped tribal marks were a helpful means to retracing one's roots, for many it was their only means.

The prevalence of tribal marking in the North, was related by my respondents, to the dominant presence of slave raiding. The chief of the Sisala people in Wa, Alhaji Issah Abdulai, claimed that where there has been as much slave raiding, tribal marks are not as visible and cited the southern part of Ghana as an example.<sup>13</sup> Other respondents spoke of Northerners being more conscious of their identity then those in the South. It seems that as a result of slave raiders consistently threatening a community's solidarity, unity, and security, Northerners became more conscious of their identity and developed a great pride in their ethnic heritage and community.<sup>14</sup> Through the practice of tribal markings, Northerners showed that they were not only conscious of their identity but more concerned in keeping their identity.

### *Concluding Remarks on Tribal Marks: What Remains*

What remains is just the surface, just a result of forgotten times, a continent robbed of its resources, of its young. Though the practice of tribal marking may not have started because of slavery, the practice became most well known as a result of this event. The importance of what these marks symbolized was changed forever by the slave trade which tore families apart. No longer did these marks serve as a symbol of one's ethnic pride or group solidarity but as one's roots, to the past, to one's original home and family. Perhaps for many, the only native part of them that remained intact.

When I took at these today what I see is pride, pride in one's origins, one's roots. But what another might see are the marks of slavery, what tore this continent apart. All one was left

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<sup>13</sup> Abdulai, 20 April 1998



with were marks to retrace his history, to return home to find one's real roots. For this reason tribal marks will always have a deeper meaning than ethnic pride or identification, because they enable you to return home. If this isn't possible, well than you will be forever marked. Your true identity unknown to the world but not to you.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Balumae ethnic group, 25 April 1998

## Chapter III

### Medicinal Marks

Just as the wanzan is the specialist for tribal marks, a traditional healer or herbalist is the specialist who makes incisions for medicinal and protective reasons. Often a herbalist serves as a counselor to his community, advising them on how to treat and prevent diseases and infections. The different medicine the herbalist uses to treat various diseases and infections are combinations of plants, herbs, and roots. However, like the wanzan, I was unable to have the herbalist disclose to me the names of some of the herbs, roots or plants he uses to treat his patients.

In order to treat certain diseases or illness, the herbalist makes an incision using a knife to insert medicine beneath the skin or flesh. The combination of herbs, roots and plants used as treatment are first grinding down to a fine powder. Water may be added to the powder to create a liquid which is easier to insert into the cut. The herbalist also treats the incision with special ointment to stop any bleeding. Shear butter was one type of ointments both the wanzan and herbalist use to treat marks. Shear butter is used as a lubricant to keep the skin from drying out and allows the incision to heal within a week's time.

Two of the most common medicinal marks in Wa are known as the bird and stomach marks. These are the two most popular forms of scarification, cutting across all ethnic groups. The bird mark is thought to be originally practiced by the Ashanti's. As a result of the various migration patterns, the bird mark is now a commonly practiced mark in the Upper West Region. The bird mark is a medicinal mark to treat and prevent a disease causing convulsions. This disease is claimed to come from the "nobile" bird, infecting babies and children as it flies overhead.<sup>15</sup>

When a child becomes infected with this disease, parts of the body become stiff, while at the same time the whole body shakes and the eyes remain wide open. These convulsions may even paralyze parts of the body and cause blindness. Once the child begins to convulse, he is given to his father or any man to take to the herbalist for treatment. It is believed that the mother can not bear to see her child so sick. To treat the convulsions, the herbalist makes a small diagonally incision into the infant's left cheek and a black powder is inserted. This black powder was described to be the grinded charcoal of roots and herbs.<sup>16</sup> (Figure 6)

Every ethnic group interviewed used the bird mark to treat or prevent convulsion inflicted by the nobile. The medicine inserted into the incision is claimed to be very effective. However, when I talked to Hajia Mariama Adama, a nurse at the Regional Hospital in Wa, she claimed the

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<sup>15</sup> Balumae, 25 April 1998

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Wisit Bolla, 22 April 1998

children continue to come into the hospital seeking treatment after they have already been given the bird mark. She claimed that these convulsions are actually caused by malaria.<sup>17</sup>

The stomach mark resembles the tribal mark of the Balumae ethnic group (see figure 7). It is believed that the blood of and surrounding the umbilical is toxic. The toxic blood surrounding the belly button can cause chronic stomach problems. Therefore, several marks, usually 12, are made round the belly button. These incisions along with the medicine used, relieve the body of toxic blood.<sup>18</sup> The age that one is given stomach marks was not specified.

Therefore, within Wa the stomach marks serve dual purposes. First and foremost, the mark is a sign of a identification for the Balumae ethnic group. However, they also believe that the umbilical cord contains toxic blood which is taken out when their tribal marks are made around the stomach. For the other ethnic groups, the stomach marks serve medicinal purposes only. Form my own observations, however, I could not tell which people were members of the Balumae ethnic group based on the stomach mark unless some other tribal mark was present.

Another type of medicine mark is made within the Mossi ethnic group. Chiibu marks are made to relieve chest pains. These marks are often found in a small cluster of twenty or more very small, faint marks. Medicine, containing a mixture of grinded roots and herbs is placed inside these marks. While the reason for these chest pains is unknown, this form of treatment is said to be effective.<sup>19</sup>

Herbalist, Wisiy Bolla, spoke of another medicinal mark made to both treat and prevent sexually transmitted diseases. These marks are made on the back of the leg, behind rather than cutting into the skin. The Significance of the placement of these marks seemed to be unknow to the herbalist.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Hajia Mariama Adama, 23 April 1998

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Abdulia Darimani, 17 March 1998

<sup>19</sup> Mossi, 19 April 1998

## Chapter IV

### The One Who Goes and Comes

The most well known and written about mark is that given to the child who goes and comes. In the southern part of Ghana, this mark is often referred to as D nk, meaning slave. The D nk mark resembles crow's feet on both sides of the eyes and mouth (see figure 8)<sup>21</sup> In Wa, the mark is called Leuwaa within the Balumae ethnic group. Along with the Balumae people, the Sisala ethnic group also believe in this form of scarification, however, the marks given are different.

After a woman experiences the death of two babies of the same sex, either at birth or shortly after, the third baby, of that same sex, is marked. It is believed that the same child is trying to come back but for some reason he or she is not allowed to stay. There are two reasons for marking the baby:

1. To make the child ugly, It is believed that by disfiguring the face or body, one appears ugly to the gods in the other world. Thus, the child will no longer be wanted to return. Giving a child marks for this reasons was described as grabbing the child and enslaving it to stay in this world.
2. However, if the child does die, these marks are than used to check the next child who is born. Thus, such marks are used to identify a child who is coming and going between this world and the next. It is believed that when the child is born and lives, having the same marks as the previous child, that he has been rejected from the other world because of the disfiguring marks.

In addition to marks, the child who goes and comes is given an ugly name. Some examples given by the Balumae people were Yendau (literally, slave bought) meaning you have been bought here so you may not return. Another is Tan Puori (the place where trash is dumped), the use of this name implies that if the child dies again his body will be dumped like rubbish. This name is meant to scare the child into staying in this world.

It was not possible for me to take a survey as to how many people believe in the child who goes and comes. However, according to Onene Konadu's article, "Rural Poverty: The Case Study of Ghana," 26% f the respondents said it is true that some children who die to come back again.<sup>22</sup> Infact, during my interview with the Balumae elders, one man claimed to know a child who had gone and come back as a result of being marked.

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<sup>20</sup> Bolla, 22 April 1998

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Leo Yomkson, 27 March 1998

<sup>22</sup> Konadu, Onene. "Rural Poverty: The Case Study of Ghana." (Fass Bulletin, 1996) p. 59

For the Balumae people, the mark for the one who goes and comes is two groups three horizontal lines, usually across from one another. These marks are put on the chest and or face (figure 9). Meanwhile, the Funsi members of the Sisala ethnic group reported using a mark of a cross on either one of the cheeks (figure 10). However, they use this mark to only identify the same child who is trying to come and go between worlds.<sup>23</sup>

Herbalist, Wisiy Bolla also described a ceremony that is sometimes undergone to keep a child in this world. The parents of the child gather a goat, fowl, and kola nuts for a performance, perhaps associated with the sacrifice of the goat or fowl. After which, the child is given a bracelet on the ankle and or necklace. At this time, the herbalist marks the child with an “x”, called sabogu, on the face. When the child grows the necklace is removed and put on the child’s wrist until he or she dies.<sup>24</sup>

While the practice of this mark seemed to be very successful in the opinion of some of my respondents, the frequency of one woman losing several babies at the time of delivery or soon there after seems to have serious healthy enough for her babies to survive. The practice of the marks of the child who “goes and comes,” allows, woman to overlook any possible medical problems. Many babies die and are buried without any medical evaluation. Therefore, if there is something wrong with either mother or child it is never discovered which may only continue the deaths of not only future babies but the mother.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Iddrusu Aworo, 26 April 1998

<sup>24</sup> Bolla, 22 April 1998

## Chapter V

### *Marks of Protection*

Within the Wa area marks of protection are made toward off evil spirits, robbers, to make one victorious in battles, and to protect the limbs from harm. Most often these marks are made on the arms, legs and feet. Depending on the herbalist, who makes the protective marks, and for what reasons medicine may or may not be used. The marks of protection found in Wa tend to be very small, faint numerous marks often in clusters or groups. (figure 11)

Herbalists are sometimes sought to advise parents of newborn babies as to how to protect the baby's well being. Often the herbalist will make small incision, placing medicine inside to protect the baby from future diseases and unforeseen calamities. Herbalists also make incisions for adults who feel another is wishing evil upon them.

Most often in Wa, marks of protection are given to matured males and females who decide for themselves to get such marks. Though females can receive these marks, it is thought that males endure more of the hardships in life. Thus, marks of protection are more commonly found on males.<sup>25</sup>

Protective marks present in the Balumae, Mossi and Sisala ethnic groups. The Balumae's mark is a cluster of groups of three small vertical lines. They are often placed on the upper arm. Within the Mossi ethnic group, three small, very faint vertical marks are placed on the ankle for protective reasons. The Mossi use a particular medicine called *muha* to place inside these marks to protect one against robbers. It was said that even if one having such marks is attacked, the attacker will not succeed in causing him any harm. In this way it seems, that the marks are actually believed to make one stronger.

The *muha* medicine is made from the bark of a particular tree. This bark is ground up and combined with a small amount of water. This mixture then forms into a hard ball. To apply the medicine, the ball is dipped in water and rubbed into the incision.<sup>26</sup>

The chief of the Sisala's Alhaji Issah Abdulai had several small faint marks on both of his arms, near his elbow. Not only do these marks serve to protect him and make him stronger. It is believed that the medicine put inside the incision protects the arm, not allowing a knife to cut into the skin.<sup>27</sup> This seemed to be a major belief of all those practicing marks of protection.

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<sup>25</sup> Balumae, 25 April 1998

<sup>26</sup> Mossi, 25 April 1998

<sup>27</sup> Issah Abdulai, 20 April 1998

## Chapter VI

### *Marks as Decoration*

There are several different methods employed in Wa to decorate the face. While, incisions or markings are made, the more popular methods are tattooing and body paints. Many young adult females had red circles or half circles between their eyebrows. Additionally, black paint or tattooing is used to mark the appearance of vertical incisions on the cheeks. Only when looking at a person, usually female, up close can one make this distinction.

Decorative marks can be found on both males and females but are most popular among females. Most often decorative marks are attained by girls in their teen years. However, parents can also have the wanzan make decorative marks on the infants face during the naming ceremony.

What surprised me the most during my research was the scarification in Ginkpan Village. This Village is located outside the downtown of Wa. The Ginkpan Village is more rural village than those located in the center of Wa. Consequently, I expected tribal marks to be the most dominant form of scarification practiced. However, I was wrong. Out of all the different communities I interviewed, marks of decoration were most popular in Ginkpan Village.

Within the Ginkpan Village both males and females can have decorative marks. While it would seem that the design of decorative marks would vary depending on the individual tastes, the decorative marks made in this village were nearly always the same. The only major differences are found between male and female marks. The form of a male's decorative mark is usually a horizontal mark on the right cheek. Often the other cheek has the diagonal bird mark. Females have one vertical mark on each cheek along with a blackened design between the eyebrows. However, this design, usually in the shape of an "s" is a tattoo or made from body paint. (figure 12).

While females in this community really liked and heavily practiced decorative marks, they did not like the appearance of tribal marks. They described tribal marks as being unappealing to the eye. However, they viewed decorative marks as enhancing one's beauty.

At the time of my interview in Ginkpan Village only one young adult male was present. As the rest of the rains falling on the previous day, all the men were out farming. The opinion of this male was that all marks, tribal and decorative, destroy the beauty of the face. However, it seems to me that other males may have a different opinion as women probably would not continue a practice that was viewed by members within the community as ugly or unappealing.

## Chapter VII

### *Current Opinion and the Future of Scarification*

In addition to asking the elders of the Balumae, Mossi, Dagbanbas, and Sisala ethnic groups their opinions on what the future practice of scarification would be in Wa, I interviewed four young adult residents of Wa. Two were male and two female, their ages ranging from 20 to 35. through my interviews and discussions with the various residents of Wa, I was able to learn about their personal opinions of scarification and learn what the future practices of scarification might entail.

Scarification is a sensitive topic because it permanently marks one for life and because of its associations with slavery. In order to ease my way into discussions about personal views of scarification, I first asked if one would give identification or medicinal marks to their own children or if they already have. Generally, people were more willing to give their children tribal marks that could be hidden under clothing. However, people seemed compelled to give their children medicinal marks no matter the placement, namely because they are form of treatment and keep on healthy.

Some of the reasons given for not liking tribal marks, those especially on the face, were that they take away from one's natural beauty, can be used to insult, effect first impressions. Additionally, many said that the reasons for getting tribal marks no longer exist as people can identify each other through verbal communication. Further more, slave raiding and tribal wars no longer threaten to dismember communities.

Still some people may not want to be identified because of rivalries between certain ethnic groups. It also seems that gender often plays a role in the decision to give one tribal marks on the face. One man preferred to only give his daughter tribal marks located on the stomach, however, he said if he has a son he will give him marks on the face.<sup>28</sup> This shows that people believe females are more concerned with looks and appearances than males.

When I asked one woman if she would give her children tribal marks she first replied by saying that she has no control over such decisions. While, she admitted she does not like tribal marks, she reminded me that she lives in a patrilineal society and will not have any say over her children getting marked or not. This women did not like tribal marks because as she said people mark assumptions that you came from a traditional, rural village and not a town or small city.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Iddi Iddrisu, 21 April 1998

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Ajara Yakubu, 20 April 1998



Overall it seemed the younger respondents, did not want to mark their children but would for health reasons. While, older respondents wanted to continue the practice of scarification for both health reasons, to show ethnic pride, and because it was part of their culture. These respondents have come to see the uniqueness in traditional cultural ways. They take pride in those traditionals or rituals which make their culture unique. One respondent described a people with no traditional culture as a tree with no roots.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Discussions with Adama Ibrahim Salia, April 1998

## ***Conclusions***

Long ago, the practice of scarification was brought to Wa by various ethnic groups, however it still continues to remain a part of the lives of present day residents. Throughout Wa, scarification serves as a means of ethnic pride, identification, protection, healthcare, and decoration. By investigating into this practice, I have come to learn more about the beliefs, values, and myths present in Wa.

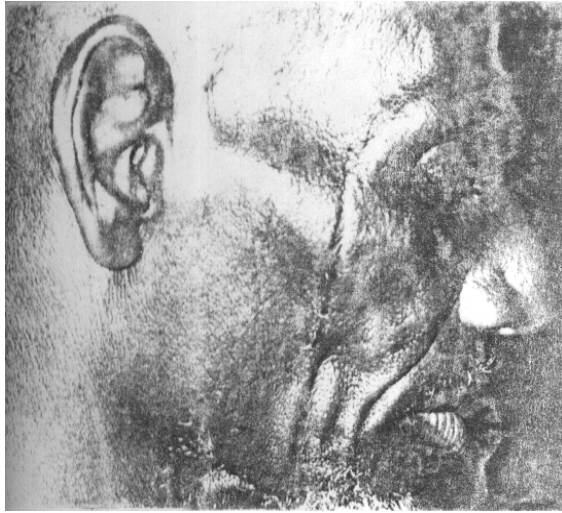
While it is true that the practice of tribal marking is diminishing, the continued efforts of the Balumae ethnic group to give children their stomach mark, for example, shows the value of ethnic pride and group solidarity present in Wa. Additionally, the belief in the afterworld, can be seen through the marking of the child who “goes and comes” found in both the Balumae and Sisala communities. This mark, along with some reasons for the marks of protection, show how traditional religion is present in the culture and lives of the people of Wa whose dominant forms of religion are claimed to be Christianity and Islam.

In conclusion, scarification holds many different meanings and uses for the people of Wa. While tribal marks are a dominant practice, many people no longer see the need for them. Yet this practice is continued to show ethnic pride. As a whole the practice of scarification will continue to diminish in the coming years while the only marks most likely to remain visible are those that serve medicinal purposes.

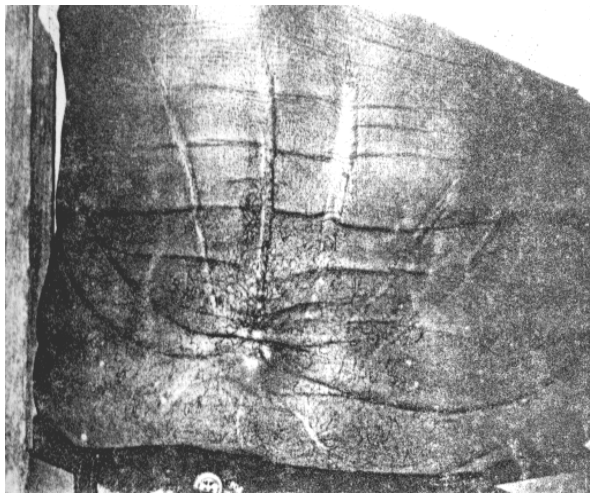
## ***Further Research***

While the practice of scarification is diminishing there is still much that remains unknown. In particular, further research into the practice of tribal marks would tell a lot more about the history of West Africa and the slave trade. Further research could be done on the relationship between tribal marks and slave raiders by conducting research at the cities of old slave markets and recording oral history. Additionally, one could try to investigate the direct impacts of domestic and Trans-Atlantic slavery on the practice of tribal marks. However, with the practice of tribal marking quickly fading away this information will become increasingly harder to find.

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**Figure 1** – Balumae Tribal Marks consist of a set of 3 marks made on both sides of the face, forearms, upper arms, chest, thighs and calves. All of these marks tend to be found on the elders of the Balumae ethnic group.



**Figure 2** – The Balumae ethnic group also have a tribal mark made around the belly button. This tribal mark consists of the set of 3 marks radiating out in all directions, above, below, and on the right and left sides of the belly button. This tribal mark alone is much more common presently in Wa than the rest.



**Figure 3** – These are the tribal marks of the Royal Family of the Mossi ethnic group who were born in Burkina Faso. Three lines trace the shape of the face and one mark is made from the nose over the left cheek. This mark made on the cheek is the tribal mark given to those members of the Royal Family born in Wa.



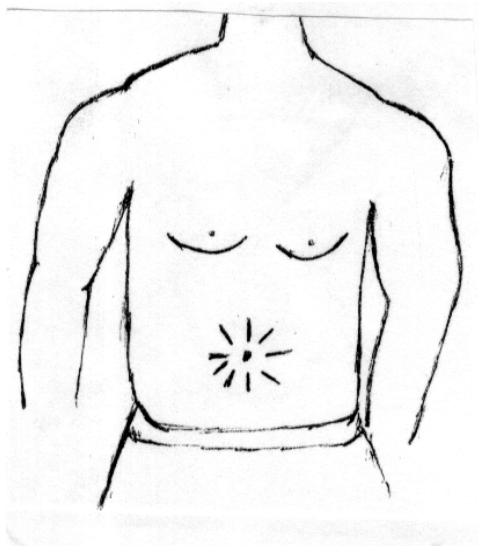
**Figure 4** – Tribal mark of the Dagbannas consists of short vertical lines made on both cheeks. These lines can number from one to four.



**Figure 5** – Sisala-Funsi tribal mark is a long mark made coming down from the nose over the cheek. For males the mark is made on the left and for females the mark is made on the right cheek and tends to be smaller in size.



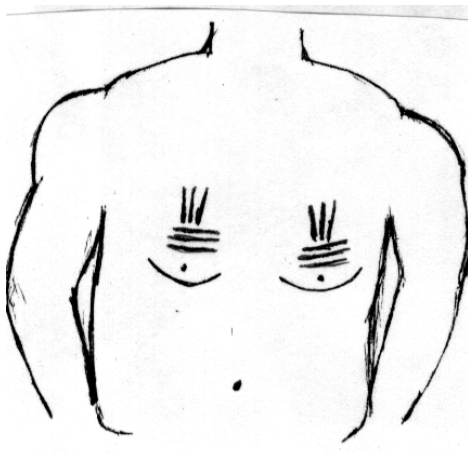
**Figure 6** – Medicinal Mark. This is the bird mark given on the left cheek to treat convulsion.



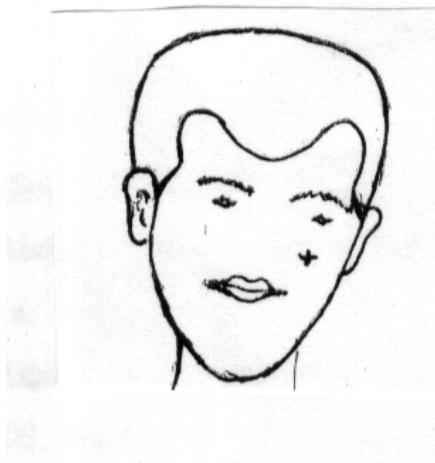
**Figure 7 – Medicinal Mark.**  
Similar to the Balumae tribal mark, this mark is made to rid the stomach of the toxic blood from and around the umbilical cord.



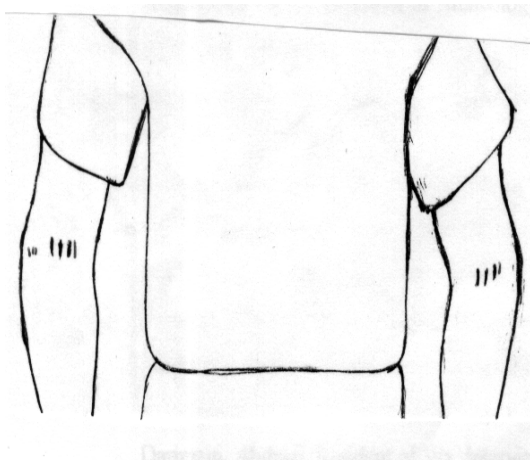
**Figure 8 – Dɔnkɔ Mark**  
This mark identifies the child who goes and comes, made mostly in the Fante areas in southern Ghana.



**Figure 9 – Leuwaa Mark**  
Balumae ethnic groups mark for the child who goes and comes.



**Figure 10 – Funsu Mark**  
Made on either cheek to identify the child who goes and comes.



**Figure 11 – Protection Marks**  
These marks are most commonly found on the arms but can also be found on the legs and feet. These marks are often very faint, skinning, and short.



**Figure 12 – Decoration Marks**  
Marks of decoration usually have a darker colour to them and are more common among females. The design made this girl's head is a tattoo but the marks on her face are do to scarification (Ginkpan Village)

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