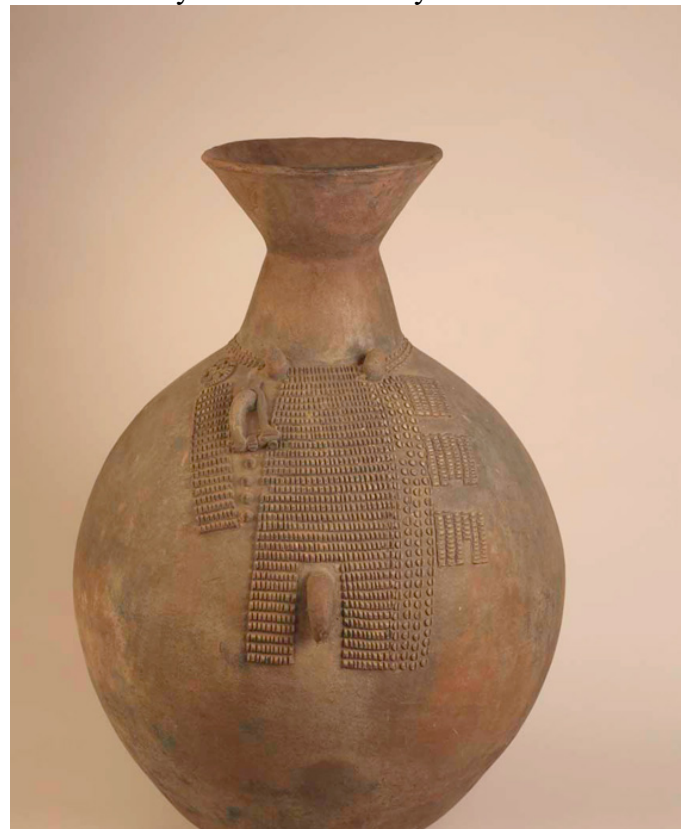


Scarification, Femininity, and the Decline of the Mark of Civilizations

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November 2018

Scarification, inscription or cicatrization can be viewed as being about “lived lives, not idealized ones.”¹ It was the practice of making cuts, burns or incisions into the skin and then irritating the skin in hopes to create permanent marks of patterns. Starting in Africa, this tradition was started because the higher the melanin content of the skin, the better the scarring or formation of keloid scars, and the less visible an ink tattoo would have been.² This ritual form of body modification was integral to many cultures in Africa, speaking to their beliefs, values, and world view, often being called ‘the mark of civilizations.’ While femininity is important in societies everywhere, these African cicatrization rituals and initiations had a paramount role in describing social status and femininity, linking these decorative skin marks to show signs of fertility, marital status, societal ranking, and the ethnic identity of being a woman. To understand shifting beliefs about scarification in modern times, one must look at the post-colonial history of these procedures, their meanings, and contrasts among cultures, as well as contemporary examples of tribal markings, and what these discoveries say about femininity and ethnic identity.

In recent years, scarring procedures have been made illegal in many African governments.³ How can once a very critical rite of passage and search for one’s identity be viewed at as something negative and to be outlawed? In general, the marks that were intentionally placed on bodies were seen as ‘marks of civilization.’ These scars were a way for one to distinguish a village person from one of the bush. Many cultures believed that this was the only way that you could distort the natural state of the body in a way that differentiated it from



Ga’anda Funerary vase featuring scarification patterns ensized on the vase. This shows the inseparable link between their spiritual beliefs, culture and scarification rituals.

¹ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. LosAngeles, 1995.

² Sehloho, Matshepo. "How Body Scarification Is Rooted in Ancient African History." 702. April 16, 2018. <http://www.702.co.za/articles/299842/how-body-scarification-is-rooted-in-ancient-african-history>.

³ SaharaTV. "Africa In The City: Tribal Marks - A Dying Tradition, Reinvented." YouTube. September 19, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lksFqfWwgnU&t=406s>.

creatures and animals.⁴ Cicatrization was often used as a way of identification and linking family lineages in addition to being for beautification. It was often a procedure that represented life stages, telling a man when a woman was ready for marriage or children.⁵ In most cultures, when women received these scars, it was apparent that she was ready, willing, and able to handle childbirth.⁶ Often linked as ways to speak to spirit realms, it is thought that the pain of scarification was a personal journey that would transcend one into the realm of the spirits. This was a way to better communicate and merit protections.⁷ By showing courage and the ability to accomplish mental pain, many believed “if the body is strong, the soul can survive anything.”⁸ If you could not handle the pain of scarification, could you handle the reality of being an adult?

In Northeastern Nigeria (north of the Benue River), the Ga’anda culture performs a ritual called *Hleeta*. This is a ritual initiation that is celebrated for all of the girls of the village in 6 stages.⁹ As a societal event, scarification played a valuable role in the arranged marriage process. The potential suitor of the girl had to work at her family’s farm every season until the scarification process was complete. Cicatrization was drawn out in stages that could last from 8-10 years.¹⁰ These marks were symbols of fertility, as a trade for the man’s willingness to provide and produce for his potential future wife. After this long courtship ritual, the woman would have her thighs scarred to mark the commencement of the marriage.¹¹ Thigh scars in the Ga’anda culture signaled to other men that the woman was taken and that they may not approach her. After a few months, the woman will then have the most invasive scarification ritual to date, done by a skilled elder that learned from their mother or grandmother. This stage marks the entire body and merits the seclusion of the woman until she is fully healed. Once introduced back into society, there are public celebrations to officially celebrate the union

⁴ "Scarification and Cicatrization among African Cultures." Rand African Art. Accessed November 08, 2018. http://www.randafricanart.com/Scarification_and_Cicatrization_among_African_cultures.html.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Scarification." The Pitt Rivers Museum of Body Modification. Accessed November 08, 2018. <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts/index.php/permanent-body-arts/scarification.html>.

⁸ TRIBES, New Atlantis. "Scarification, a Ritual before Fighting." YouTube. September 05, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ddcxLqO0zo>.

⁹ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Los Angeles, 1995. 58

¹⁰ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Los Angeles, 1995. 62

¹¹ Ibid.

and her bravery and strength.¹² These rituals and stages are an integral part of the Ga'anda culture and show the inseparable link between femininity, fertility, marriage and social conventions.¹³

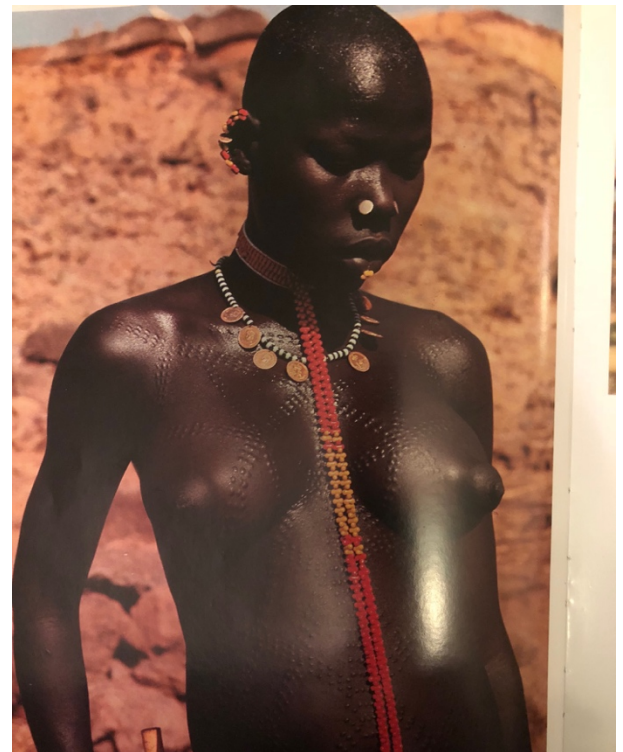


Showing Ga'anda scarification patterns

Due to the prized nature of arranged marriages in Ga'anda culture, extra-marital pregnancies were frowned upon. On the event that a woman had two children outside of wedlock, she would have designs etched onto her calves. Although a permanent marker of misbehavior, this was still seen as an aesthetically positive transformation.¹⁴ This is unique to Ga'anda culture but is consistent among its subgroups. The Ga'anda tribes also used the scars on their skin as a symbol of communication and relation with the spirits. Often funerary jars would be decorated with the scars of the deceased, which they believed encouraged the spirits to nurture the dead. By incorporating these signs, it guaranteed the quality of the vessel and reinforced the body as a vessel of communication.¹⁵ The

translation to decorate other art materials shows the aesthetic importance that scarification had on the Ga'anda society, as well as the innate connection with their spiritual beliefs.

While the Ga'anda culture used the scarification practices as a way to prepare the woman for marriage, the Nubians used it as a way to mark menstruation and physical changes. During her first menstrual cycle, there are dots cut into her upper chest and breasts. Pregnancies after result in more dots being inscribed into her



Nubian Scarification that shows the dots that were carved to show the stage of maturity the female was in.

¹² Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Los Angeles, 1995. 62

¹³ Aronson, Lisa. "African Women in the Visual Arts." *Signs* 16, no. 3 (1991): 550-74.

¹⁴ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Los Angeles, 1995. 63

¹⁵ Aronson, Lisa. "African Women in the Visual Arts." *Signs* 16, no. 3 (1991): 550-74.

abdomen, making the mother a walking sign of fertility, abundance and maturity.¹⁶ This is a unique way of viewing femininity, glorifying and marking the creation of life with symbols that are special and held in high regard.



Tiv female tribal scars

The Tiv culture that resides in the Benue Valley in Nigeria used generational patterns to mark their youth.¹⁷ They often used scarification as a way to accentuate good characteristics, such as a woman's calves. In this culture, it was common for the cicatrization to symbolize sexual lust and desire. Belly scars, although voluntary, were described with the same word that meant 'sexual lust'. These scars were rumored to stay raised and

sensitive for years, promoting sexual sensation for both the male and especially the female. It was a documented important part of foreplay within the culture.¹⁸ This connection was said to promote sexual desire and the urge to copulate, in turn being associated with fertility.¹⁹ The Mursi people of the Omo valley are also use scars for the purpose of adding sexual gratification to relationships as well as believing that they would become a kind of currency in the afterlife.²⁰

¹⁶ Riefenstahl, Leni. *The Last of the Nuba*. Leni Riefenstahl, 1995. 46

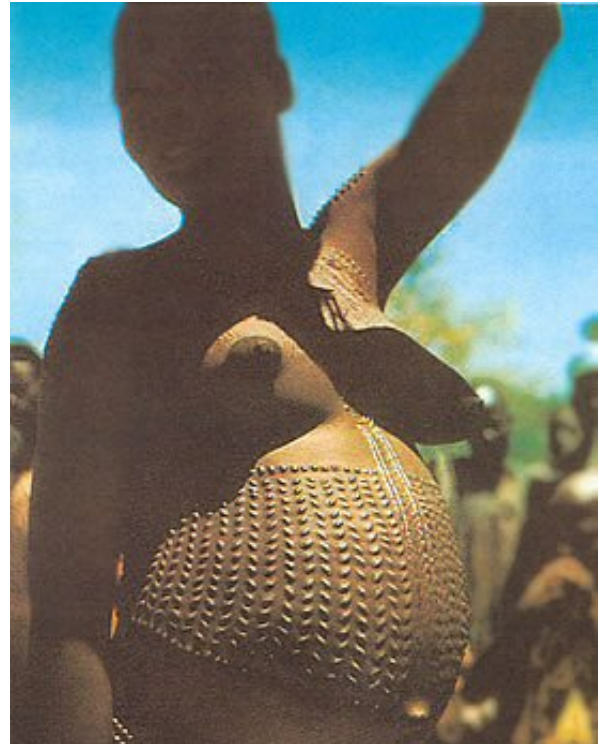
¹⁷ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. LosAngeles, 1995. 79

¹⁸ "Scarification and Cicatrization among African Cultures." Rand African Art. Accessed November 08, 2018. http://www.randafricanart.com/Scarification_and_Cicatrization_among_African_cultures.html.

¹⁹ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. LosAngeles, 1995. 82

²⁰ "Scarification." The Pitt Rivers Museum of Body Modification. Accessed November 08, 2018.

The Yoruba elders believed that “lines in the human flesh are primordial.”²¹ Directly linking the act of scarification to childbirth and adulthood, they believed that if you were unable to take the pain of this ritual you were a coward and would say “*ojo ni*”, and those that could take it were courageous, “*o ni laiya dada*’. In their practice of scarification, they believed that it had a parallel to life in the sense that all good things have unpleasant aspects. Scarification is typically done on all Yoruba children against their will and is primarily used for identification and beautification purposes.²² It is still being practiced, as there are some contemporary examples such as model Adetutu Oj within the last 30 years.



Belly scars from a woman of the Mursi people



Benin female, facial tribal scars

Benin people from west Africa use scars to mark major life events, as well as a symbol of initiation into adulthood.²³ They saw the procedure as growing a stronger link to the community. Children’s faces are scarred as soon as they are weaned from their mothers, as a way to ask the ancestor spirits to protect the child. Females are often marked with grids on their faces, these represent planting and are an allegory for fertility and bearing children.²⁴ The Benin people believe

that this is a direct link with their family lineage and their spirits. When the child is old enough to have their

²¹ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Los Angeles, 1995. 83

²² Oj, Adetutu TV. YouTube. October 18, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7jPJYDdJHQ>.

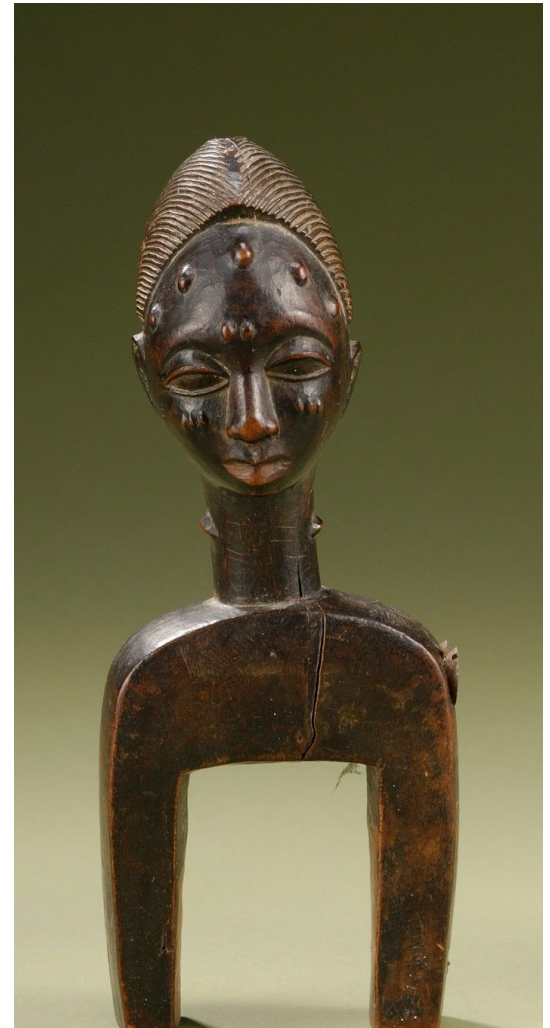
²³ Geographic, National. "Scarification." YouTube. December 20, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lfhot7tQcWs>.

²⁴ Dawkins, Farida. "What Is That on Your Face? African Tribal Marks and Their Meanings." Face2Face Africa. March 02, 2018. <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/face-african-tribal-marks-meanings/6>.

faces scared, they are officially considered a part of the tribe community.²⁵ Cicatrization in this society is said to help grow your understanding of who you are as an ethnic woman, assisting you in marrying your spiritual identity with your cultural identity.²⁶

Unlike most cultures, the Baule along the Ivory Coast practiced scarification for more fashionable purposes. It had no link to linages but was usually a more generational thing.²⁷ They did not practice scarification on children unless they believed that it served direct medical purpose, as they thought that the scars could seek out spiritual healing and help. The Baule believe that these marks could communicate with the spirit realms to protect themselves from harm.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Lulwa people relate their female skins marks with ethics and morality. *Bwimpa* is their word for beauty, but they only believe that beauty is created by human hands.²⁸ The cult of Cibola had an initiation process that was founded around beauty and ethics; scarification practices in this cult were said to guard the health of young mothers and their newborns.²⁹ The cicatrization was seen as a way to protect children from dark magic, protecting them from possession and in turn directly protecting their physical health.³⁰ By ‘humanizing’ the skin, it was thought that you were creating *bwimpa* as well as linking your spiritual, ethical soul to your physical body.



Baule Sculpture that shows the importance and prevalence of facial, female, tribal scars.

²⁵ Dawkins, Farida. "What Is That on Your Face? African Tribal Marks and Their Meanings." Face2Face Africa. March 02, 2018. <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/face-african-tribal-marks-meanings/6>.

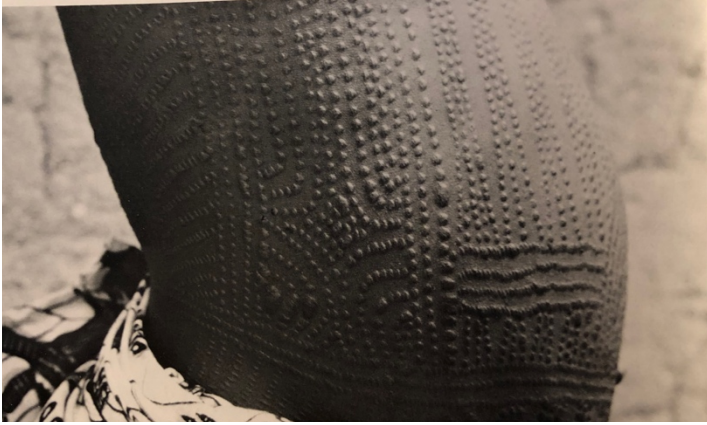
²⁶ SaharaTV. "Africa In The City: Tribal Marks - A Dying Tradition, Reinvented." YouTube. September 19, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lksFqfWwgnU&t=406s>.

²⁷ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. LosAngeles, 1995. 103

²⁸ Petridis, Constantine. "A Figure for Cibola: Art, Politics, and Aesthetics among the Luluwa People of the Democratic Republic of the Congo." *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 36 (2001): 235-58. doi:10.2307/1513065. 243

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.



Tabwa female scarification patterns



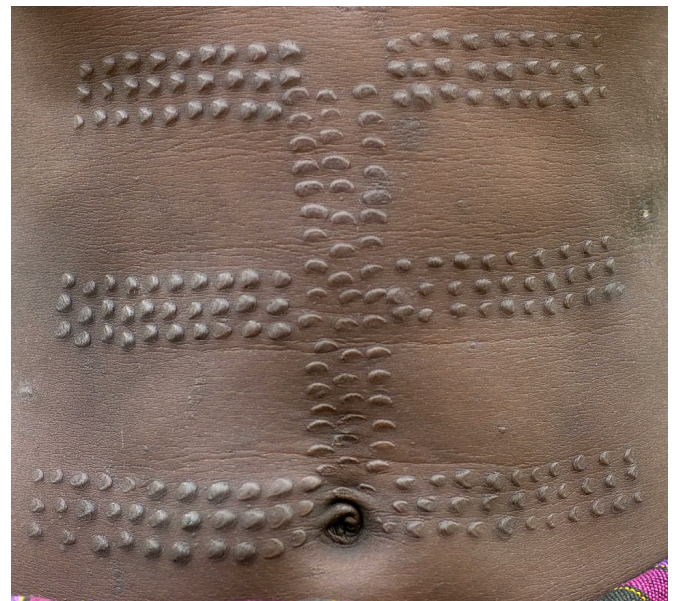
Tabwa art showing the gender neutral scarification 'v-shape'

The Tabwa culture of Zambia believed that through the right symbols and signs they could achieve the perfect body, making scarification “elevated to a position of art.”³¹ The cicatrization process in Zambia goes as follows: the local blacksmith makes a razorblade, the skin was cut, pulled by an Acadia thorn, fishhook, or arrowhead, and then they were rubbed with soot from the

bottom of a pot to create large raised keloid scars.³² Most marks were elective in this culture, emphasizing the woman’s elective right to choose the pain and suffering of the procedure. Tabwa aphorisms that relate to *Hemba* (Tabwa’s female scarification practice), state that you are not born with beauty, but that you are inscribed with it.³³ Often these scarification practices were done with only the immediate family knowing

about it, not meriting public celebration. These events were viewed as very significant for the individual and a person endeavor. In most cultures, the marks were gendered and specific for each person, but in the Tabwa culture, there were marks that were common among both genders. Often it was a series of dots that connected the shoulder blades while dipping in the center of the back to form a ‘v-shape’.³⁴

Within the Surma tribe in Ethiopia, a girl’s eagerness to endure the pain from cicatrization was used



Surma tribe stomach scarification

³¹ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. LosAngeles, 1995. 41

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. LosAngeles, 1995. 45

as an indication of her emotional maturity and willingness to produce children.³⁵ Although not forced, these kinds of rituals were seen as a ritual for any woman that was hoping to have children or become married. This emphasizes the link between what it meant to be a woman in Africa and the pain you may have to endure if you wanted to become a normal and accepted member of the social circles.



K. Djeneba with her tribal scars from the Ko tribe.

Up until the widespread trade and colonization of Africa, scarification rituals and rites of passage were viewed as an integral part of many societies. The stark decline in recent times can be investigated in many ways, but it is impossible to pin the decline for this body art form on any one factor. Although it is rare to see someone with tribal markings today, there are a few people that still have them and lead normal lives. K. Djeneba is a member of the Ko tribe from Burkina Faso, “People find it pretty, but I think it’s ugly. We are not like others. In the past, when you had a smooth face, you were rejected! I used to like my scars; they were beautiful. We used to brag about them. But, now, in the city, it is definitely out of fashion. You are called names like ‘torn face’ and it



Woman that is of marrying age from the Surma tribe in Ethiopia.



Martina Kaboré's facial scars from the Ouemkanga tribe.

³⁵ Dunphy, Liz. "Girls 'slashed to Be Beautiful' in Ethiopian Scar Ceremony." Daily Mail Online. April 15, 2017. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4413954/Girls-slashed-beautiful-Ethiopian-scar-ceremony.html>.

hurts.”³⁶ Martina Kaboré is from the Ouemkanga tribe from Burkina Faso, “When I was 10 years, I asked for them. I wanted to be like my brothers and sisters, and to show that I am courageous. I was very eager. I liked them. I did not feel pain, because I really wanted them. Times have changed, but it’s okay. When people see me and point at me I stand tall and I am proud. I had them done on my first son, he was 18. I would do to have them done on my second child, but my husband disagrees.”³⁷ The Westernization of cities makes it increasingly difficult for members of the indigenous tribes to become integrated and feel welcomed. The traditions that once where their only way to become accepted become the reason the exact reason they are then rejected.



Model Adetutu Oj and her tribal scars from the Yoruba tribe.

Adetutu Oj is a member of the Yoruba tribe from Nigeria and recently made her way to

international fame as a model with tribal scars. She is an example of someone who was able to use her marks as a way to market herself in western cultures and something ‘different’.³⁸ But she also dealt with bullying as a result of her lineage marks, “I have a diary in my room where I wrote that I hate myself because of the mark, and I realized that this is not how it’s supposed to be. This thing is for beautification and identification. But there is no way that you can talk to all these people bullying me and explain that every time. And I think that it’s part of the reason that they stopped giving it to the younger generation.”³⁹ While some people with marks advocate for continuing the tradition, Adetutu is an advocate for ending the practice.

³⁶ Brooks, Katherine. "This Is The Last Generation Of Scarification In Africa." The Huffington Post. December 07, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/23/scarification_n_5850882.html.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Oj, Adetutu TV. YouTube. October 18, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7jPJYDdJHQ>.

³⁹ Ibid.

How can this tradition of something revered to show status and symbol become a source of shame for those that still live and bear the marks? These cultural symbols have been tainted through time with the western eye. Starting with initial European contact and overexaggerated character drawings that went back to Europe, scarification began being depicted as the “provocation of the male” and done for the “stimulation of male passion”.⁴⁰ This distortion of reality displayed these rituals and rites of passage as innately sexual and only for erotic purposes. This oversexualization of the female black body continued to be a problem and fueled racism for hundreds of years to come. By depicting the Africans with their sacred scars, the Europeans were projecting and over generalizing these people as naked, polyamorous, and purely driven by lust. This exploitation and misrepresentation have shaped the way that African people see these indigenous traditions themselves.



Contemporary scarification on Caucasian skin.

Today, scarification begins to rise in popularity in western cultures. This extreme form of body modification is now seen as a way to rebel against society rather than be a device to be accepted into it. This radicalism is an attempt to normalize the cicatrization process and make it known again as something that is a choice within body modification and beautification. Although there are westerners that strive for this radical nature, there are still people living with the burden of feeling like an outcast simply because of the culture in which they were initiated into.

The scarification of women in Africa has a long history across a vast range of cultures and was performed for many reasons. Often symbolizing a link with lineage and a way to communicate with spirits and other realms, these painful marks were once used to integrate and celebrate femininity in society. These

⁴⁰ Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. LosAngeles, 1995. 45

inscriptions in human flesh were seen as the marks of civilizations; showing a visible sign of the willingness to become a mother, that can be empowering, exciting, and a significant step for many women across Africa. The primordial lines in the flesh and their social implications show us that beauty can and was linked to something that was created with human hands. These patterns helped women connect their spiritual morality with their ethnic identity and elevated body modification to a position of art. The shifting meaning in misrepresentations of western depictions are a source of shame and the decline for this once great artform.

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