

Body Marking As Identification among the Dangmes in Ghana

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Abstract

Body marking is an intangible and a sensitive cultural variable in Ghana. Unfortunately, most individuals do not want to associate themselves with people who have body marks. This obvious misunderstanding of the art has led to stigmatization of the bearers of these marks. Body markings have been used as a form of identification among many cultures through several generations, Ghana has a rich culture of body marking among the various ethnic groups practice it, yet; the purpose and connotations of these marks have not been uncovered in certain parts of the country. As the study is centered on identification, it will help recognize the cultural identity of the nation by comprehending and embracing the custom of the various ethnic groups of Ghana where the need be. This research is therefore geared towards understanding the purposes and reasons for making body marks. Symbolic and interpretative anthropology and diffusionism were the theories that guided the study and are explained as such. Three ethnic groups from Ga-Dangme were selected for the study and these are Ningo, Prampram and Ada. The qualitative research method was used, with interviews and observations being the main form of data collection instruments. Out of the overall accessible population of 90 respondents, a sample size of 60 was purposively selected based on their knowledge on the subject matter. The results of the study showed that there are different body marks that are made for different cultural reasons.

Keywords: Body marks, identification, scarification, cultural interpretation

Introduction

The definitions of what body marks are vary, some of which entail the purposes for which the marks are made (Ankrah, 2012). They could be described as types of marks that serve ethnic and political purposes. Ayeni (2004) states that body marking is an all-encompassing term that is used to describe the several methods of changing the surface of the skin (done among ethnic groups) through intentional and potentially irreversible alteration. It is done in a way that makes every ethnic group have a different and distinct mark. Wrath (2005) has also stated that body marks are a form of identification by which groups of people differentiate their families, lineages and tribes from others.

Ankrah (2007) asserts that body marking is one of the traditions in Ghana that allows children of a tender age to be given marks that will identify them as members of an ethnic group. According to Ozongwu (2013), body marks date back decades ago from marks made on fertility dolls to tattoos of tribal hierarchy.

Ayeni (2004) has stated that the history of body marking started in Africa between 8000-5000BC when several markings were seen on some images discovered in Tassili in the Sahara. Herodotus as cited in Mayaki (2011) said that ethnic marking started long ago in Egypt in the 5th century with a group of foreigners who were living in Egypt at the time. He stated that for the main purpose of identification and to differentiate them from the Egyptians, these foreigners cut their foreheads with knives. With time, different ways of marking were adopted by other tribes for different reasons.

Ethnographic Background

Debates persist about the origin of the Ga-Dangme people. One school of thought suggests that the proto Ga-Dangme people come from somewhere east of the Accra plains while another suggests a distant locale beyond the West African coast (GhanaWeb, 2013). The Ga-Dangme people are however believed to have settled in the Accra plains by the 13th century and still reside in the area (Randolph-Macon College, 2013).

The people of Ada were believed to be a part of the African Negro race from the Western Sudan before migrating to their current abode (Ankrah, 2013). They originally consisted of the Ada, Krobo, Osudoku, Shai, Kpone, Prampram and Ningo. They are also believed to have come from Oyo to Abeokuta in Nigeria, then to Dahomey and were prevented from settling there permanently due to hostilities in the land. They then merged with the Ewes from Ketu and travelled together to Tado and together they moved again to Ngotsie in Togo. Some of the members of the two groups, the Ga-Dangmes and the Ewes, decided to settle in Togo in the Anecho region while the rest migrated again to Lolovor which is now known as the Accra Plains.

The Ga-Dangmes currently inhabit the Accra plains and are approximately 2,000,000 people in number. The Ga-Dangme people make up 8% of Ghana's population and they can be found in Ghana and Togo. Currently, Ga-Dangme is a large umbrella that contains 13 different groups with a similar language and similar cultural practices (GhanaWeb, 2013). These 13 groups consist mainly of Dangmes living in Osu, Se (Shai), La, Ningo, Kpone, Krobo, Osudoku, Gbugbla (Prampram), Ada and Agotime and Ga's living in the Anecho (Anecho) area in Togo, Ga-Mashie in the central part of Accra and Nungua (Ameka & Dakubu, 2008).

In Ghana, there are various ethnic groups who practice body marks. Irving (2007) categorizes body marks in Ghana into medical, spiritual, identification and beautification. There has been the impression that people with body marks are uneducated and live in rural areas and these bearers of body marks are sometimes given the identity of being untutored persons. Adshina (2013) projects that many people do not want to associate themselves with other people who have marks on their face thereby attaching a sense of stigmatization to the issue of body marks. This has created some misconception about body marks and people who analyze body marks tend to read their own meanings into them; in that, most bearers of these marks are misjudged and treated negatively due to the lack of understanding of the body marks.

Ankrah (2012) inferred that the Westerners undermined everything African and termed body marking as scarification and rendered it an uncivilized practice. This research therefore seeks to find out the meanings and significance of body marks for identification among the Dangmes in order to educate people about them.

Meaning of Body Marks

Body marking is a unique feature among various cultures in the West African territory and can not only be seen on the faces and body of West Africans but is also evident in their works of art such as artistic wooden masks, carvings and songs (Cullivan, 1998). The meaning of body marks vary such that different authors have different meanings in the context of their various cultures. All these meanings mainly stir towards body marks being used as a form of identification.

Abdulai (1998) inferred that body marks according to the Sisala in the Northern part of Ghana meant a sense of identity and a sign of hope. He further explained that the Sisala people started practicing body marking during the slave trade and it was for identifying themselves such that in an unfortunate event where one of them was captured and taken away his or her identity would forever remain intact. It was also their hope that the marks would help one identify other members of community that were captured. Additionally these body markings could be used to retrace one's roots back home. Ajayi and Kola-Aderoju (2009) support this statement by saying that, in the late 1800's, tribal markings became extremely important not only for ethnic identification but because they allowed one to retain their roots even if they were captured and taken into slavery. For this reason, body marks will always have a deeper meaning than ethnic pride or identification because they enable one return home.

According to Barker (1986) domestic slaves in the northern part of Ghana, during the slave trade were treated as members of the family and could rise to positions of authority in the community yet; one with slave ancestry could never become a chief. This was supported by Gobewura (1998) when he said that for members of the

Mossi tribe, some types of body marks meant royalty, in that, without these marks, it is almost impossible to achieve a high position.

For Barker, body marks meant a painful reminder to its bearers. This was because slave raiders gave body marks to their captives to identify them and to apprehend them in case they should escape. Since then, these marks have been identified in Northern Ghana as marks for slaves and it ends up being a constant reminder to the bearer and his family and all who see him of his past history and enslavement. Due to this, such people are not regarded in the society. Even today, one's slave ancestry can be used to defame one's character or cause ridicule in public. Though these marks reminded the bearers of their painful past and ancestry, Gobewura states that body marks in general helped in maintaining and instilling the culture of a group of people into the young ones and this coincides with a statement made by Adshina (2013) that, the young one's with these marks then, without compromise, become the bearers of African tradition.

History of Body Marks

It is uncertain how body marking started in Africa, there are however different sets of stories surrounding the history and origin of body marks in the African continent.

There is also a story about an African king named Sango, who sent two of his slaves to a far-away country on an important mission. One of the servants was able to perform the task he was assigned while the other could not. The servant who was not able to achieve his mission was subjected to one hundred and twenty-two marks (122) on his face as punishment. With time, the marks healed and gave him a distinctive identity and he was fancied by the king's wives. This angered the king and he then decided that cuts should be given in the future, not as punishments but as a sign of royalty. The king Sango himself decided to get these marks to enforce the law he had passed, he was however not able to withstand the pain and could only bear two cuts on his arm. From that day on, cuts on the arm were a sign of royalty among his people until different styles of cuts were adopted by other tribes for different reasons (Hare, 2011).

According to Ankrah (2012), the art of body marking in Ghana started as a form of identification of the deaf and dumb children in the society. This was done so that they could easily be provided the assistance they needed when necessary. Body marking also became a necessity in the olden days with the rise of communal wars and the then slave trade (Olutayo, 2013). Ethnic groups used to mark their members in the hopes that the marks will be able to guide them back to their hometown (Ozongwu, 2013). Among others, the slave traders viewed unscarred faces and bodies as a sign of good health and so they did not seize tribesmen with both facial and bodily marks (McRae, 2013).

Reasons for Making Body Marks

There have been different tribes practicing the art of body marking. Some of these tribes still practice them while it remains a dying practice for other tribes. Schildkrout (2004) states that body marking is a way of indicating an individual's status in society, revealing a particular time of life and celebrate a change in life or just following a fashion. Uzobu, Olomu and Ayinmoro (2014) have said that some ethnic groups use body marks as a source of aesthetics or beautification and a protection therapy. There have also been a lot of reasons why body marks are made but they are further simplified by Roper (2004) and Irving (2007) as marks made for; Beautification/Decorative Purposes, Identification, Strength and Courage, Fertility, Family Pride/ Royalty, Medical Reasons/ Protection from Death.

For the purpose of this study, body marks done for identification purposes will be elaborated on.

Marks for Identification

Different sets of people have similar body marks that differentiate them from people of different lineages or villages. Since these body marks are used mainly to differentiate ethnic groups, they vary according to the customs and preference of the lineage, village or family. Ibiyemi (2014) said that because of these variations, there are marks on the cheeks, forehead, on the temple, under the chin and so on and there are vertical lines, horizontal lines, both vertical and horizontal lines on both cheeks. Roper (2004) also said that the cuts that are generally made on the face of a person will show the individual as belonging to a specific tribe or clan. Even with a common tribe, people will have marks that differentiate them from other people of different villages. The

parts of the body where a person is marked and the way in which the marks are made all help in identifying a person as belonging to one group or another. For example, Oshodi (2013) indicated that the Pele style of marking peculiar to the Yoruba of Nigeria has three different versions:

- i. The Pele Ijesa which are thick, half-inch vertical lines on both sides of the nose down to the mouth.
- ii. Pele Ekiti, a quarter inch horizontal line
- iii. Pele Akoko, quarter inch horizontal and vertical lines.

An individual's tribe or family typically dictates the pattern in which tribal marks are inscribed on their faces, stomachs or legs.

Body marks were used as a source of identification in ancient tradition and custom of Africa and it was a rich culture; it was also a form of legitimacy in some cultures. They were used at an augmented pace during the times of tribal war and slavery. The marks helped in identifying people as coming from a particular tribe, town or family (Thicc , 2012).

Markings and scarifications are not only used to identify people as belonging to a particular tribe, lineage, family or village; they are helpful in identifying collected objects which help trace the history of the particular ethnic group such as Dengense figure of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chokwe Chihongo mask of Angola and the Luluwa figure also of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

History of Body Marks among the Dangmes

The selected Dangme groups have all spent a great deal of time together from migration to their current settlement hence there exist some similarities in their language, cultural practices and the like (Ankrah, 2013). Some schools of thought exist about the history of body marking among the selected Dangme groups in Ghana. On one hand, the history of body marking is traced to ancestry, being that body marks existed in the family or village where their ancestors hail from and for this reason, body marking is done as a sign of respect to those ancestors. On the other hand it is considered to be an inspiration drawn from the gods as there is the vivid belief in the spiritual realm among the Dangmes.

In the past, body marking was done based on the family of the bearer. Though it is not all the families among the Dangme ethnic group who practice the art of body marking, among the families that practiced it, they had distinctive marks that distinguished their members from other families. This is still seen today where some families still practice body marking while other families do not indulge in the practice.

Among the Dangmes, despite the different reasons for making body marks, they all had one thing in common; the natives of Dangme considered the art as an all-spiritual affair. Native Dangmes believed in the existence of a spiritual world aside the physical one in which we live. To them, for something to manifest in this world, it has to have happened in the spiritual world. In past years, before body marking was done, the help of a traditional priest or priestess was sought and these priests or priestesses were consulted to verify the identity of a child the moment the child is born. For families that practiced body marking, they consulted these priests or priestesses (who served as intermediaries between the physical and the spiritual world) to find out whether or not a child should be marked. The main reason for consulting the gods before the marking took place was to have the concern of the gods and to find out whether or not they agreed with the process for that particular child. There were occurrences where children were believed to embody the souls of past kings and queens and the souls demanded, through the priests or priestesses, that the children be marked for identification (S. Attiapah, *Personal Communication*; 3rd February, 2015).

There is a long line of narratives when it comes to the history of body marking among the selected Dangme groups and Dangmes as a whole; some of which were influenced by others. With time, different clans and families among the ethnic groups adopted body marks to serve different needs and for different valid reasons.

Concepts of Body Marking for Identification

Body marking is a process that involves making an incision unto the skin. This incision is allowed to heal with the intention of leaving a permanent mark. It is also referred to as a mark made on the skin with a tool for specific identification purposes. There are varied definitions of body (tribal) marks that describes the processes and sometimes also the step by step procedure involved. Dennis (2007) states that body marking is an art made

on the body, with the body, or consisting of the human body. The most common forms of body markings are tattoos, body piercings, scarification, branding, sub-dermal implants, full body tattoo and body painting. Irving (2007) postulates that, body marks are made on the body with its main uses being medical, decoration, spiritual protection and tribal or family identification. On the other hand, Ayoolake (2010) compares ethnic marks (body marks) to '*oriki*', which means 'attributes' in Yoruba, saying that the two are in close conjunction with each other such that, it is for the purpose of identification that the two exist.

Ogunjinmi (2010) argues that, body marks serve as a family's identity hence, it is necessary that each member of a family receives one to preserve the family lineage and culture. Reveur (2011) also indicates that body marks are used as a symbol of identity in particular tribes and they express the individual's religious or spiritual belief, self-protection, identification, social status, medical protection and mythical identity. Almost all ethnic groups or societies that practice body marking have identification as its primary purpose.

Undeniably, body marks have been an important aspect of culture and history where many ancient cultures have helped to provide clues as to its long history through their artistic outputs. Historically, body marking is sometimes used to trace the history of a particular group of people. Many of the human figures found from 8000BC – 5000BC, rock paintings found in the Tassili n'Ajjer mountains range in the Sahara and Olmec stone sculptures dating from around 1000BC found at Villahermosa in Mexico feature incisions on the face and shoulders and show markings that represent body marking (Rivers, 2011).

From another point of view, body markings have served and continue to serve different purposes in different African countries based on belief, tradition and culture. Some of these purposes include and are not limited to conveying information of status, beauty and power, revealing a particular time in one's life or a transitional ritual.

Theoretical Framework

The successful execution of the study was based on two main theories; diffusionism and interpretative anthropology. The theory of diffusionism is an anthropological school of thought that describes the spread of certain ideas, customs and practices from one culture to the other formed the theoretical basis for this study (Haviland, Prins, Walrath & McBride, 2011). Interpretivism on the other hand seeks to bring to bare the underlying reasons why people from different cultures do what they do.

Undoubtedly, the practice of body marks have been passed on from generation to generation and from culture to culture. As body markings move swiftly from one culture to the other, varied meanings and purposes are attached to them. They remain one aspect of culture that has been subjected to different meanings and purposes ranging from communication to identification, beautification and so on based on the cultural orientation of the group of people practicing it regardless of its origin.

To aid in the better understanding of the interpretations and concepts of body marking, the symbolic and interpretive anthropological theory was used. According to Diah, Hossain, Mustari and Ramli (2014), symbolic anthropology sees culture as a mental phenomenon that cannot be molded by mathematics or logic. McGee and Warms (2012) also state that symbolic anthropology deals with the interpretation of a symbolic action.

Clifford Geertz, who was one of the major contributors of symbolic anthropology, assumed that important symbols and actions have many layers of meaning and their power is derived from this fact. He further encouraged that ethnographers and anthropologists adopt the use of "thick description" in defining a phenomena. The use of thick description guided the descriptive method in the discussion to give vivid explanation of the symbolic systems which in this case is body marks per the explanation given by the Dangmes.

According to Kessing (1974), Geertz's texts were not disembodied and decontextualized myths or customs but humans engaging in symbolic action where the symbols and meanings are shared by social actors. Geertz again tried to establish the fact that culture is an organized collection of symbolic systems and that these systems were a means of transmitting meanings. Thus, his view of culture is semiotic, where the study of culture involves the study of shared codes of meanings.

Body marks for identification among the Dangmes were identified and defined according to the meanings the Dangmes had constructed based on their culture and their tradition. The study was supported by the symbolic

and interpretive anthropology theory where body markings were viewed as a mental phenomenon in the lives of the Dangmes and the meanings were derived from two main points of view, that is, the metaphysical view and the symbolic view. The metaphysical view dealt with the meanings attached to these body markings based on their belief in the deities, spiritual beings, their ancestors and the spiritual realm whereas the symbolic view dealt with the shared codes of meanings among members of the society and the fact that the symbolic functions of these marks helped identify them as Dangmes.

Methodology

The study made use, of the qualitative approach; with personal interviews to gather data on body marks. In the quest to understand the meanings attached to body marks for identification among the Dangmes and to identify the various types of body marks, the qualitative research method proved to be the best option; in that, it allowed the researcher to study and understand the Dangmes and the various meanings they have constructed and attached to their lives. Merriam (2009) states that qualitative research method allows a researcher to study a particular group of people and understand the meanings that the people have attached to various phenomena.

The methods used include ethnographic practices such as observing and interviewing. In this case, the body marks of the Dangmes were described in detail and the meanings were expatiated with less prominence on the statistical aspect of data collection. Sibanda (2009) supports this by stating that, the relevant data when gathered can be generalized across the group of people in a study. The data that was gathered aided in generalizing its results across the people of Ningo, Gbugbla (Prampram) and Ada.

Population for the Study

Noheli (2011) defines a population as a well-defined collection of individuals or objects known to have similar characteristics. The number of people that are covered during a study is the population. In other words, it is a set of people under consideration in a study hence; Population is generally a large collection of individuals such as the Dangmes in Ningo, Prampram and Ada who form the main focus the study to be conducted. The target population for this research were the selected Dangme groups

- Inhabitants of Ningo
- Inhabitants of Prampram and
- Inhabitants of Ada

All of whom are with or without body marks. The total accessible population was 90 respondents; 30 from each of the three Dangme groups.

Data Collection

The main form of data collection for this report was done through interviews and the data was collected from traditional leaders, elders (the elderly in the community) and the youth (18 years - 40 years). Data was collected from 90 respondents which formed the accessible population; 30 from each of the selected communities, that is, Ningo, Prampram and Ada. Out of the 90 respondents, a sample size of 60 was drawn and the information provided by the sample was used in the discussion of the results and findings.

Discussion of Findings

Commencement of Body Marks in Ada

Adjonyo (2014) stated that body marking started among the people of Ada when desperate women in need of children started consulting oracles and deities for help. After the women were granted the children they needed, the terms of these deities were for the children to bear the mark of the deities on their faces (especially their cheeks) to show how powerful the deities were and to identify the children as children of deities; an example of such a mark was the *Agbee bi bo* (as seen in Figure 1). When these children obtained from deities grew older they were sometimes made to serve the deities responsible for their birth.



Figure 1: Agbee bi bɔ on the left cheek of the figure

Source: Illustration by Sylvester Lumor

Most of the children who are conceived by the help of these deities often do not only have the body marks but also had special names that identified them as such.

Adjonyo (2014) further indicated that the people reasoned that, since the deities were able to grant barren women with children, the deities could further help them with their several health challenges. The priests and priestesses were consulted continuously with cases of child birth and other health related issues. The deities provided the people with all the help they needed irrespective of the situation brought before them (deities). This made the practice of body marking very common as the deities always demanded that in return for their assistance the people must bear the marks of the deity.

In Ningo and Prampram, there are different anecdotes surrounding the commencement of body marking. Most families in Ningo practice the art of body marking hence there is no precise account as to its origination.

Traditional Names of Body Marks

Body marks found in various parts of Ghana are usually addressed by the name of the first practitioner, the part of the body where it is found or a general name that has been accepted by the people (Nubuor, 1985). The names of the body marks found in Ningo, Prampram and Ada are mostly based on the part of the body where the marking was made or the reason for which the mark was made. In all the three traditional groups, body marking is generally termed as “*bɔ pomi*”. “*Bɔ pomi*” has its origin from ‘*bɔ*’ which simply means mark and ‘*pomi*’ which means the act of cutting something, making it the ideal term since it means the cutting of a mark. There are no variations in the names of these marks due to the similarities in language and other salient parts of the culture of the people of Ningo, Gbugbla (Prampram) and Ada. Some of the names of body marks identified during the study include:

Table 1: Table indicating the names and literal meaning of the body marks identified

NAMES OF BODY MARKS	LITERAL TRANSLATION
Gbeba	“Die and come back”
So gbɔ bɔ	“Clan mark”
Sé bɔ	“Chair mark”
Fɛo bɔ	“Beauty mark”
Akaba	“Slash”
Kunɔ nane bɔ	“Mark of the feet of a cock”
Semi bɔ	“Back mark”
Joku-joku	“Strokes”
Pusu hiɔ bɔ	“Heavens sickness mark”
Blɔ kpɛ bi/ Agbee bi bɔ	“Middle of the road child”/ “Child of a deity”

Marks for Identification

In the past, identification among different clans was a major issue as it helped clan and tribe members in diverse ways. An individual was able to be identified by the mark he or she bore on a part of the body. As stated in the introduction, according to Roper (2004), cuts that are generally made on the face of a person show the individual as belonging to a specific tribe or clan. It helped individuals who had lost their way to trace their steps back to their homelands; this was very common during the era of the slave trade and this is supported by Ajayi and Kola-Aderoju (2009) that tribal markings became common in the 1800’s not only for ethnic identity but because it allowed one to retain their roots. It was very necessary to bear the mark of the tribe or ethnic group one belonged to on some part of the body.

In an attempt to validate the information unearthed about marks for identification among the three Dangme groups, the names of the marks were deliberated upon in all the interviews and 31 of the respondents representing 51.6% of the sample studied (which constituted both bearers and non-bearers of body marks), confirmed that the recognized body marks for identification among the three Dangme groups are the *so gbɔ bɔ*, *Akaba*, *Sé bɔ*, *Kunɔ nane bɔ* and the mark obtained after the *niwomi* rites as they are the marks that identified people as members from a clan and members from the Dangme ethnic group as a whole.

Bɔ

As stated earlier, *bɔ* is a term that basically means mark. It is done on the face of a child usually by the decision of the child’s parents. If the mark is not done by the parents’ decision, it can be done if it exists in the family. Families and clans among the Dangme ethnic group have their peculiar practices and such is the art of body marking. Body marking is performed in some families and clans while other families and clans do not perform them. For families and clans that do perform them, they are done for various reasons and their names are spiritual or pertain to the reasons for making them. As *bɔ* means mark, it is sometimes preceded by the part of the body where the mark is made, the name of the mark or the reason for which the mark is made.

So gbɔ bɔ



Figure 2: An elderly woman in Ningo bearing the *so gbɔ bɔ* on her left cheek

Source: Researchers

Marks seen on the faces and arms of the bearers identify them as members of the Dangme tribe and though they may be similar to marks existing in other ethnic groups, they have their own purposes and interpretations. In a personal communication with Mr Samuel Attiapah (an elderly resident of Ningo), he revealed that among the Dangmes identification became a major issue between different families upon their final settlement after migration. He further stated that upon settlement, many families needed to differentiate themselves from one another for better protection of fellow family members hence the rise of the *so gbɔ bɔ* (refer to Figure 2) especially among the Ningo people as the mark is given because of the clan one hails from. The *so gbɔ bɔ* was done on a large scale for people belonging to the same clan for the purpose of identification. With time, other types of body marks rose also for the purpose of identification but these ‘new’ marks did not only identify one as a member of a clan but as a member of the Dangme ethnic group. Some examples of these marks are *Akaba* (refer to Figures 4 and 5) and the *Kunɔ nane bɔ* (refer to Figure 6).

So gbɔ bɔ (figure 2) is a mark that is given to a child because of the clan the child belongs to; as stated earlier, these body markings exist among some families and clans and the specific names given to body marking that is done because of one’s clan is the *so gbɔ bɔ*. The *so gbɔ bɔ* is one of the faintest marks and is sometimes difficult to see as it is done for the sole purpose of identifying an individual to a clan. Usually, the only form of medication that is inserted into the cut are herbs and they are used to stop the bleeding and not necessarily to leave a prominent mark or scar. Among the selected Dangme groups (Ningo, Prampram and Ada), about 63% of the sample size agreed to the knowledge that the *so gbɔ bɔ* is a mark that one bears because of the clan the bearer is from and out of the 63% that had knowledge of the *so gbɔ bɔ* 12% bore the mark on their faces. The practice of the *so gbɔ bɔ* is very common among the people of Ningo. 5% of these respondents in Ningo indicated that there may be another reason for bearing the *so gbɔ bɔ* and this could be due to the fact that a member of the family or the family head may have consulted the deities for special juju to protect all the members of the family hence in return for the favour of the gods and for the purpose of protection, the members of that family will have to bear the *so gbɔ bɔ*.

Sɛ bɔ

There is also the *Sɛ bɔ* that is done for members of the royal family who are entitled to the throne. Such people are marked from childhood depending on their lineage. *Sɛ bɔ* (as illustrated in Figure 3) literally translates “chair mark” and this is done to mark a child or any member of a family who is entitled to the throne. The *Sɛ bɔ* is one of the smallest types of body marks that is done on the face of the bearer. The *Sɛ bɔ* is about 0.5cm and is found close to the mouth of the bearer; it is also one of such marks that are barely visible from afar.



Figure 3: The Sé bɔ close to the left side of the mouth of the figure

Source: Illustration by Sylvester Lumor

Akaba

This is a term which also means a slash (mark); it is done on the face for identification, as seen in figures 4 and 5. It is a 3cm - 3.5cm long diagonal gash done on the left cheek of the bearer. *Akaba* is practice among the selected Dangme groups under study and it is done for identification, as is the *Kunɔ nane bɔ* (literally meaning feet of a cock). *Akaba* is a type of body marking was done to bring variations between the body marks for identification. It is merely a straight line while the *Kunɔ nane bɔ* (figure 6) is in three strokes. *Akaba* is widely practiced among the three Dangme groups Ningbo, Prampram and Ada. 5% of the total sample size bore the *Akaba* on their left cheeks.



Figure 4: An elderly woman with the Akaba on her left cheek

Source: Researchers



Figure 5: A Ningo woman with the Akaba on her left cheek

Source: Researchers

Kunṅɔ nane bɔ

The term literally means ‘the mark of the feet of a cock’. The cock is the totem of Ga-Dangme and members of the Dangme tribe deemed it appropriate to bear, the totem of the ethnic group they belong to for the sole purpose of identification as members of the Dangme tribe. It is rare finding this type of mark and this is due to the fact that the *Akaba* also serves the same purpose and it is that which is often seen on the faces of Dangmes. The *Kunṅɔ nane bɔ* is also done on both sides of the face, close to the eye to represent the feet of the cock. The symbol identified as *Kunṅɔ nane bɔ*, that is, the three diagonal strokes resembling the feet of a cock can also be seen in the *gbeba* mark where three diagonal strokes are made for medical reasons and protection from death. In the case of the *gbeba* the three strokes are not serving the purpose of identification but rather serving medical purposes by protecting the bearer from death. The length of the *Kunṅɔ nane bɔ* usually ranges from 3cm to 4cm depending on the person making the incision.

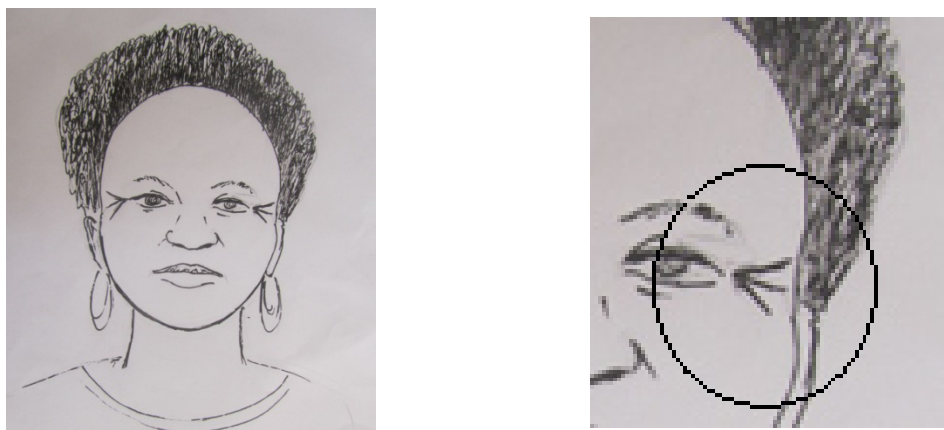


Figure 6: Kunṅɔ nane bɔ (mark of the feet of the cock)

Source: Illustration by Sylvester Lumor

Niwomi is the traditional puberty rights of the people of Ada; this rite is done for the wealthy in the society as it requires a lot of money to go through the process. *Niwomi* is a Dangme word that literally means “wearing something”. The young girls who are meant to go through the rites are kept in a room for a week. This is done prior to the day of the big festival “*Asafotufiami*”, which is performed on the first Friday in August; the girls are kept in a room one week before the beginning of the festival. On the day of the outdoor, the Saturday of the durbar, the girls come out one after the other, carrying huge brass pans which contain everything that a married

woman (per the culture of the Ada) should use to dress and polish herself up. Some of the stuff include cloths, powder, perfumes, combs, just to mention a few.

The initiates parade in single profile wearing beads around their ankles and wrists, below their knees and around their arms; slightly above the elbows. The beads are in pairs and dyed raffia is to keep them together. After the procession through the main town, they are then made to perform the traditional *Klama*, *Kpatsa* and *Awa* dances in front of one of the traditional homes. The initiates are meant to continue wearing the beads (the ones slightly above their elbows) for a period of one to two weeks, never to take them off, until the beads leave a permanent mark on their arms. For those with tough skins, if after the allocated period they still have no marks, the beads are removed and a sharp edge such as a blade is used to make tiny incisions around the arm where the beads are fixed again so as to leave the permanent mark expected. This then becomes a mark of identification for such people to show that they have undergone the puberty rite and to subsequently identify them as Dangme women (C. Nubuor, B. Nubuor & K. Adjonyo, *Personal Communication*, 12th September, 2014).



Plate 7: The beads that leave a mark after the niwomi rites

Source: Researchers

There is a possibility that the main reason for bearing such a mark was for members to show commitment to the ethnic group they belonged to. When committed to a group, it is only advisable to go according to the laws of the group and portray the respect and devotion the individual has for the group, and among the Dangmes one of the ways of showing their respect and commitment was to bear the mark of the group. This can be compared to the level of devotion among some Chinese tribes as stated by Murano (2013) that show devotion to oneself and the community where young boys of Southern Thai in Phuket insert sharp metal objects into their cheeks as a sign of devotion.

Conclusion

The results derived from this study indicate that body marks for identification, as pertaining to the Ghanaian way of life needs to be understood before conceptions or misconceptions are drawn. Marks for identification exist in many of the ethnic groups in Ghana and though they all have similar appearances, the reasons and meanings are varied. The meanings of body marks for identification in one tribe may differ from another hence an equal understanding needs to be drawn when it comes to the issue of body marks.

As the nation is striving for the status of national identity (Ghanaian identity), it is only appropriate to state that further research be done among other ethnic groups in the nation, across all forms of discussion and mainly on cultural practices that have been passed down from generation to generation to understand the need for such practices and the social, educational, political, religious and cultural implications attached to them. This will go a long way in helping solve current issues that arise in the nation.

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