

Body Adornment Practises in Nigerian Culture A Multi-Ethnic Investigation

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Introduction

Man is by nature rational. This implies that his actions are usually not fortuitous. Man's use of body adornment is thus a reasoned and deliberate attempt to leverage himself psychologically. As the only living creatures who are aware of their own selves, human beings use their bodies as mediums of artistic expression, by endowing the skin with special significance. Through the use of a precise iconography, 'body' therefore becomes message with its decorations symbolising a wide range of meanings.

Body adornment is a significant cultural activity which is widely practiced by the many ethnic groups which are found in the vast continent of Africa. Some of these decorations are made in form of temporary body designs, while others are permanent body designs. These body designs emphasis fixed social, political and religious roles. Body adornment in most African societies has been known to bestow a specific role in the community, celebrate the passage into sexual maturity, or confirm spiritual experience.

Body designing, more than any other art, tends to indicate social status and social structure and they nearly always follow aesthetic as well as social canons (Hewitt 15). In many traditional societies, in which climate and custom permit scant clothing, body designing is common and is considered to be artistically and socially valuable. As Trowel (45) observes:

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The exposure of more parts of the body, because of their hot climate, made the Africans skillfully decorate the body.

Body design distinguishes and differentiates an individual, and the precise meaning of the designs or patterns is unique for each person and society. Among the Baule of Ivory Coast for instance, permanent body designing is made purely for cosmetic purposes. The Baule present a good example of the fashions of body designs, which varied from time to time and from place to place. Vogel (82) identifies a common pattern which was recurrent among the Baule. This consisted of three, six or nine small scars on the nose. Bohannon (76) also gives evidence of the passing trends in body adornment among the Tiv of Nigeria. He observes that Tiv body adornment is purely aesthetic and the designs may mark the wearer's generation since the patterns change about every ten years or according to fashion.

One discovers that in most African societies, temporary body designs as well as permanent body adornment have social and ritual significance at the same time as they still have to satisfy the human need for beauty. Thus, in body art, attention is drawn to certain parts of the body, and their attractions are emphasised. Negri (9-10) identifies two major types of permanent body adornment among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. She goes ahead to bring all the markings made for ethnic identity under one category. An example is the Ogbomosho face-marks which are drawn as gashes from the edge of the scalp to the jaw. These, have definite forms to distinguish various families within a tribe, or geographical area. In the second category could be found decoration marks and fertility symbols. An example is the fin-fin cuts which are made in groups which formed geometric patterns over almost the

whole of a woman's body. These marks enhance feminine appeal. The Yombe of Zaire are also interested in promoting female beauty. Some form of elaborate body markings which cover the back and front of a woman among the Yombe, illustrate a lengthy process which begins at the age of ten and is completed when a woman reaches adulthood and is eligible for marriage. The patterns mimic the patterns apparent in basketwork and textiles (Hooper 182).

Patterns which re-occur throughout African societies are reproduced on the body since they represent the people's beautiful qualities. Social and ethnic values are imprinted using aesthetically pleasing design patterns. Among the various ethnic groups of Nigeria, Negri (14) identifies the Ichi marks of the Igbo which distinguishes the wearer as a man of valour, a man of honour, and a man on whose shoulders communal responsibilities could be thrust. Others are the Gbere marks of the Yoruba ethnic group which were made for protection, the royal marks of Benin made for its aesthetic appeal, the Fulani face marks made for ethnic identity and for the enhancement of facial features, and many other permanent body design practices.

Temporary body designing has been recorded as possessing great social values for the many ethnic groups found in the African continent. Two types of temporary body designs are distinguishable among the many design practices – the temporarily indelible make-up designs which lasted a few days, weeks or months as the case may be; and the instant make-up designs that washed-off straight away. Among ancient Egyptians for instance, we are told that cosmetics was a way of life, and therefore, men and women followed the latest fashions in make-up. Thus, in *Women's Beauty, Hygiene and Fashion in Egypt*, the writer observes that; "Everyone from the poor to the pharaohs had make-up...The difference being

the range and quality of the products" (3). Temporary make-up for them included rouge made of iron oxide, while Malachite, a copper ore was the basis of a green make-up used to adorn the eye; the colour of which symbolised fertility. Dark grey eye paint was also used and this was a derivative of a lead ore called Galena. Eye make-up was also believed to have had magical and medicinal purposes. Galena for instance, not only protected its wearer from the 'evil Eye', but also contained disinfectants and deterred flies.

Many scholars thus bear witness to the centrality of body designs in the socio-cultural sphere of traditional African societies.

Temporary Body Designs in Nigerian Culture

Among the Hausa in the Northern part of Nigeria, Negri (14) observes that the application of temporary body make-up is a widespread practice. Henna or Laili make-up is extensively used by women to design the hands and the feet. On the 'night of Henna' which is a pre-marriage ceremony observed among women in the North, the hands and feet are usually immersed in a pot of henna liquid and in some cases, intricate patterns are drawn on the palms and the heel using henna dye. Other types of temporary make-up used amongst the Hausa/Fulani women, are black indigo which is rubbed into the hair, yellow ochre used on the lips, and red camwood which is rubbed over the teeth. One of the make-up materials that enjoy cross-cultural patronage in Nigeria is Tiro (native antimony or lead –ore). This make-up material is usually ground into a fine substance which may be mixed with soot and indigo for a more attractive colour. Tiro is kept in a small phial and applied on the eyelid with a thin ivory or bone-stick, thus affecting a blush-black tinge. To complete their body adornment, Fulani women usually plait and decorate their hair elaborately

using beads and false hair. The hair is often done in very long plaits which are decorated with coloured beads and pieces of metal and are arranged in bunches. Numerous coloured beads sewn into a band are worn round the head and neck; strings of beads on the neck, and rows of bangles on the wrist.

Other temporary make-up practices exist in the body design repertoire of the Nigerian society. Uli body design tradition among the Igbo for instance has held much fascination for many scholars including early European visitors who met the Igbo already practicing the make-up technique. Basden in his book *Niger Ibos* which he wrote after having spent seventeen years among the Igbo, narrated seeing both men and women wearing the design. Temporary body design practices found among the Igbo include Uli, Ufie, Ogaalu, Ede Ala, Uli Ogbu, *Nzu*, Uli Ede, and Edo, body designs. These designs held great significance for the traditional society which practiced them, because they possessed aesthetic appeal, and were utilised as aids to intra-cultural communication. Among all these body design traditions, Uli stands out as the most popular design practice. Uli body designing is a unique make-up art practiced by the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. Uli is the art of decorating the body in patterns of designs with liquid juices extracted from the Uli pods which belong to the Randi Cordetta tree. The liquid is a dark monochromatic indigo dye containing the colouring agent indigotin, which is obtained from a variety of plants and used for body decoration. The dye which is extracted from the pods of specific varieties of trees or the fruits from a shrub-like plant is known as Uli. The plants which yield the pods or fruits from which the dye is extracted are known as Uli, and when the dye is applied to the skin, the patterns or motifs created as designs on the body are also called Uli. Uli therefore, refers to the material and method of design presentation, using the human body for the exhibition

Uli design is made with liquid extracted from seeds embedded in fleshy pulp in pods of some species of Uli plant, or the fruits from a species of Uli plant. There are varied species of the Uli plant. These species are known by different names in different communities of Igbo land, but their functions are basically the same. The species are: Uli Oba or Uli Mkpò or Uli Obodobo (*Rothmania Whitfield*), Uli Nkilisi or Uli Mkpuru (*Cremaspora Triflora*), and Uli Ede Eji or Uli Ataeshi (*Gardenia Imperialis*).

The make-up session starts with moisturisation of the body in preparation for the application of Uli designs. This is done by massaging Ufie into the body in liberal quantity, as a base for Uli make-up. Usually, a person to be designed with Uli, is required to take his/her bath so as to remove dirt, sweat and oil – deposits from the skin. In most communities in Imo and Abia states, *Ede Ala* or *Uri Ede* which serves the same function as *Nkasiani* in Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi states, could be used to design the body as a complementary background to Uli designs.

In order to design a person with Uli, the designer would first procure the pod(s) of the Uli plant, and scoop out the seeds bedded in fleshy pulp, using *Mma Nko*; or collect the fruits from the species which produce fruits that cluster into bunches on the stem of the plant. Usually, care is taken to ensure that the pod is mature but also not so ripe that the seeds would have started drying up. The seedy pulp thus scooped out, would be ground on the *Okwa Uli*. The liquid extracted from the paste is usually greyish in colour. A little water could be added and in some cases, a little ground charcoal as the case may be. Then using the *Mkpisi Uli* or *Mma Nwuli*, the designer dips into the liquid and draws patterns on a client's body. The design motifs could take any shape – from stars, moon, squares, triangular and circular shapes, to abstract

strokes, or designs derived from the movement of animate objects, societal names, or combinations, depending on the creative ingenuity of the designer, and the design needs of a client.

When Uli designs are made on the body, they do not appear very dark at first, until the person washes her body; then, the beautiful intricate patterns become darker and more distinct. The designs come out black or deep grey in colour and are usually beautiful and aesthetically pleasing to behold. Uli designs stay on the body for four or five days before they would begin to fade or wear off. By the eighth or ninth day, they would have disappeared entirely. When the designs gradually wear off, they may be retouched by retracing the patterns with fresh Uli liquid or on the other hand, the old designs could be allowed to fade off entirely, then a wholly new process of Uli designing would be carried out.

Many other forms of temporary body designs exist in traditional Igbo society. Some serve as complementary backgrounds for Uli designs, others are applied as a base or subsequent enhancement for Uli, while yet, others exist as independent make-up materials /designs in their own rights. Because of the central position which Uli make-up occupies in the society, many other forms of designs have wittingly or unwittingly become associated with it. Some of these designs came into existence in the designer's bid to discover ways of enhancing Uli designs. Some are designs which were already in existence, and in the process of experimentation, became integrated into Uli designing process. Others have existed side by side with Uli for so long that it is difficult to determine the exact inception of the union, or whether in fact, the two design forms evolved simultaneously as a unique combination.

Nzu (native chalk) is a form of temporary body make-up mostly used for purification purposes in communities found in

Edo, Benue, Oyo, Cross River, Imo, and Delta states, to mention but a few. It is usually in form of a white chalk or tablet which is used by traditional worshippers for cleansing and purification and it is believed to possess great significance. For example, when *Nzu* is applied by native doctors around the eyes and on the body or ankle, the belief is that it cleanses the eyes of evil impediments to enable the seer commune with spirits. In cases involving ritual purification, or during festivals in honour of gods, *Nzu* make-up would be applied all over the body or on the images of the gods in whose honour the festivals are being celebrated. In traditional society, a soldier would go to great lengths to smear his face and other exposed parts of his body with *Nzu*, a dancer her face, legs and hands, and a traditional healer, his face and eyes. *Nzu* is believed to possess the ability to frighten away both human and spirit enemies. Psychological arming is thus a veritable function of *Nzu* make-up.

Nzu make-up is mostly obtained from river beds and sites where kaolin deposits are found. In preparing the *Nzu* make-up, *Nzu* chalk is ground into a powdery substance and mixed with water. When applied on the body, it gives a sharp white or creamy white tone after it has dried up. *Nzu* is believed to be medicinal and as such, it is applied by people suffering from measles or heat rashes. It is a temporary mode of design which easily comes off when washed.

Permanent Body Decorations (Incised Body Designs)

Body incision is a widely practiced art in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Every ethnic group has its own pattern of designs specific to it. Even amongst the people of the same ethnic group, there are distinctions in the nature of the marks or designs, depending on who is to be designed and the purpose for which he/she is to be designed. Apart from the temporary

designs such as laili, Uli, Ogalu, tiro and others, there are permanent designs in the nature of decorative markings, symbolic marks, identification marks, marks of honour/valour and some forms of cicatrisation. Some of these terms are used interchangeably, but there may exist a slight difference in method. While these forms of designs refer to incisions made on the skin, there is a distinction, in that, symbolic marks, identification marks and marks of honour/valour are made, using sharp instruments such as knives and glasses, in such a way as to control the shape of the marks on the parts of the body where they are made. Decorative markings, fashion marks, and other forms of cicatrisation are a special form of the former, and therefore require a more intensive craft. The process involves a systematic cutting out of some flesh from the skin thereby creating a gash which later heals and leaves a permanent pattern. Through this process, many elaborate patterns of geometric designs may be incised into the skin of the neck, chest and torso. Thus Negri (14) makes this observation:

Cicatriziation in this form was used on both men and women. It was usually effected at the time of puberty. Such cicatrization was a mark of bravery for boys, and for girls, a part of the fertility rites connected with coming – of – age ceremonies.

Among the Yoruba ethnic group, two major types of body designs are distinguishable, and both are permanent. The first type is facial or body marks made for ethnic identity, while the second are those used as decoration and fertility symbols. An example of facial marks are the “Royal Marks of Oyo” which are drawn as gashes on the whole length of the arms and legs, while the fin-fin body designs which were made in groups of

geometric patterns over almost the whole of a woman’s body present a good example of decoration marks. Although most Yoruba body designs had symbolic or decorative significance connected with marriage and birth, there were others which had magical purposes. Abiku marks were of this type. They were tiny cuts made in one or two parallel line or lines over the back and shoulders and rubbed-in with medicinal spices believed to have the power to prevent the Abiku-child from dying and going back to the spirit world. To reinforce the efficacy, iron chains were placed around the child’s neck, and tiny bells tied to his/her ankles. Other magical marks were “Ghost marks” which were circular raised discs made on the limbs and body and which were rubbed-over with native chalk. Other ethnic groups such as the Bura of Bornu state and the Igala of Kogi state have permanent facial marks which are used for ethnic Identification.

For the Igbo ethnic group, permanent body designs played very significant roles in the traditional society. Among these, are Egbugbu marks which consist of three or four vertical lines beneath the eyes, usually made for identification purposes on brave young men who may have passed through the ‘initiation into Adulthood’ rites or such coming-of-age ceremonies. Among some communities found in present day Ebonyi, Anambra and Enugu States, some form of tribal marks were given, although this was not a wide-spread practice. Such marks were not as elaborate as Yoruba tribal marks for instance; rather, they could usually consist of single short deep or shallow gashes which may be straight or slanting on either side of the cheek or beside the eyes.

There were other decorative marks given for their aesthetic qualities and curative attributes. The latter is usually given to people suffering from one ailment or the other, or those under the influence of some supernatural forces, such as the Ogbanje

children (children who are believed to have the power to die and reincarnate as many times as desired). Such children were given some cuts which are believed to have the potency to halt this cyclic movement. Marks given for aesthetic purposes or to follow fashion trends were made in accordance with the whims and preferences of the adorer. There were face marks which were not for identification, but for beauty purposes, even though the designs may be peculiar to specific communities. In Awka, the present capital of Anambra state for instance, the women were given a series of cuts down the forehead, reaching to the bridge of the nose. These marks were accompanied by a cross or two crescents, just above the level of the eyes, with a 'rosette' beside the eye.

Ichi, a highly significant facial design among the Igbo, has a cultural function and an aesthetic quality, as well as some social significance. As a cultural expressive art, *Ichi* design was considered a prerequisite for ?z? title taking in traditional Igbo society. As aesthetic majors, *Ichi* designs were made, for the special beauty and masculinity they bestowed on the man who had undergone the process of getting incised. The designs are used to decorate the face, giving the wearer, a new and unique demeanour. In terms of social significance, *Ichi* is used to express bravery among males so much so that a man wearing *Ichi* marks is by popular consensus regarded as a responsible and highly significant member of the society. The process of creating *Ichi* marks is a long and painful process during which the face is permanently patterned. In most communities in Igbo traditional society, every man is eligible to have *Ichi* designs made on him, but the restrictions come when one wants to take the ?z? title. In the whole of Igboland, the craft of *Ichi* designing is peculiar to the people of Umudioka in Anambra state, who exercise the sole right and expertise to give *Ichi* marks. Though the reason for this monopoly is not

exactly clear, one thing that is obvious is that the *Ichi* designers take their craft as a serious business and travel from place to place scouting for customers; some times even traveling to distant towns to settle and ply their craft. As a means of advertisement, they give *Ichi* marks to their sons as early as six or seven years, and then take them along in their travels. This is in line with Negri's (14) observation that:

Mark cutting was a hereditary profession, handed down from father to son in families of mark-cutters. The families normally formed themselves into a union, in order to protect the secrets of their art and livelihood.

Every *Ichi* craftsman is called a "Nwadioka". The method of making *Ichi* designs follows a peculiar procedure. A hole will be dug in the ground on which a tree trunk will be placed across. The *Okwe* tree is favoured because it is a tree that does not produce gum when cut. The candidate would be made to lie on the ground with his head on the tree stump, facing skywards. The Nwadioka first of all scrapes the whole hair on the candidate's head and then makes a small mark known as "atincho" on his forehead. Thereafter, he starts cutting gashes, starting from the forehead, with a small pointed knife, which has its two edges well sharpened. As the Nwadioka is making the gashes, an assistant would be beside him dropping hot water on the wound immediately after each cut, so as to minimise the pains and also to give some respite, so that the next cut would be made. The common method is for the Nwadioka to remove the outer layer of the flesh, wait for the hot water to be dropped on the wound, and then remove the inner layer of the flesh. When the Nwadioka finishes, his attendant then takes the responsibility of dressing the wound so that the *Ichi* would heal well, otherwise, the wound may

become infected and attended by suppuration.

Great care is taken to dress the *Ichi* wounds every morning and evening. It would be cleaned with hot water and in the process; some pus would appear on the wound. After the cleaning, some herbal medicine would be dropped on it. Finally, a broad leaf from the "Uburu" tree is warmed on the fire and used to cover the wound, to avoid it getting infected. This treatment and care given to the incised man or boy, is referred to, as "Ila Ichi". The healing period lasts for about two weeks and some times, even longer if complications arise. During this period, the incised man is not expected to come out from the "healing room" or to see any woman. There is a belief that if a woman goes into the room where the newly incised man is recuperating, a cause called 'ehi' would fall on the incised man and kill him. However, it is not very difficult to infer the socio-cultural implications of allowing a woman, see a man at his most vulnerable, especially with a smelly, sore-scared and pus-filled face. No man would want to implant such a vision on a woman's memory.

When the wounds have healed, the *Ichi* marks appear very prominently, in parallel rows, over the entire upper part of the face, even including the eye-lids, parts of the nose and the cheek bones, depending on personal preferences and the trade-mark of the Nwadioka. It is usually an occasion of joy when a man has successfully undergone the *Ichi* incision and the healing process. It is common for the newly designed, to go to the market as a form of outing ceremony, where he would receive gifts ranging from food items to household goods. In some cases, the women (Umu Ada) from the man's kindred would cook various assortments of food and bring for the celebration. In years past, every *Ichi* man was a titled man, so he commanded the respect and prestige accorded titled men in the community, and was held in very high esteem

even beyond his community.

Incised body designs, whether made for identification, for beauty purposes, for curative purposes, or for which ever socio-cultural reasons, have aided the many ethnic groups found in Nigeria to define their domain, conquer it, and assuage their desire to achieve aesthetic balance.

Conclusion

Modernity and globalisation have no doubt impacted on traditional attitudes towards autochthonous body decorations. Many design practices have been gradually and even sometimes hurriedly dropped out of the design repertoire. Many of the design practices which existed in traditional society such as facial / tribal markings, have been abandoned. Many urban elites see facial marking as connecting them to an unenlightened past, yet there is no gainsaying that body designs (whether permanent or temporary) are very central to the socio-cultural existence and perpetuation of traditional African societies. The fact that these design practices play important roles in a wide range of ceremonies dealing with rites of passage, healing, war, agriculture and many others, is an indication of the enormous potentials abounding in African body design traditions.

In Nigeria, body designing which is still a feature of some ethnic groups today, has distinct functions. On the one hand, there is the decorative function, but on the other hand, the decoration gives information about status, rank and the membership of people in different groups. Body designs are thus, a part of the personal development from childhood to adulthood, and they are also often used in ritual initiations as a clear sign of the social development. In relation to a woman, the form and style of the designs may indicate if she is married, single or betrothed; or if she is a mother or a widow. With

men, designs are elevated to the level of social distinction where honour and status are clearly spelt out in design language.

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