

TATTOO AND INCISION: ENDANGERED RELICS OF THE YORUBA CULTURE

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Abstract

The research aims at re-examining the relative importance of tattoo and incision as important features of the Yoruba culture. In the light of the recent happenings in terms of modern developments and coupled with the trend of changes that we have experienced globally in respect of the human civilization, the need to review its relevance in those communities where the idea still thrives in our days becomes highly paramount.

Furthermore, the near extinction of the practice as evident in our emerging societies today calls for a sense of concern in our history. This however will help in justifying the need for the re-appraisal of our policies and practices, as the changing trends are evident in our society. We shall further assess the consequences of the near extinction of an integral aspect of the Yoruba culture in the 21st century Nigerian experience.

Introduction

By this research, we are considering the Yoruba people of Nigeria who are predominantly found in the South/Western part of the country. These are people with rich cultural distinction and who have lived with their culture for a long time that if any conscious attempt is made to jeopardize its relative existence, it will in fact be calling for a destructive mission. To them, their culture has served as a functional medium in that it has helped in stating, evaluating and justifying conducts within its established limit. As much as this is the case, there is hardly anything they do that is not given cultural backing with a view of determining deviant attitude within the society. Tattoo in this regard therefore can be defined, as a mark with permanent design or patterns by pricking and putting in dyes or stains especially on the skin while incision on the other hand is an act of cutting through the skin.

There are varying traditions, which attempted to give substantive clue as to when and how the concept actually came about. From the oral tradition, it was said that the idea was initially designed for slaves who were captured and kept in the Oba's Palace. With those traditional marks given to them, one will not have problem identifying who is a legitimate child of an Oba. The marks became necessary because of the large size of the Oba's family in the Yoruba societies. According to oral sources as given by Ladigbolu (1994), it was reported that, when those marks were given to the slaves in the Palace, the wives of the Oba got attracted. The point of attraction was in the beauty, which they saw in those slaves which was at the expense of the legitimate children in the palace. In this regard therefore, the wives of the Oba requested that their own sons and daughters should equally be allowed to carry the tribal mark with a difference. As a safeguard against the ensuing rivalry in the Palace, the Oba had to yield to the request of his wives. The practice was later extended to other people in their respective wards and communities. Each ward or compound as a result has been giving tribal markings to their children as a means of identity.

These practices, as an ennobled tradition is a common event in the pre-independent era within the Yoruba societies. It is a cherished cultural pattern that almost everybody in the then society was bound to carry a tribal mark, which was to him or her symbol of identity for people of the same cultural heritage. Apart from the identity related need, many have had to carry varied markings for protection against agents of the dark world, while in some cases; it is for protection against sickness. In most societies, it also used as a means of enhancing personal beauty particularly among the young ladies.

In the pre-colonial era especially in the Yoruba communities, there were serious rivalries, which resulted into a number of inter-tribal warfare such as the war between the Ekiti people and the Ibadan people in the 18th century. Such wars as prosecuted then in the Yoruba communities accounted for enormous destruction of human lives and material wares given the poor physical, social and economic standards at the period. With those prevalent inter-tribal wars within the Yoruba enclave, there was also the emergence of slave trade activities, which was at the wake of the British exploration of Africa. Although concerted efforts were made to stem the tide of trading in human wares, when it actually proved quite impossible given the intent and desire behind the trade at that time,

the idea of tribal markings, gained much ground. For those who were unfortunate to have been captured and sold into slavery, the tribal mark on him/her facilitated the retracing of his/her root after he/she have been liberated from slavery.

Apart from the above, tribal markings have other related uses such as helping in the stratification of people into classes within the societies. Furthermore, it has assisted in distinguishing between the many related wards in the communities. It has also helped to forestall the danger of having to marry a close relative.

In view of the attached commitment to the exercise, societies have consistently frowned at those who do not have a tribal mark because, it amounts to not identifying with the yearnings and the collective aspiration of their community or worse still; person's beauty has not been enhanced. Such individuals without the traditional mark will surely become the passing word in their society and will be disdained as not having money to enhance his/her beauty. Furthermore, the person's social status will adversely be affected because, he/she is not working in conjunction with prevailing cultural pattern for his/her society.

Tattooing and Incision: A Device for Enhancing Beauty in Yoruba Culture

Daramola and Jeje (1975) reiterated that the practice of incision and tattoo had assisted in enhancing human beauty most especially among the ladies as they are the focus of attraction in any human community. In view of the above fact, women will always be out to do things that will ensure that they are within vogue and that they are accepted in the competitive social structure of their community.

In view of the societal approval of the practice, the Yoruba people have further devised means of enhancing their beauty through the use of juice from a particular tree called *Buje*. In some cases *Ina Bum* was also used, but the strongest and the widely preferred was *Buje*. This is because, it appears better than *Ina Bum* when used on the human body. To achieve this enhancing procedure, there are priests with specialized skills known as *Onikola* i.e. the one who specializes in the given tribal marks. These people took the act as a profession and they were always on hand when called upon. They were known to have travelled very far within the Yoruba communities carrying out this noble assignment. In view of the demand upon them, they must make adequate preparations for their job by consulting the gods who will give them his blessings. This will at least help to prevent the likely complication whether physical or spiritual that may erupt in view of the belief that there are mischievous beings who are out to create unnecessary troubles. In having to give the tribal marks, there are specialized areas of the body where these marks are placed, like Daramola and Jeje further pointed out:

Those marks are not just put in any part of the body but in the following places; forehead, chest, stomach, back and in some cases on the legs and hands as it is common among women and ladies (p. 34).

The associated belief that it will help to enhance one's beauty must have accounted for the reason why most ladies in those days often report to putting such designs on their hands and legs for men to see and in turn for them to get attracted. In view of the communal acceptance, almost all ladies will save enough to enable them tattoo their bodies. More also because of the social pride, parents will always ensure that, their own daughters are not left out in the race that will ensure the beauty of their own children. Another area where effort has also been made to enhance beauty as noticed in those days was in respect of *Eyin-pipa* i.e. adding an additional space in between the two upper incisors. The space in Yoruba Language called is called *Egi*. In those days, they saw it as a way of enhancing beauty because, such lucky people with such are usually showing what they are endowed with, thus attracting their contemporaries to them.

The notion about body incision and tattooing was not peculiar to the Yoruba communities alone because, we have similar practices among the Hausa, Fulani and Nupe people respectively. These people like the Yorubas also carry varied tribal marks perhaps, for the same reason as adduced for the Yoruba people. Their markings are distinctive and peculiar to their respective places. It must also be noted that *Laali* which is an extracted juice from plants was and is still being used for painting of legs and hands, while among the Yoruba people, there are those who still use *Osun* for the painting of their legs as well.

Tattooing and Incision: Endangered Relics of the Yoruba Culture

In the olden days, tattooing and incision were a regular event in view of the credence, which were given to them in the society. However, when the missionaries came into the region with the aim of

evangelism, they came with a sense of racial and religious superiority that they affirmed that nothing of importance at least resides in this part of the world in respect of our religion and culture. This perception must have being egregious. Everything within our culture came under serious fire that, all things possible were done with the intent of destroying them so as to pave way for a new mission that must give birth to an entirely different religion and culture within the existing societies.

In view of the posture that the missionaries took which was encumbrance to our culture, it further enfeebles the structure by emasculating it. The clouts of the missionary presence worsened the situation considerably. Adrian Hasting (1976) through his research effort was able to bring to light the effrontery of the crusading zeal of those missionaries, which eventually became counter productive because of its aim to extirpate the indigenou culture. In his words:

Many missionaries were extremely ignorant of the societies they had come to evangelize, partly next to an ignorance partly blame worthy, partly in inevitable. Moreso, they came with an almost impregnable confidence in the overwhelming superiority of the European west and in all the ways of society and culture, which they had taken for granted in their homes whether evangelical, or orthodox.

The idea in vogue was that, all converted Christians were to accept everything they were told as meaning absolute submission to and the acceptance of the new way of life as the ultimate. This trend had it toll on everything within the Yoruba culture as the practices of tattooing and incision were considered as ritualistic, barbaric and very unhygienic and as such they must be dispensed with. Until this age in our advancement, more people are prone to seeing the ills in those things rather than viewing what they are meant to achieve within our cultural framework. As such, the practice has become evanescent.

Parrinder (1961) equally brought to light another important measure, which was brought against practices of Yoruba ideals. In this submission:

The old attitude of missionaries was usually destructive, the indigenou religion was not studied, it was not thought to have any divine relation or inspiration and little effort was made to use any part of it as a basis for further teaching. But it is not necessary to deny that old religion both taught some truth and produced some spiritual values and living.

The drive for conversion could not be compromised as the missionaries were of the opinion that, unless the natives were made to break from their African culture, they cannot be construed as having accepted the missionary' position. Hence, they have to put up calculated effort to discredit virtues and values that are inherent in those indigenou practices. This campaign as embarked upon became highly detrimental in the society as those who gave to doing the incision and tattooing were treated as outcast in the church. Those who gave to the profession soon lost their means of live hood, thus, creating more problems than envisage helping to solve.

As much as the missionary effort was making its due impact on the cultural values within our societies, the wave of technological advancement equally contributed its quote in the ravaging attack on African cultural pattern. Nigosian (1975) brought this out distinctively in the following words:

The achievements of science and technology have radically altered the pattern of man's life socially, economically, culturally, politically and intellectually. The same changes are affecting his moral and religious values.

The functional disposition of our cultural pattern as practiced in the Yoruba societies served as an effective medium for evaluating and passing where appropriate the norms within our society. However, with the introduction of the European values, it has helped in disrupting what man and his culture represented in our society. This was however, due to the claims of technological advancement in the field of science. The missionaries have identified in their own perception that those acts were dangerous to human body and as such, they were discouraged. If such act is condoled, it wall become carcinogenic which will eventually become cataclysm, which the missionaries did not want at that time. We need point out also that our culture is far older than their science, therefore, the integrity of its advances and achievements must be weighed only within the context of Yoruba appropriation It such values and virtues are bad and dangerous to man, then, in the pre-colonial era, why arc the young men in the 21st century Europe and America tattooing their bodies in the present dispensation? Must we discard

with our culture and thus, lose our identity? The support which science has mustered against our culture seems to have done serious havoc to what our cultural institution actually represented that today they are threatened even within our context. Dopatnu (1986) was apt in stating the major constraints that had worked successfully against our culture. Like he rightly observed, 'it was fashionable for people to identify themselves with Christianity or Islam. Since these were regarded as the religion of the enlightened'.

Those who had been adherents of the faith soon turned their back to the practice because of their acclaimed conversion. Their capricious act towards the traditional institution was with blit/ and in acerbic manner, which is blitz-krieg and belligerent. This *in fact* developed the sense of compunction in them because of the bedlam situation that subsequently emerged.

Civilization has an epidemic capacity in view of its fastness in rapid expansion and domination wherever it has succeeded to establish its hold. As the two religions i.e. Christianity and Islam have done considerable job in conversion, they have left a particle of discord among our people. This has been detrimental to our cultural heritage because of the principle of divide and rule tactic, which worked considerable in their favour. Those who fell to the pranks of civilization as preached by the missionaries soon became antagonists of the Yoruba culture. They became weapons of mass drive in the attack against the indigenous culture, which was a once cherished cultural faith. As the educated foe became better acquainted with the doctrines of the foreign religion, they turned their spiritual venom against the Yoruba culture that they became apostles of self-destruction as if those cultural elements were not ours in the 'first instance. We must recall that the policy of association a.-.d not assimilation should have been employed even when such apostles of self-destruction began their campaign for conversion, but to our dismay, this was never the case.

In spite of the calculated drive against the Yoruba cultural pattern, the battle has not been highly successive as the relics are still surviving within the rural areas. This is because of the fact that our culture and tradition is ineffable and quite ineluctable in the running of the society has successfully established itself in an indubitably manner that the rumpus made was not able to dampen the spirit and the collective aspiration of the people. In spite of the hostilities that were mounted over the years, the stoic attitude of the tradition is amazing. The stymie attitude of the missionaries notwithstanding, it had no subliminal effect on the people and their ways of life because, they have remained stolid. The cultural pattern of the people was inexorable because they were inextricably linked. Moyibi Amodi (1978) has been vivid in his description as indicated:

The African traditional religion (culture) is living even in the towns. In other words, it is current, present and active in the minds of individuals and in collective relationship. It co-exists with Christianity and Islam.

The above observation is a reality as many of the acclaimed antagonists of African culture are not sincere in their **cry** against the indigenous values. In obvious cases, many of such people have had to revert to the specialized hands for guidance and protection in most pressing situations. The obvious must be stated that even among the Christian populace, the percentage of those who are carrying incisions on their bodies are many that one may need ask, what is the supposed noise against African cultural values is all about?

The act of tattooing and incision which were brandished as fetish and pagamistic by the missionaries have been enjoying patronage even among the youths of the developed countries such as America and Britain among others. One can then ask why the African style as practiced in the colonial days brandished as fetish. If the emerging civilization then in Africa was condemned in spite of its advantages in social, religious and political ways, why are they now being used in the developed world if not for their relevance to the human society? If their attained technological advancement has been the measure they are relying on in proving their supposed superiority in this regard, then the African attempt should equally have been respected. Like Nigosian (1975) said while commenting on the relative success of our culture at the face of oppression and opposition that she faced at the period, he said:

Many religions rose only to disappear quickly leaving with no trace. Others flourished only as long as a particular civilization a nation flourished but died with it. A few however were destined to persist as living religion to the present era.

It is obvious that African traditional religion has no effective mechanism for propagating its

religious and cultural tenets. Despite that, the religion has continued to live in the minds of the people and will continue to make personal appeal to African scholars. We must appeal to African scholars to come around to defend our cultural pattern by trying to explain its place and role in man's total well-being. Although, the world is unique yet, the peculiarities in our difference must be respected.

Conclusion

It may though be granted that tattooing and incision as practiced in those days may have caused a lot of havoc to human lives but, such in an objective sense ought to be seen as a challenge which one must brace up to accept as a motivation for better result. Cases of accident cannot be ruled out like the issue of the disaster that befell America while she was launching the challenger that to go into the space; it never served as a deterrent to her pursuit. Africans must face squarely those challenges that are threatening our cultural values. We must proffer solutions that will not only help to prevent such occurrence but that which will also help to preserve our culture.

Our ladies and women were spectacle to behold in the olden days in view of our rich cultural structure. What we have as culture nowadays is nothing but a conglomeration of values that are alien to African life style. Ills, which have damaging effects, have since crept in unnoticed and the society, is paying dearly for our negligence. Technology is not alien to any culture and so; we must take advantage of its discoveries to improve our lots in the Yoruba society.

It is interesting also to note that while the world at large may be criticizing the African traditional ideals of incision and tattooing as being backward in the 21st world experience. Despite that, we have come to discover the passion, which our young ladies are developing in tattooing, which is evident on most of our campuses particularly in the northern universities today. In the African society, we must re-emphasize the fact that we believe in things which are real and not on abstract objects which is characteristic of the Christian practice. This is necessary because, we always want to rest our hope on things that we can touch. In this respect therefore, many within our society still cannot do without amulet, body incision and tattooing.

In the Nasarawa State University as an example, many of the ladies on campus have recently developed passion for tattooing their legs and hands as the new innovation which we can liken to a process of re-enactment of our traditional past.

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