

# **The Roles of Tribal Marks During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970)**

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## **Introduction**

The Nigeria civil war, also known as Biafra war was inter-state war which took place from 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1967 and lasted for until 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1970, covering a period of 30 months. The history of Nigeria is deeply rooted on a series of political and social upheaval whose causal factors lingers around the lines of reppionional ethnic and religious boundaries. Just as boahen noted Nigeria being a colony of Britain had liented a constitution from its colonial power (Britain) which have absolute majority to one region thereby promoting regional politics and political dvision in the country; prior to the civil war, the country has untesses series of poliical crises and the major cause of these crises has been due to ethnic and religious distrust between the three major ethnics group in the country; the Hausa, 1960 and Yoruba.

The major political crises that occurred prior to the war have been argued to be the remote causes of the war. Some of these include; kano riot of 1953, the census crises of 1962 the federal election riot of 1964, the coup and counter-coup of 1966 e.t.c<sup>2</sup>

Civil war however is common among nations of the world. It is imperative to note that "Super power" nations have at one time or the other experienced such crisis. Just aas in the case of America, Nigeria too has gone through the same experience. It was due to the 1960 desire to secede and establish an independence Biafra State that led to the ourt brak of the Nigeria court war. However, the then Military Head of State, L.t, Col. Yakubu Gawan was against the secession of the eastern region which was championed by Lt.Col. Emeka Ojukuru and the host of others.

The war had a devastating effect on both the Federal Government and the Biafra, most especially on the Civilians in the eastern region. The war effected every aspect of the country, ranging from the economic, political and foreign relations<sup>3</sup> This work therefore intends to come up with historical analysis of the role and effects of tribal marks during the Nigerian civil war and to examine the extent to when the practice is still vague in Nigeria societies.

### **The Concept of Tribal Marks**

Oxford dictionary defined tribal mark as a design or image that has been influenced by indigenous peoples, especially such as tattoo<sup>4</sup>. Tribal marking has to do with the practice of embellishing the body with piercing, colouration, tribal scars etc, it involves arts made in human body which include but is not limited to the face, such as teeth filling.

Historically, tribal marking have been along standing tradition that has played a significant role in cultural consciousness and community building among African societies<sup>4</sup>. It is asserted that tribal markings has its origin as a practice among Australian aborigines dating back to 60,000 BC, elements of it were dispersed and adopted by many countries worldwide, persisting (up with) date. In Africa it began with the image of Tassili in the Sahara between 8000 and 5000 BC, which shows marking that appear to represent scarification. In Nigeria, a number of terra-cotta, copper sculptures (ca.AD.1100) and Owo terra cottas (cc.AD.1400) depict elaborate tribal pattern, some closely resmbing 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Yomba marks.<sup>5</sup>

Body markings some times called body art are generally used by Africans of all gender for several reasons, some of these are; for festivals, feast celebrations, daily attire, beauty and strength. Each tribes' marks from repon to repon. The Massai people of east Africas body marks are primarily to denote the celebration of festival of the moran or depict who is a warrior. The Turkana people of Kenya use it to show the status of men and women. Tribal marks among same tribes (is) to show stages of development or rite of passage, (such) bike the Ga'anda and Kao people of Nigeria's (Tribal marks).

### **The Role of Tribal Mark During the nigerian civil war**

Tribal mark are lacerations made on the face practiced by different ethnic groups in Nigeria. These incisions were a formal identification

(amongst) tribes and various families have distinct ways of marking laceration on the face. Tribal marks as a form of identify became important during the slave trade and the Nigerian Civil war. As some people who made their way back home were easily identified by the marks on their faces. It (so much so) further eases the problems of communication, the pattern of marks helped on identifying persons ethnicity and homeland so that they are not been misidentified as members of rival group to pose security threat. According to a source, tribal marks was used during the Nigerian Civil War to differentiate a particular tribe from another and that (the people what were given) tribal marks by their parent were able to traced their way back home after the war?#

### **The Yoruba Tribal mark**

The Yoruba tribal marks are scarification which are specific identification and beautification marks designed on the face or body of the Yoruba people. The marks are usually inscribed on the body by burning or cutting of the skin. The primary function of the marks is for identification of a person's tribe, family or patrilineal heritage. Other secondary functions are symbol of beauty, Yoruba creativity and mischievous children (Ila Abiku). This practice is popular among the Yoruba speaking people of Benin, Togo and Nigeria.<sup>8</sup> During the Nigeria Civil war and Transatlantic slave trade, tribal identification and facial stripes became important some repatriated slaves and prisoners of war later reunited with their communities by looking at facial stripes.

In Yoruba societies, every child is born into patrilineal clan called (Idile baba). The clan shares names (Oride), poetry (Oriki), taboos (eero) and facial marks (Ila). The facial marks on the child assigns the child full clan membership rights. The children with facial marks are called (Okola). Families or individual lacking the normal features consisting with the tribe are not considered as acquiring full standing as agents in Yoruba societies. They would also lack the capacity for meaningful behaviour, such as greeting, stating and commanding.<sup>8</sup> Each tribe of the Yoruba ethnic group had different inscription patterns which appears in different sizes and shapes at different locations within the face or body some peculiar styles of Yoruba tribal marks include:-

**Pele:** The pele is three longitudinal lines inscribed on the cheeks. Pele have different variants, such as Pele Ife. A three longitudinal lines inscribed on the cheek, it is peculiar to the Ile-Ife people. Pele Ijebu and Pele Ijesa are other variants.

**Owu:** This consist of three incisions on each side of the checks and peculiar to Owu indigene, historical city in Abeokuta. This marks is seen on the checks of former Nigerian President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo.

**Gambo:** Known as “Keke”, consist of multiple straight and curved lines about a half on inch apart inscribed on the checks on both sides of the mouth. Indigenes of Ogbomosho are usually identified by the gombo mark or Keke style.

**Abaja:** This can be both a basis and also a complex style. In its basis form, it is either three or four horizontal lines, six lines per check, often referred to as Abaja Alaafin mefa mefa. This marks is unique to the people od Oyo. Other Yoruba tribal marks styles include; Ture, Mande, Bamu, Jamabadi e.t.c.<sup>9</sup>

All these marks were more effective durra the Nigeria Civil War period as the war was a tribal war, parents needed to identify their children during the war means to prevent than from been kidnapped or killed

### **Igbo Tribal Mark.**

The tribal marks used to beautify the body really turned into a different ball derup the Nigeria Civil war period. The marks which is a long time practice tradition or culture in most part of African tribes in identifying its members since birth. The 1960 marks is of different styles. Among the Nri people is known as ichi, which is of two styles: Nri style and the Agbaja style.

**Nri:-** in the Nri style, the covered lone runs from the centre of the forehead down to the chin. It second line runs across the face from the right check to check to the left. This is repeated to obtain a pattern meant to imitate the rays of the sun.

**Agbaja:-** in the Agbaja style, cydeand semi cycle patterns are added to the initial incision to represent the moon. These scarification are given to the representative of the Eje – Nri, the mburichi. This is Nris ways of honouring the sun that they worshiped and a form of ritual purifications. The tribal marks is a visible important aspect of

the 1960 culture, due to the substantially victimization of the Eje in the Atlantic slave trade. It was reported that over 20,000 slaves every were captured from Benny and 16,000 were 1960's. this incident prompted to the idea of tribal marks for the purpose of identification and recognition in case of displacement.

Oral source has it that tribal marks were only inscribed on people who tell ill or on the occasions of some kinds of rituals cleansing and that other crises that took place in the north and south west also contributed to the reasons for tribal marks. He further said that the Nigerian Civil War arose so much tension and that people lives were both threatened be armed men in uniform and also the civilians were also a threat to themselves.

Nigeria is made up of different ethnic groups and all these groups scattered all across the country, even before the war began most of these groups were not having any means of visible identity to indicate the language they belong. The civil war got to a point where the 1960s were also laying road blocks as check points in order to fish out northerners to kill them. They also encountered a very serious issues as they could not differentiate their own people. Who were not able to defend them selves using their nature tribes and were also no having any means of physical identification, then, the need for physical identification was required and this was how tribal marks was promoted. The 1960s had to mark themselves and this was based on various clans.

### **Hausa Tribal Mark**

Tribal mark played a significant role during the Nigerian civil war, it served as an easy means of locating or identifying the region that an individual comes from without even asking the person but, by merely looking at the persons sacrificial marks. Hausa language is divided into divided into sub groups and all these groups have their unique ways of marking their people such as:-

**Gobirara:-** The Bagohiri, man from the north is easily identify by the sacrificial marks on his face. They marked six to seven stripes by both sides of the cheeks. The Gobirara are mostly found in sokoto and some parts of Gusau in Zamfara state. This tribal marks could be seen on the face of the Former Governor of Sokoto Dr. Dalhatu Batarara.

**Yar – baka:-** This consist of three small incisions on both checks and by the mouth sides. This style is peculiar to the people of ancient kano city and its environs.

**Fashion – goshi:-** This comes in a form of a straight single line and sometimes in two different styles. The first one is a single line on the forehead while the second style is a single line from the forehead down to the nose. This is peculiar to the people of Maiduguri.

**Bari – bari:-** The Bari – Bari style consist of three incisions of straight lines on both sides of the checks. It could be long and or short. This is mostly the kanuri's tribal marks styles.

Other tribal styles among the Hausa speaking people include: Belle, kalangu, Tsagar wuya e.t.c, in the case of sickness, marks can be given to the sick person so as to remedy or care the sickness, these types of marks include:- Balli – balli, kaho e.t.c. marks are as well given to beautify a persons body and can also serve as a means of punishing an individual who has gone against the laws of the land. Due to the gravity of the Nigerian civil war, people were displaced and so the marks helped each tribes to locate their region in order to reunite with families. It is believed among the Hausa people that they grew up seeing themselves with tribal marks in their community in which most of them were given from birth. It is also beleaved that the marks became more effective and promoted during the civil war when it was noticed that there was difficulties in identifying people without visible identification.

### **Conclusion**

The significant of tribal marks during the Nigerian civil war period canncno be ignored because of its symbolic, as a sin of identification, the tribal marks says who an individual is, where he/she comes from, of what tribe and equally what region. Tribal marks served as means of communication and beautification. The marks were in existence before the civil war period, but the misidentification between the tribes during the war resulted to the promotion of the marks.

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