

## **Self Adornment Techniques in African Tribal Culture**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Africa continent has over fifty independent countries and accounts for about 16% of the world's population. It is a very large and unique continent with many tribes and diverse ethnic peoples, each with their own culture, language, customs and history. There are currently 410 types of tribes residing in Africa. African tribes have ancient tradition of decorating the body and wearing different accessories in rich and varied way. African tribes adorned themselves in following four ways: Scarification, Face and body painting, Beadwork and Jewellery. Scarification is deliberately cutting the skin in decorative patterns that leaves permanent scars. Face and body painting is a colourful art used by various African cultures to celebrate, protect, and mourn. Traditionally, it was obtained from natural ingredients and smoothed on the skin with fingers, sticks, or grasses. Beadwork is the art of making things with beads. African beads are made from stone, bone, shell, plastic, wood recycled glass etc. African Tribal jewelleries are made from natural materials such as tiger's bone, wood, metal, shells, ivory, bone, stones and a lot of other natural materials. Each adornment technique carries its own narrative. These practices have endured through generations, adapting to shifting contexts while retaining their core significance. These self adornment techniques of African tribes remind us the richness of human diversity and enduring the importance of self expression within the tapestry of our shared global heritage.

**Key Words :** African tribes, Accessories, Beadwork, Facepainting, Jewellery, Scarification

### **INTRODUCTION**

Africa is the world's second-largest continent and the only continent that spans both the northern and southern hemispheres. Africa is about 30.37 million km<sup>2</sup> in size. Africa has over 50 independent countries and accounts for about 16% of the world's population (African Culture, African Tribes & Traditions, 2018).

Tribes are called 'Adivasi' in Sanskrit and Hindi, which literally means the original settlers. Tribes live in rural areas, forests, mountains and in sustained communities, where nomadic lifestyle was common in their regions (Segy, 2018). Africa is a very large and unique continent with many tribes and diverse ethnic peoples, each with their own culture, language, customs and history. There are currently 410 types of tribes residing in Africa. Some important of them are Zulu, Karo,

Himba, Dogon, Yuruba, Masai, Taureg, Turkana, Makai, Berber, Nuba and many more (Isiavwe, 2021).

The African tribes are classified on the basis of the animals they believe. Animals were regarded as totems, as reincarnations of ancestors, as signs of fortune, as omens of ill-luck. The tribes of Africa have a strong belief in superstitions and customs. They speak common language, with modifications of dialect. They are all tillers of the ground and owners of cattle. The dressing style of the African tribes (Fig. 1) is slightly different from one tribe to another (Macdonald, 1890).

African tribes have ancient tradition of decorating the body and wearing different accessories in rich and varied way. Traditionally, African tribes wore little to cover their bodies, leaving their skin exposed and available for decoration. Adornments are used to increase attractiveness and to obtain accompanying social benefits



**Fig. 1 : Tribe of Africa**

(Bloch and Richins, 1992). African tribes adorned themselves in following four ways:

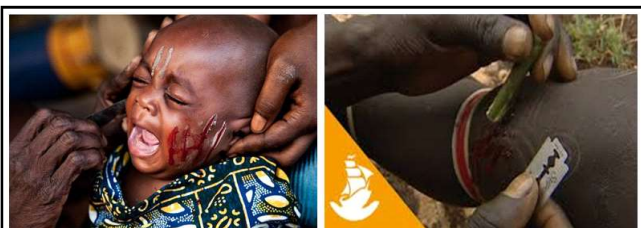
- 1) Scarification
- 2) Face and body painting
- 3) Beadwork
- 4) Jewellery

#### **Scarification:**

Scarification is deliberately cutting the skin in decorative patterns that leaves permanent scars. Scarification can be in the form of grooves cut down in the skin or welts that stick up above the skin in raised designs. Archaeologists, people who study the physical remains of past cultures, also reported in their study that scar patterns were present in the African statues. Therefore it is believed that the Scarification method of adornment is more than hundred year old (Body Decorations of African Cultures | Encyclopedia.Com, n.d.). Scarification is both decorative and innovative, and the scars create a completely different look (Connor, 2010). In present day tribes of Chad, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zaire among the country of Africa continent, practice scarification. Adepegba (1976) identified three types of marks that are frequently found in all regions of Africa. They are as follow-

#### **Scarification:**

It involves the simple production of scars by a variety of cutting tools as shown below in Fig. 2 (Bohannan, 1987); The history of Scarification in Africa | Hadithi Africa 2019, February 11).



**Fig. 2 : Scarification**

#### **Keloids:**

It is represented by raised scars. The image of Keloids is shown below in Fig. 3 (The history of Scarification in Africa | Hadithi Africa 2019, February 11).



**Fig. 3 : Keloids**

#### **Tattoos:**

It is a coloured marking usually produced by the use of pigments and pricking or cutting tools as shown below in Fig. 4.



**Fig. 4 : Tattoos**

#### **Face and body painting:**

Face and body painting is a colourful art used by various African cultures to celebrate, protect, and mourn. Traditionally, it was obtained from natural ingredients and smoothed on the skin with fingers, sticks, or grasses. Face paint is usually made out of clay with different hues using dried plants and flowers while oil, clay, and chalk are the most common ingredients for body painting. Face painting is used for many different reasons and can signify many different things such as hunting, religious and traditional reasons, military purposes or to scare an enemy (Fig. 5) (907 African Tribal Face Painting Stock Photos, High-Res Pictures, and Images - Getty Images, n.d.). It also functions as social markers, distinguishing boys from men, men from older men, men from women and members of

the tribe from outsiders. Face painting indicates status and they convey a strong cultural meaning. Each symbol used in face painting has a certain meaning (African Tribal Make-Up, 2016).



**Fig. 5 : Face painting**

Body painting is used by some African groups not only in special occasions but to denote their age group. Specific colours are used to indicate certain periods in a person's life, such as puberty, courting, marriage and other things. For example, Nuba men between the ages of seventeen and thirty living in southern Sudan wear body paint to indicate their age and apply full body decorations as a kind of daily outfit as shown in Fig. 6. The Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, for instance, use ochre pigments to create intricate patterns on their bodies. Berber women of northern Africa also paint their hands and feet with intricate henna designs called *siyala* for their weddings. (Body Decorations of African Cultures | Encyclopedia. Com, n.d.: Chocolate\_body\_painting-The\_warrior-Der\_Krieger-1, n.d.).



**Fig. 6 : Body painting**

### Beadwork:

Beadwork is the art of making things with beads. African beads are made from stone, bone, shell, plastic, wood recycled glass etc. Beads are made in many different regions of the African continent. African beads made by indigenous tribes and ethnic groups are most commonly referred to as African tribal beads. The Yoruba tribe is one of the largest tribes in Africa who make beads. The most popular beads which are made by Yoruba tribes

are Yoruba brass beads (Fig.7), Keta Awuazi Beads (Fig. 8), and Yoruba mock coral beads (Fig. 9) (African Tribal Beads - Shop for Trade Beads from The Bead Chest, n.d.). These beads are used to make various types of jewellery or ornaments like necklaces, waist bands, belts, bracelets, armlets etc.



**Fig. 7 : Yoruba brass beads**



**Fig. 8 : Keta Awuazi Beads**



**Fig. 9 : Toruba mock coral beads**

Makai women wear beautiful beaded jewellery on special occasions. Women of Pokot tribe and Turkana tribe are recognized for wearing beautiful broad beaded collars and necklaces. Waist bands are a tradition in many African cultures, and they have a significant cultural and historical importance. Waist bands are worn around the waist or hips and are typically made of seed beads and other small beads strung together. In African culture, waist beads have gained popularity as a way to connect with one's cultural heritage and celebrate womanhood (Hacker, 2023).

### Jewellery:

African Tribal jewellery is also famous. They are made from natural materials such as tiger's bone, wood, metal, shells, ivory, bone, stones and a lot of other natural materials. Various styles of brass, stone, bone, or iron bracelets and armlets may represent an African's religion, gender and success. Jewellery may be decorated with beadwork in such a way or design that represents a certain idea or message. In some African societies, only leaders or members of special groups may wear items made of precious materials, such as coral (Fig. 10),



ivory (Fig. 11) and gold. The red of the coral represented power, while the white of the ivory stand for spiritual purity.



**Fig. 10 : Coral jewellerys**



**Fig. 11 : Ivory Jewellerys**

Among the Zulu tribe of South Africa, the king wears a necklace of leopard claws, while lesser chiefs wear ornaments of bone carved in the shape of leopard claws (Fig. 12).



**Fig. 11 : Ivory Jewellerys**

### Conclusion:

The self adornment techniques of African tribes reveal a fascinating tapestry of cultural identity, social symbolism, and aesthetic expression. Across the vast and diverse landscapes of the African continent, these practices are more than just embellishments; they serve as powerful tools for communication, storytelling, and the preservation of heritage. Scarification reinforces the intricate web of identity. They communicate age, marital status, serving as histories that connect individuals to their

past and present. The deliberate act of modifying the body becomes an act of personal empowerment. Further vibrant body paintings mark important life events and about social status. Through body painting, African tribes transform their skin into a canvas, illustrating stories of passage, celebration, and the bonds that unite their communities. The art of beadwork and jewellery crafting not only reflects individual creativity but also serves as a visible language, communicating one's status, age, and role within the tribe. Each adornment technique carries its own narrative. These practices have endured through generations, adapting to shifting contexts while retaining their core significance (Dhlomo, 1977). In an era of globalization and cultural exchange, it is crucial to approach these adornment techniques with respect and understanding, acknowledging their deep-rooted meanings and the people who have practiced them for centuries. The self adornment techniques of African tribes remind us of the richness of human diversity and the enduring importance of self expression within the tapestry of our shared global heritage.

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