

# SEVEN

## BEYOND THE ART: UNDERSTANDING INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION THROUGH SCARIFICATION AND BODY MARKS

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### Abstract

As a personal and collective cultural practice, scarification, which is the deliberate cutting or etching of the skin to produce permanent scars in decorative or symbolic patterns (Vescia, 2018), carries layered meanings across groups, generations, and social contexts. Just as it is an established practice in many traditional societies of Aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea, likewise does it have a long history in Nigeria. This study examines the role of scarification and body markings in shaping inter-ethnic relations and national integration in Nigeria, and challenges the view that these practices are merely aesthetic. Using a mixed-methods approach, we conducted interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys with diverse communities across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Findings reveal that scarification functions as a cultural identifier and a medium of dialogue between ethnic groups, thereby fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. Quantitative data further demonstrate a strong correlation between appreciation of these practices and positive inter-ethnic relations, underscoring their contribution to national unity. While highlighting the importance of recognising and respecting cultural heritage as a pathway to social cohesion, the study concludes that such insights are vital for policymakers and community leaders working toward an inclusive national identity.

**Keywords:** Scarification, body marking, cultural identity, ethnic relations, national integration

## **Introduction**

National integration in Nigeria, with its more than 300 ethnic groups, remains both a profound challenge and a testament to resilience. Among the often-overlooked cultural practices shaping this discourse are scarification and body markings. These ancient customs serve as powerful symbols of history, identity, and social relations across diverse communities. Far beyond artistic expression or personal identity, scarification reflects, contests, and negotiates inter-ethnic dynamics in Africa. This study investigates how indigenous practices influence communal ties and national integration, viewing inter-ethnic relations and collective identity through the lens of scarification and body marking. In many Nigerian societies, these markings function as rites of passage, expressions of beauty, healing tools, and markers of social identity. They embody lineage, tribal affiliation, and cultural heritage (Meek, 1931; Okediji, 1998), while also revealing histories of power, resistance, and negotiation. In this context, scarification exposes fractures in national identity yet simultaneously offers pathways to healing and unity.

Nigeria, like many African nations, continues to grapple with colonial legacies and complex identities. Body marks remind communities of shared histories and aspirations for unity. They symbolize resistance and identity but also foster dialogue and understanding across ethnic lines. By examining these practices, this research demonstrates how scarification and body markings cultivate belonging in fragmented societies and strengthen ethnic connections through cultural anthropology and social theory. As globalisation renews interest in indigenous traditions, scarification must be reconsidered as a form of expression that advances national identity and integration. This study challenges reductive views of ethnicity and identity, showing how Nigerians navigate diverse cultural landscapes while aspiring toward cohesion. It raises critical questions: How do scarification and body markings shape ethnic unity or division? How do personal marks inscribed on the body foster mutual understanding? By analyzing these practices, we gain deeper insight into Nigerian identity and envision a

future where scars become symbols of resilience and shared purpose rather than division.

## **Literature Review**

In certain African cultural settings, scarification and body markings offer a rich lens for understanding identity, beauty, and social cohesion. This study situates indigenous practices within Nigerian cultural narratives, highlighting their historical and anthropological significance. Scholars have long examined scarification among major Nigerian ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. Adisa et al. (2024) note that Yoruba body marks historically served identification and beautification purposes, shaped by socio-cultural dynamics. Supporting Adeleke (2021), they argue that scarification is tied to clan identity and heritage rather than mere aesthetics. Ojo and Saibu (2018) add that these marks signify clan identity, social status, and ethnicity, embedding individual identities within collective cultural memory. Adisa et al. (2024) further emphasize their role in preserving identity during cultural dislocation, including the transatlantic slave trade.

Comparative studies confirm the universality of body marking. Scelta (2011) documents its presence across cultures, from African societies to Aboriginal Australia and the Americas, underscoring its global relevance. Despite European norms that often rejected such practices, body marking remains a cultural hallmark among Nigerian groups such as the Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and Urhobo. Turner (1995) suggests that markings facilitate social acceptance, while Rubin (1988) views them as integral to civilization, expressing cultural context.

In Nigeria, scarification defines belonging and otherness, reinforcing social engagement. Ojo and Saibu (2018) found that Yoruba markings enhance appearance and articulate identity, originating in pre-colonial times as symbols of beauty and status. Uzobo et al. (2014) argue that scarification historically promoted cultural consciousness and cohesion, with Maasai and Turkana communities using markings to signify rites of passage and social rank. Scelta (2011) notes that Igbo practices often denote adulthood, marriage, or elite status. Among the Yoruba, tribal marks embody both identity and beauty, long celebrated as symbols of

prestige. Adisa et al. (2024) emphasize their dual role in aesthetics and ethnic identity, while Ojo and Saibu (2018) stress their importance in survival and cohesion during civil wars and conflicts.

Contemporary perspectives reveal tension between tradition and modernity. Globalization and Western beauty standards challenge indigenous aesthetics (Ojo & Saibu, 2018), yet Scelta (2011) argues that the core function of body markings—reinforcing community bonds—remains unchanged. Despite extensive scholarship, gaps persist: prior studies often overlook personal narratives and agency. This research addresses that gap by incorporating first-hand accounts, highlighting individual choice and lived experience in Nigerian body marking practices.

Moreover, scarification has rarely been examined in relation to inter-ethnic relations and national integration. This study explores how these practices shape communal ties, demonstrating their potential as artistic expressions and catalysts for empathy, dialogue, and unity in Nigeria's complex, multifaceted society. By analysing scarification and body markings, we gain deeper insight into Nigerian identity and envision a future where scars serve not as markers of division but as symbols of resilience and shared purpose.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) as its theoretical foundation. Developed in the 1970s, SIT provides a psychological explanation for group discrimination and prejudice, and remains influential in anthropology and sociology for examining how group identities shape behaviour, interactions, and culture. Social identity has been defined as "knowledge individuals have of who they are, based on their group membership(s)" (Ojo & Saibu, 2018, p.149). The theory emphasizes that social categories influence worldviews and behaviours, offering individuals pride, belonging, and self-esteem through group membership (Breakwell, 1986; Bloom, 1990; Stein, 1996). Bloom (1990) warns that the absence of belonging can lead to psychological distress or even personality collapse, while Tajfel and

Turner (1979) argue that enhanced group status strengthens self-esteem and fosters categorisation into “us” versus “them.”

SIT underscores how group membership shapes identity and society. Tajfel and Turner (1979) highlight ethnicity as a source of pride, reinforcing cultural values and shared experiences. Within this framework, the study examines how group dynamics, cultural identity, and social categorisation influence Nigeria’s inter-ethnic relations and national integration. Scarification and body markings serve as cultural symbols across Nigeria’s diverse ethnic groups—including the Yoruba, Urhobo, Igbo, Igala, and Hausa—expressing identity and reinforcing solidarity. Among Yoruba and Igbo men, body markings promote in-group pride and cohesion, while simultaneously distinguishing ethnic boundaries.

Field research revealed that categorisation often privileges in-group members and exaggerates differences with out-groups. Tribal marks play a central role in this dynamic: participants described them as affirmations of belonging to a distinct culture. Yet, resemblance of marks across groups sometimes undermines kinship recognition, producing biases in social interactions and complicating inter-ethnic relations.

By situating scarification and body markings within SIT, this study demonstrates how these practices function as social identifiers that both reinforce ethnic distinctions and provide opportunities for dialogue. Understanding their role in identity formation and categorisation offers valuable insight into Nigeria’s ethnic relationships and highlights their potential contribution to national integration.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Triangulation through focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and questionnaires provided nuanced insights into scarification and body marking practices. Participants included men and women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds across Nigeria’s

six geopolitical zones, representing ethnic groups such as the Tiv (North-Central Benue, Plateau), the Kanuri (North-East, Borno), the Hausa (North-West Sokoto, Kano), the Ngwa (South-East Abia), the Urhobo (South-South Delta ), Tera and Waja ( North Central, Gombe), Zuru and Gobir ( North West- Sokoto, Kebbi), Nupe ( North Central, Niger State), Idoma (North Central Benue), Igala and Bassa (North Central, Kogi), and Yoruba (South-Western Nigeria Oyo, Osun).

### **Data Collection**

Ethnographic fieldwork explored how indigenous scarification and body marking practices are sustained, contested, and reinterpreted in modern Nigeria. Experienced interviewers fluent in English, Pidgin English, and local languages conducted the fieldwork, adhering strictly to research protocols. Community members participated in extensive interviews, while facilitators moderated and recorded FGDs to ensure accuracy and proper conduct. Questionnaires were distributed and collected across the study communities.

Prior to fieldwork, research instruments were prepared, and assistants were recruited and trained. Training sessions included protocol familiarization, use of audio recorders, FGD demonstrations, role-playing, qualitative research techniques, and ethics. Community leaders provided consent and were briefed on logistical arrangements, including transportation. Field researchers demonstrated punctuality and commitment throughout the process.

### **In-depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews captured cultural narratives, expert perspectives, and historical reflections often overlooked in group discussions. These interviews allowed participants to discuss scarification, identity, and ethnic belonging. Traditional leaders, historians, artists, and policymakers were consulted to understand the broader social and political implications of body marks. Participants were selected through convenience and targeted sampling, identified by tribal, facial, and body marks. Both male and female participants were included regardless of socioeconomic background. Six participants from Ngwa,

Wahwah, and Urhobo communities (South-South and South-East) were interviewed; ten from Ede and Ogbomoso (South-West), including seven males and three females; twelve from Tera, Waja, Zuru, and Gobir (North-East and North-West); ten Igala and five Idoma (Kogi State); and five Nupe (Niger State).

Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with community elders, traditional rulers, and cultural historians. Life history interviews were also collected from individuals who had undergone scarification, including adults, former initiates, and custodians of indigenous practices. All interviews were open-ended and flexible, designed to elicit rich, context-specific responses aligned with the study's objectives.

### **Focus Group Discussion (FGDs)**

We collected diverse perspectives in active FGDs where participants confirmed, challenged, or expanded on each other's views. Given the sensitive and sometimes stigmatised nature of body markings today, FGDs revealed communal feelings, generational changes, and inter-ethnic conversations. Each FGD session had 6-10 ethnic group participants for manageability and meaningful interaction. Before FGDs, conducive environments were found. Self-introduction and FGD purpose explanation were ensured. The study aimed to capture generational and social dynamics by recruiting participants from diverse age groups, genders, and social backgrounds. We held ethnic-based FGDs in Gombe and Sokoto States to promote comfort and cultural cohesion, then cross-ethnic groups to examine inter-ethnic perceptions and integration potentials. Semi-structured guides or objectives were created, and FGDs were held in selected Gombe and Sokoto States. These regions have unique scarification practices. Tera, Waja, etc. are in the Northeast, while Zuru, Gobir, etc. are in Sokoto (North-West). Procedures were consistent across regions, except in the South-West, where only Yoruba is an ethnic group. Before each FGD session, permission was obtained to record audio tapes and ensure confidentiality. Each session was led by a moderator, recorder, and timekeeper, who facilitated discussions and took notes using the topic

guide. Participants were encouraged to speak freely without fear of rejection or repercussions. Each discussion lasted 1.5–2 hours. The audio tapes were transcribed, translated, and analysed in conjunction with the notes from each discussion session.

### **Quantitative Survey**

Questionnaires provided a quantitative overview of Knowledge, Attitudes, and Perceptions (KAP) regarding scarification and inter-ethnic relations in the study areas, complementing the qualitative data. This is crucial for statistically measuring generational shifts, regional differences, and integration potentials. Surveys allowed generalisation across a larger population sample and comparison with qualitative findings. Our 360-person survey sample included 60 Tiv, Kanuri 60, Hausa 60, Ngwa(Igbo) 60, 60 Urhobo, and 60 Yoruba respondents. The team distributed and collected structured questionnaires in each region over two days. To represent diverse age groups and ethnicities, stratified sampling was used. Community enumerators personally administered the questionnaires. Recorder, papers, Interview guide, questionnaires, etc.) were sufficient and delivered on time for each day's activities. Logistics made it easy for team members to distribute questionnaires and find stakeholders to interview. To provide timely feedback on data quality issues, data entry/transcription began within 24 hours of collection. Enhance verbal communication. Audio and video were recorded. The tools were pretested during training to ensure contextual fit and question comprehension. The indigenous language was also used where respondents did not speak English. An interpreter and a research team member fluent in the local language assisted.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

The interviews were conducted in local languages (trained interpreters were used) or English, depending on the participant. Narrative and thematic methods were used to transcribe, code, and analyse interview data to track individual and collective meaning-making. A thematic analysis identified patterns, contradictions, and emerging themes across groups. The indigenous language was also used where

respondents didn't speak English. An interpreter and a local-language-fluent research team member participated.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research maintained high ethical standards. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw without penalty. All recordings were securely stored to maintain data confidentiality. Local norms and values guided engagement strategies, particularly in rites of passage, discussions on gender, and religious topics. Before entering communities, authorities granted ethical approval, and participants gave informed consent. Each participant was informed of their rights in clear language during this consent process. Most participants participated, but some refused to be photographed or filmed during focus group discussions. Some participants hesitated to discuss scarification and body markings, which are now taboo. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, ensuring its ethical integrity. Starting with qualitative results, this study's findings are presented below.

### **Presentation and Interpretation of Qualitative Data**

This section presents qualitative data from six geopolitical zones of Nigeria on how scarification and body marks affect inter-ethnic relations and national unity. It has four sections. The first examines scarification and body marks as ethnic identifiers in Nigeria, highlighting the different names and meanings given to them by different groups and their importance in strengthening individual and communal identities. The second discusses how indigenous scarification and body marking knowledge can benefit national development. The third examines how these traditional markings, once seen as divisive or outdated, can be reinterpreted to promote ethnic unity. The final subsection examines the evolution of a national ethos, as embodied in body markings, to preserve this core element of Nigerian culture and promote inter-ethnic relations for national unity.

## **Ethnic Signifiers: Scarification and Body Markings in Nigerian Culture**

Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups have long used scarification and body marks as identity markers. They symbolised lineage, clan, and region by being etched into the skin. Body marks, such as the intricate *ilà* of the Yorùbá people in the southwest and the symbolic *ichi* of the Igbo people in the southeast, held cultural significance, conveying roots and social status. This shows that ethnic groups across geopolitical zones have used scarification and body marks to express their heritage and belonging. The first definition of scarification discusses aesthetic body marking, while the second emphasises healing. According to Ayeni (2004), scarification in lupus vulgaris treatment involves "multiple stabbing" of the skin. Garve et al. (2017: 708) state that African societies scarify "through cuts of the skin, removal of skin parts, burns and branding, chemical imprinting, skin laceration and a variety of other techniques." Scarification is "culturally sanctioned to convey messages and signals to indicate cultural identity and to treat certain diseases," according to these scholars. This claim shows that African communities, including Nigerian communities, use scarification for identification and healing. Our research shows that scarification and body marks protect and decorate Nigerian ethnic groups. In Yorùbá culture, scarification is known as *gbèrẹ̀*, as reported by community members during interviews. Other popular body markings in Nigeria are tribal ones. All ethnic groups in Nigeria have tribal marks that distinguish them from others, and use body marks to express their identity, beliefs, social status, self-protection, and healing (Ogunjinmi). These marks, including facial marks, distinguish bearers from other sociocultural groups by indicating family identity and affiliation. groups. Among the Urhobo ethnic group in the South-South region, body marks are known as *ekekeh*. Mr. Alex, one of our informants in Delta State's Uturu Abraka community said Urhobo tribal marks identify family members. He said *ekekeh* body marks are round and blackish, and Mr. Freeborn (the Chief Priest of Ovwie kingdom in Urhoboland) confirmed this. Mr. Ozor, an Ngwa from Igboland, said *ichi* was a facial ritual scarification worn by Igbo men of Nigeria. The scarification showed that the wearer had been initiated into the aristocratic Nze na

Ozo, thus making the wearer noble. The derivative word Iche, which refers to a titled chieftain among the Igbo, echoes this tradition. Traditionally, Akwa Ibom men had this body marking which allowed ritual cleansing of abominations and title conferment. Some women also wear body marking. In a focus group discussion session conducted with members of the Igala community in Kogi State, North Central Nigeria, on 30th October 2022, one of the informants described body marking as:

... a practice in the Igala culture that serves as a means of identification among the Igala people. It is seen as a unifying factor. It is a practice that has been in existence for many decades. Facial marking is also seen as a means of protection, especially during the civil war in 1967 in Nigeria; the marks help to differentiate the Igala community from others, especially the Igbo people, and thus give protection in that time of war .

Our research established that all Nigerian ethnic groups get body marks from childhood. Many said that elders in their communities mark children. Elderly people mark children with broken razor blades, knives, and needles. However, elderly women in Nsukka make body marks on their children, unlike the Wahwah community in the same Southeastern region, where both men and women do it. According to Yorùbá communities, both elderly men and women can mark their children, but this is typically done by professionally trained clans or families. Body marking experts are known as olóòlà (scarifiers). The Nupe call neck marks kpelle and kpatugi, while stomach marks are gbangbala. According to Mr. Ozor, Igbo men with facial marks were considered Nri men and less likely to be considered slaves. After slavery, other Igbo tribes started wearing Ichi to avoid being labelled slaves. Nri and Agbaja are Ngwa marking styles. The Nri style is worn in the Akwa-Nri areas, and the Agbaja style is worn in the Awgwai and Nkanni areas. NRI-style carvings run from the forehead to the beard chin. A second line runs from the right cheek to the Left. This was repeated to mimic the sun's pattern. The Agbaja Style adds circular arcs and semicircular patterns to initial incisions to represent the moon. The "mburu" Uzu Nri representatives received these body marks. ichi. Nri

used the marks to purify and honour their sun. Other body marks present in Igbo culture are *ahumanachi* (birthmarks), *ahumananma* (moles), *mkptu-ahu* (body piercing), *ahumanma* (scars), among others. The marks can be characteristic of an individual and may be used to support identification, in conjunction with medical or police records and identification provided by family members. Birthmarks are done in childhood for the Ngwa, while *Ichi* is done in adulthood. The elders, or *Ndi Ichi*, who have body marks, could mark others. Sometimes, native doctors can mark others in their community. Some older women in the community leave body marks on infants at birth. Depending on body type, sharp objects like razor blades, needles, surgical blades, hot objects like burning skin, and herbs and roots are used to make these marks. Among Nigerian ethnic groups, many informants reported no gender-based body marks in their communities. Some communities have gender-based marks. The Ngwa people have body marks for men and women, according to many community members interviewed during our field research in the region. Most marks are for tribal/family identification and recognition. Not everyone bears the mark. Today, being marked is optional. You can choose to be marked or not. This has religious significance. almost all Nigerian communities now have optional body markings, so informants in all regions said their children don't need to be marked again because body marks are no longer fashionable. In the past, the Igbo were considered noble men and capable. Thus, they received higher respect. In modern society, people are less interested in the body or facial marks. Members of Yorùbá communities and other ethnic groups gave similar responses during the interview. In the study, many informants with body marks said they saw themselves differently in the mirror. Some people from these ethnic groups said they didn't see anything wrong with the marks because they're part of their cultural identifiers that set them apart. groups. A member of the Igbo ethnic group affirmed thus:

Of course, with or without facial markings, I see myself quite different from the other person. Not that I am more superior, nor more inferior, but because by creation we are differently made. I don't feel different

at all when people react to the scarification on my face or any part of my body (Mr Ozor, Interview, 2022).

However, Mrs. Gloria from Nsukka in the South-East was humiliated by her facial marks. "Looking at the mirror, I see myself differently," she lamented. When people comment on my facial or body marks, I feel ashamed and inferior. She regards body marks as a cultural taboo. Seeing the marks makes her vow that none of her children will acquire them to spare them the trauma she is experiencing now.

### Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Utilising Body Marks for National Development

This study highlights the indigenous knowledge embedded in Nigerian scarification and body marking practices. Such practices are closely linked to healthcare, identity management, conflict resolution, self-protection, and cultural preservation, and thus hold potential for national development. Indigenous knowledge can inform policy, education, and technology when approached through sensitive, inclusive, and strategic methods. In a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria, cultural integration and national identity are possible avenues for applying these practices.

Fieldwork revealed that body markings often symbolize bravery, lineage, and rites of passage. For example, Mr. Uchenna from the Umuonyeukwu Arongwa community in Ngwa land explained:

Before now in this our community, a woman or man would have scarification marks that would distinguish her/him from anyone else, tell her/his rank in society, clan or tribe. It was like wearing your identity card on your face. Some of these marks are marks of one's lineage. Apart from tribal identity, some body and facial markings among men were a sign of strength, courage, and bravery. In fact, some men who wear a particular type of mark are the Ndi-Ichi title holders and are highly respected. Among women, many viewed these facial scars as marks of beauty and family pride. It is funny to hear that some men found them attractive (Interview, 2022).

Region-specific accounts further illustrate the diversity of meanings. Mr. Cletus from Osioma Ngwa noted that Igbo men bearing Ndi-Ichi marks were respected for bravery, while scarification also played roles in religious rituals and healing practices. Conversely, Mr. Charles from the Wahwah ethnic group argued that body marks today provide little benefit beyond tribal identification, and often expose individuals to stigma and discrimination. He described scarification as a dying practice, attributing its decline to modernization and the ICT generation, and suggested tattoos as a more acceptable alternative.

Other perspectives revealed ambivalence. Mr. Christopher from Nsukka described his marks as a source of disadvantage and emotional trauma, opposing their use for ethnic or national integration. He emphasized stigma, discrimination, and health risks, advocating for a ban on scarification. In contrast, Mr. David, a Ngwa Igbo informant, reported no sense of disadvantage and expressed kinship with others who shared similar marks, viewing them as potential tools for integration despite their decline under Christian influence.

Urhobo informants offered varied insights. Mr. Freeborn, a Chief Priest from Oyvie kingdom, emphasized kinship recognition through marks: "We know ourselves by our face or body marks." Others, such as Mr. Ovie, expressed pity for those with facial marks, noting their vulnerability in wartime. Mr. Alex observed that scarification is declining as civilization reshapes traditional lifestyles, yet acknowledged its role in uniting ethnic groups. He opposed its continuation, however, citing health risks from unsterilized tools, echoing scholarly concerns about infections associated with childhood scarification.

These diverse narratives demonstrate that scarification and body markings embody indigenous knowledge systems with both integrative and divisive potential. While some view them as markers of identity, bravery, and cultural pride, others highlight stigma, health risks, and declining relevance in modern society. The findings suggest that cataloguing the meanings and functions of body marks across ethnic groups such as Yoruba tribal marks, Tiv scarification, and Fulani facial

tattoos, could preserve valuable cultural knowledge. The different characterisation and expression of marks on the body by different nationalities in Nigeria express the cultural and traditional values and the meaning they attach to their own world and history. At the same time, critical reflection is needed to determine how such practices might contribute to national development without perpetuating discrimination or health hazards.

### **Symbolic Scars and National Memory: Recontextualising Body Marks in Nigeria's Intercultural Discourse**

Scarification and body markings in Nigerian cultures are living archives of identity, history, and belonging. These symbolic scars, once markers of ethnicity, lineage, family, clan, status, beauty, spiritual protection, and healing, now stand between a waning ethos and an evolving national consciousness. As modernity changes cultural values across Nigerian ethnic groups, recontextualising scarification and body marks in intercultural discourse preserves their historical significance and reframes them as shared heritage. These indigenous practices become collective symbols that unite ethnic groups and enrich the nation's cultural memory. Scarification and body marks remain powerful memory tools in Nigeria's multiethnic landscape, despite their decline. These cultural texts reflect the nation's past, present, and future.

Scarification and body marks are tribal, aesthetic, and living archives, according to informants from the study areas. Every indigenous mark in Nigerian communities has ethnic, lineage/family, rites of passage, spiritual healing, spiritual protection, social status, and communal belonging meanings. In one section, the Igbo used ichi or marks to signify adulthood and bravery. Other Igbo body marks are important in traditional society. These include Egbugbu marks. Utoh-Ezeajugh (2012: 126) states that egbugbu marks "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. Our informants in the region also confirmed that children and adults with illnesses or spiritual forces, such as Ogbanje, receive marks. The Igbo believe there are

Ogbanje-connected children. Our informants say these children can die prematurely and reincarnate as many times as they want. To keep these children with their earthly parents, the Igbo believe they must be marked and perform other rituals to prevent death by cutting their bodies to stop this cycle. A Yorùbá practice involved making small cuts on the body of a suspected àbíkú (born-to-die-child) to prevent cyclic movement. Although this practice is no longer common among the Yorùbá, many who received these marks are still alive and active in their communities, as confirmed by our information. Examples of body marks, known as *ilà*, in Southwestern Nigerian Yorùbá culture include those indicating family heritage and bravery. The Yorùbá believe that some of their body marks have a spiritual healing or curative role in their lives. In Ayeni (2004), scarification and body marks appear to heal the sick. During our 2022 field research in Èdẹ and Ògbómòṣṣò, elders interviewed revealed that priests, indigenous medical practitioners, and body artists use incisions to treat various ailments and diseases on their clients. According to informants, the Yorùbá often use scarification in their healing process when they believe that diseases or ailments have underlying causes. In the spiritual realms, they believe ordinary herbs and roots cannot cure such diseases because they are connected. Body marks hold great significance in the spiritual realm.

Among the Kagoro people of Kaduna State girls' bodies are marked upon attaining marriageable age. Girls undergo these marks as a rite of passage before marriage. According to Meek (1931), these marks were a sign that a girl was mature enough for marriage. She received distinctive cuts on her body to declare her new status. The Kagoro elders still view body marks as an important part of their womanhood and identity, even though modernization and changing values have eroded this tradition., beauty, and tradition. Every ethnic group in Nigeria has similar rites of passage.

Our research also found that body marks are central to many of these traditions, suggesting that Nigerian ethnic groups' body marks can foster intercultural relations and national integration. These scarifications and body marks are ethnically different, but they share some thematic similarities that reflect Nigerian values like identity and

resilience. Mr Fortune, an Urhobo, found that body marks from one of the researcher's Yoruba community are similar. This informant said his facial marks resemble the Yoruba tribal marks and as a result, most people he encounters ask him if he is of Yoruba origin. Sometimes, he answers in the affirmative. However his knowledge of the historical origin and similarity of the marks are yet to be established. Similar experiences are evident among the Yorùbá with tribal marks, as explained by the author. The above example suggests that Nigerian ethnic groups have similar body marks, suggesting a form of relatedness between groups. Mr Fortune added that this similarity suggests:

“...science of kinship, if I see people with body marking, you can easily identify their origin. And people from the same community with body marking can easily identify their members using their body marking type” (Interview, 2022).

He disclosed that if he sees people from other cultures with similar body marks to the marks he has on his face, he will see them as his kinsmen. Meanwhile, he opined that only further investigation can really reveal where they are from. This informant made it known that he will have a mutual relationship with those from other ethnic groups who bear similar body marks like theirs. Stressed further that if the person is friendly, they can relate well. He affirmed that the ethos of body marks can ignite intercultural relations and supported his argument by sharing his experience during his national service as a Corps member. Mr Fortune stated thus:

“...during my service year, most people thought I was a Yoruba, judging from my tribal mark, and this made me friends with a lot of Yoruba corps members” (Interview, 2022).

Mr. Freeborn validated what the above informant in Oyvie Kingdom said. He acknowledged that his community has body marks like other Nigerian tribes. The priest clarified that these marks have different meanings despite their similar designs and appearances. He said he gets along with good people with similar tribal markings. He said body marks can spark intercultural relations, but not evoke them. Even the

identity-based family type is neglected. Another Urhobo informant said the similarity may mean we share the same belief, which can foster intercultural relations. Mr. Charles from the Wahwah ethnic group found beautiful cross-ethnic scarification and body marks in Nigeria. In the Nsukka area of Enugu State, he believed that these people had similar body marks that meant the same as those in the Wahwah community. However, the informant denied that similar body markings in different cultures can lead to kinship in Nigeria. Based on tribal markings, he said he has no relationship with these people. He added that he didn't think it would foster interethnic relations. He suggested this relationship could exist between Northerners and Yoruba, where their marks are more noticeable than in the South-East and South-South. The Igala community in Kogi State also agreed with the above informants. One Igala community focus group participant said the Nupe people of Niger State, some Yoruba communities, and the Idoma people of Benue State share similar traits. The Bassa people of Kogi State are also similar.

Through globalisation and cultural uniformity, scarification and body marks connect Nigeria's indigenous knowledge systems. These practices can be framed in contemporary discourse to foster intercultural dialogue. Comparing marking practices across ethnic groups in Nigeria can reveal shared values and historical intersections. Body marks can symbolise national unity. As shown in this research, these marks can be reimagined as symbols of collective identity to promote national integration. Nigerians of all ethnicities must use inclusive storytelling to meaningfully recontextualise their body marks. Custodians of cultures and scholars can interpret scarification and body marks across Nigeria to promote cultural diplomacy, education, and national unity.

### **From Ethnic Inscription to National Expression: An Interpretation of Body Marks in Nigeria**

Transforming body marks' cultural and political significance is required to turn them from ethnic identifiers to national symbols. Body marks, rooted in Nigeria's diverse traditions of lineage, status, and belonging,

have a visual language that transcends ethnicity. Rather than being aesthetic or heritage artefacts, body marks could be deliberate emblems of collective identity, anchoring a sense of nationhood in a personal and profoundly public medium. Nigerian culture relies on body markings, which should be refined to avoid eradication. During community interviews, some of our informants advised improving them to promote interethnic relations in Nigeria.

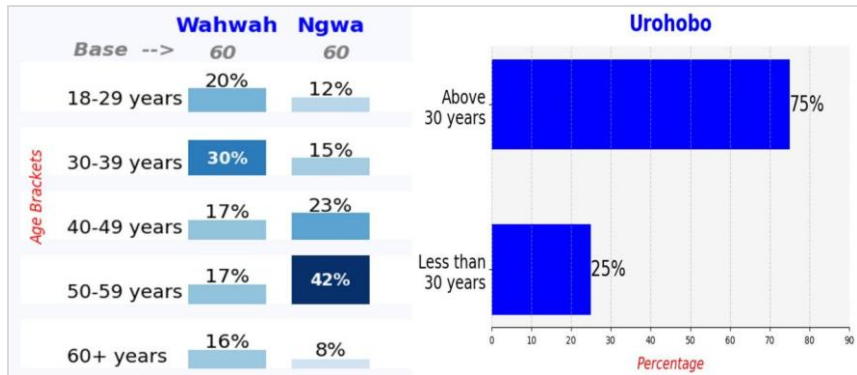
Many informants did not think scarification and body marks promoted national unity. Mr. Ozor for instance said, "It should be allowed to die. Scarifications according to him, do not promoting national unity. Even within some States in Nigeria, we observed some strong ethnic sentiments. Mrs. Ifeoma of Enugu State said, "It should be erased and not promoted because there are medical ways to treat a sick child." However, she believed that beauty marks can be refined." In her response, she discussed the practice of marking or scarring children suspected of reincarnation, known as Ogbanje in Igbo and àbíkú in Yorùbá, to prevent death reoccurrence. Mrs Ifeoma reiterates that biomedicine has significantly reduced the issue of Ogbanje or àbíkú in African societies. Mr. Fortune from Delta State's Urhobo ethnic group said that since body-marking is a fundamental value in Nigerian culture, smaller cuts that won't disfigure the faces should be made. He also suggested using a unique design for each ethnic group to promote identity and unity, which would improve interethnic relations in Nigeria.

#### Presentation and Interpretation of Quantitative Data on Scarification and Body Marks amongst Nigerian Ethnic Groups

The demographic section of our data analysis helped us identify and categorise the study units by gender, age range, marital status, and the various communities of the respondents.

## Part 1: Socio-Demographic Information

Table 1: Age distribution of respondents



Respondents are mostly middle-aged. Only 7 respondents (12%) are 18-29 years old, one of the least represented groups, and only 5 (8%), are 60 or older. The 30-39 group has 9 (15%) respondents, while the 40-49 group has 14 (23%), nearly a quarter of the sample. The largest age group is 50-59, with 25 respondents (42%), nearly half of the sample. Middle-aged adults (40-59 years) make up 65% of the population studied, while younger adults (18-39 years) make up 27% and older adults (60+) make up 8%. This uneven distribution suggests that middle-aged respondents dominated the study's perspectives, with younger and older respondents contributing less.

Table 2: Gender of Respondents

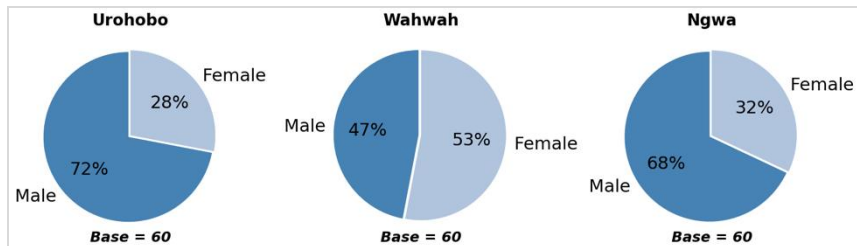
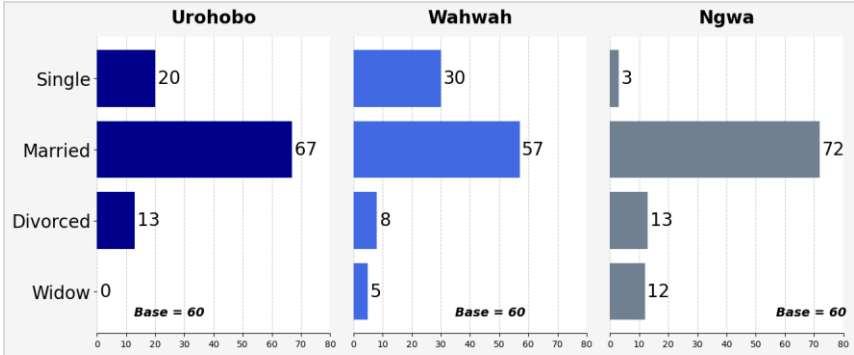


Table 2 above shows that 41 (68%) of the total respondents are male, while 19 (32%) are female.

Table 3: Marital status of the respondents



The elicited information in the table above shows 43 (72%) of the respondents are married, 8 (13%), 8 (13%) are divorced, 7 (12%) are widowed, and 2 (3%) of the respondents are single.

Table 4: Respondents’ Educational level

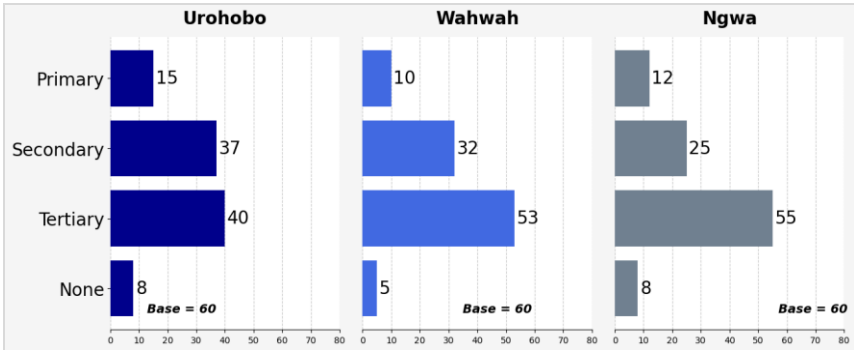
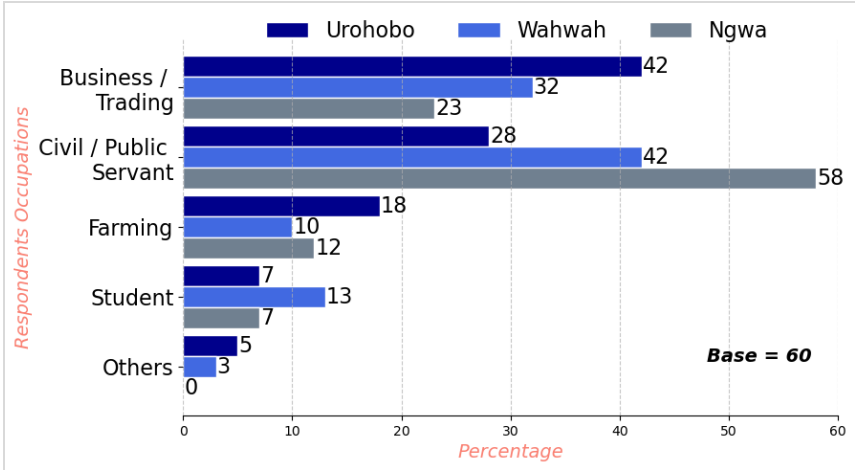


Table 4 indicates the respondents' educational level. Out of 60 respondents, 7 respondents, representing 12%, have primary education, 15 (25%) of the respondents have secondary school experience, while a significant number of them claimed to have post-secondary education, 33 (55%). However, 5 (8%) of the respondents do not have any form of formal education. This indicates that most respondents have formal education, which made understanding the items and completing the questionnaire easier.

Table 5: Occupational Category of the Respondents

As shown in Table 1, business/trading represents 23% of the respondents, civil/Public Servants represent 58%, and schooling represents 7%. The above data indicate that most respondents are actively engaged in their work.



Part 2: Meaning and purpose of scarification

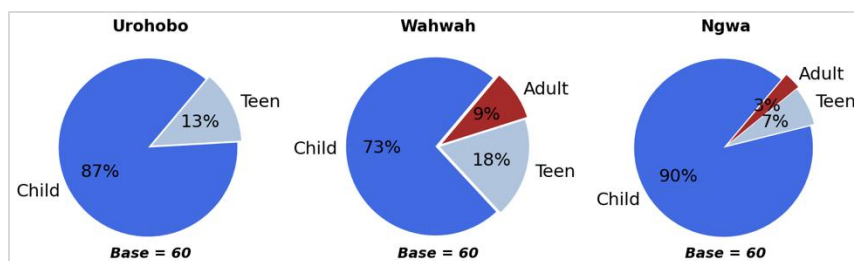
What are the reasons why some nationalities have specified facial or body marks?

Table 6: Reasons for having specified facial or body marks

<i>Base</i> →	Total 180	<u>Urohobo</u> 60	<u>Wahwah</u> 60	<u>Ngwa</u> 60
Decoration	12%	17%	17%	3%
Medication	21%	22%	33%	7%
Spiritual Protection	15%	23%	10%	12%
Identification & recognition	51%	35%	40%	78%
Other reasons	1%	3%	0%	0%

The table above shows several options to ask respondents about body scarification's meaning and purpose. 47 (78%) said facial/body marks are used for identification. This reason had the highest percentage, followed by decoration (3%), medication (7%), and spiritual protection (12%). This shows that Ngwa-speakers have distinguishable markings.

Table 7: Periods when communities engage in body scarification



It is shown in the above table that most scarification is done at the childhood stage. 54(90%) of the respondents ticked the childhood option in the list of the options provided. The 'teenage years' option was chosen by 4(7%) respondents while 2(3%) ticked the adulthood.

The fact that most of the respondents chose the childhood option is an indication that it is done early in life, and most likely that the members with marks got it during their childhood years. However, there are a few exceptions to the respondents' responses.

Table 8: Facial/Body markings among male and female folk

Responses	Urhobo		Wahwah		Ngwa	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Men & women have similar tribal marks	19 (32%)	41 (68%)	12 (20%)	48 (80%)	52 (87%)	8 (13%)
People with tribal marks see themselves as being different	6 (10%)	54 (90%)	11 (18%)	49 (82%)	4 (7%)	56 (93%)
Tribal marks are optional	21 (35%)	39 (65%)	58 (97%)	2 (3%)	21 (35%)	39 (65%)
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No

Tiv	42 (70%) 27 (45%)	18 (30%) 33 (55%)	12 (20%)	48 (80%)
Kanuri	26 (43%) 38 (63%)	34 (57%) 22 (37%)	10 (17%)	50 (83%)
Hausa	22 (37%) 35 (48%)	38 (63%) 8 (13%)	52 (87%)	25 (42%)
Ngwa	52 (87%) 39 (65%)	8 (13%) 4 (7%)	56 (93%)	21 (35%)
Urhobo	19 (32%) (35%) 39 (65%)	41 (68%)	6 (10%) 54 (90%)	21
Yoruba	12 (20%) 58 (97%)	48 (80%) 2 (3%)	11 (18%)	49 (82%)

The table above shows that 52 (87%) of respondents said men and women have the same tribal marks of identification, while 8 (13%) said no. Respondents were asked if people with body/tribal marks see themselves differently from others in the community to elicit information about discrimination or complexes caused by scarification. Many respondents (93%) said that people with body/tribal marks in their communities do not see themselves differently.

The study asked respondents about tribal marks in Tiv, Kanuri, Hausa, Ngwa, Urhobo, and Yoruba communities and how they are treated and how they feel about themselves as shown in the table above. Despite claims to the contrary, most respondents know they have tribal marks.

### Part 3: Inter-ethnic relations and national integration through scarification

To determine respondents' opinions/views on interethnic relations and national integration through scarification and body marks, Table six (6) comprised statement items as variables and graduated response options (Likert-type rating scale). The respondents' responses mean for each item statement is used to measure (accept or reject) their

perception of facial/body markings as ethnic identity markers. The variables are analysed using their mean point values, which were quantified (weighted) as 1,2,3,4, and 5, with higher values indicating more positive responses. The mean of 1,2,3,4, and 5 is 3. Scale mean is “3” and the criterion mean cut-off point is above “3” to set a higher criterion for accepting any item statement (Nwankwo, 1999). Any item in the table below with a mean score above “3” indicates that most respondents rated that statement high because they believed it to be true or correct. Lower mean scores indicate incorrect statements.

Part 4: What is the perception of the members of the Urhobo, Wahwah and Ngwa communities under study towards scarification and body marks regarding inter-ethnic relations and national integration?

Table 9: Descriptive Analysis of the respondents’ perception of tribal/body marks

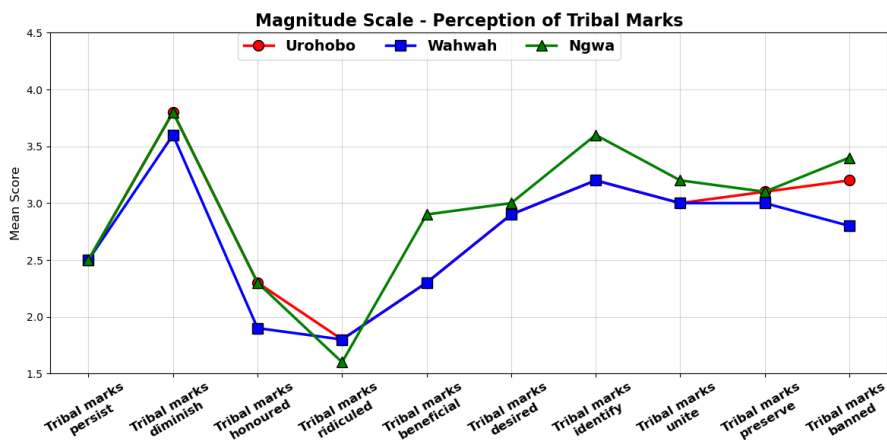


Table 9 shows respondents' mean tribal mark perception scores for Urhobo, Yoruba, and Ngwa ethnicities. The attribute “Tribal marks diminish” received the highest scores, especially among Ngwa respondents (~3.8), indicating a perception of a limited availability of

tribal marks. In contrast, “Tribal marks ridiculed” scored lowest, particularly in the Ngwa (~1.6) and Urhobo (~1.8) communities, indicating its lack of widespread acceptance. Other attributes like “Tribal marks beneficial,” “Tribal marks desired,” and “Tribal marks identify” had moderate mean scores (2.3–3.6), reflecting mixed views on their utility and cultural significance. The Ngwa community scored higher on positive attributes than others, indicating a stronger cultural appreciation of tribal marks. In contrast, Yoruba respondents scored “ridiculed” and “banned” slightly lower, indicating a more cautious or critical view.

The line plot shows that tribal marks are recognised but becoming rare, with regional cultural values. Compared to Urhobo and Yoruba respondents, Ngwa respondents value tribal marks more. All samples ridicule tribal marks minimally. Urhobo perceptions match those of other regions, indicating a shared cultural understanding with minor localised differences.

#### Summary of the Quantitative Analysis

Table 1 shows broadly similar age structures across most geopolitical groups, with respondents concentrated in the 30–59 age range. Tiv, Kanuri, Hausa, Urhobo, and Yoruba distributions are balanced, with no single age cohort overwhelmingly dominant. In contrast, Ngwa (South East) stands out with a pronounced concentration in the 50–59 age group, indicating an older respondent profile. Overall, the results suggest moderate age diversity across regions, with limited youth (18–29) dominance and a slight skew toward middle-aged adults.

Table 2 shows a male-dominated respondent profile across most ethno-regional groups, with particularly strong male representation among Kanuri (North East), Urhobo (South South), Ngwa (South East), and Tiv (North Central) respondents. In contrast, the Yoruba (South West) group stands out as the only zone where female respondents slightly outnumber males, indicating a more gender-balanced (and female-leaning) participation. Hausa (North West) respondents also display a relatively balanced gender distribution compared to other regions. Overall, the results suggest notable regional differences in

gender composition, with male dominance being the general pattern except in the South West.

Table 3 indicates that marriage is the dominant marital status across all ethno-regional groups, consistently accounting for more than half of respondents in each zone. Ngwa (South East) and Urhobo (South South) show the highest proportions of married respondents, suggesting more stable marital structures in these groups. Singlehood is relatively low in Tiv and Ngwa but more pronounced among Yoruba (South West) and Hausa (North West) respondents. Divorce and widowhood are present across all groups but remain secondary statuses, with slightly higher divorce rates among Kanuri (North East) and Tiv respondents. Overall, the results point to widespread marital stability, with regional variations mainly in the proportions of singles and divorced individuals rather than in marriage itself.

Table 4 indicates that secondary education is the dominant level across all ethno-regional groups, particularly among Tiv, Kanuri, and Hausa respondents, where it accounts for over half of the sample. Tertiary education is most pronounced among Ngwa and Yoruba respondents, suggesting comparatively higher educational attainment in the South East and South West. Urhobo respondents show a more even spread between secondary and tertiary education, pointing to a relatively balanced educational profile. Primary education and no formal education remain present but marginal in all regions, with slightly higher proportions among Hausa and Tiv groups. Overall, the results highlight clear regional disparities, with southern groups exhibiting higher levels of tertiary education compared to their northern counterparts.

The chart shows clear regional differences in occupational structure among respondents. In the northern groups (Tiv, Kanuri, Hausa), civil/public service is the dominant occupation, reflecting a strong reliance on formal government employment. In contrast, farming emerges as the leading occupation among Ngwa, Urhobo, and Yoruba respondents, indicating a stronger engagement with agriculture in the southern zones, particularly in the South East and South West.

Business/trading and student categories remain secondary across all regions, while “other” occupations are negligible. Overall, the results point to a north–south divide, with public-sector employment more prominent in the north and farming more dominant in the south.

Table 6 reveals that across all six ethnic groups surveyed, the predominant reason for scarification is Identification & Recognition, making it a primarily social and cultural practice for marking group or individual identity. Spiritual Protection consistently emerges as the secondary key motivation, indicating a significant ritual or religious dimension to the practice. In contrast, reasons like Decoration and Medication are notably less common overall, suggesting that aesthetic or therapeutic purposes are peripheral rather than central to the tradition. The chart indicates that body scarification is overwhelmingly concentrated in childhood across all six communities, suggesting it functions primarily as an early-life rite of passage rather than a later, individual choice. Children account for clear majorities in every group, rising as high as about nine in ten cases among the Ngwa and Urohobo, and remaining above half even in communities like Tiv, Kanuri, and Hausa. Teen scarification appears as a modest secondary stage, with only small proportions marked in adolescence, while adult scarification is consistently minimal, implying that once the socially expected childhood marks are completed, further scarification is uncommon. Collectively, the pattern points to strong cultural norms that locate the appropriate time for bodily inscription at the beginning of the life course, embedding group identity and belonging early rather than progressively over time.

Table 8. Across all six groups, most respondents report that tribal marks are not similar across genders, especially among Yoruba, Urohobo, and Hausa, where around two thirds or more say marks differ by gender. Marked individuals overwhelmingly feel distinct in every community, with roughly four fifths to over nine tenths agreeing, which underscores the strong identity marking role of these scars. At the same time, majorities in most groups, particularly Yoruba, Ngwa, and Urohobo, say that tribal marks are not optional, indicating that despite

some variation, the practice is generally perceived as a social obligation rather than a matter of personal choice.

Table 9. Across the six communities, perceptions of tribal marks are ambivalent but lean slightly positive on cultural value. Mean scores are relatively high for items such as “tribal marks persist,” “tribal marks honoured,” and “tribal marks identity,” indicating that many respondents still see marks as enduring symbols of respect and belonging. At the same time, moderate scores for “tribal marks ridiculed” and “tribal marks banned,” alongside only modest endorsement of “tribal marks desired,” show a clear awareness of stigma and a weakening desire to continue the practice, especially among Hausa and Yoruba. Overall, tribal marks remain culturally meaningful yet increasingly contested, with identity and prestige balanced against perceptions of ridicule, harm, and pressure for decline.

#### Discussion of the Findings

We discovered deeper meanings and purposes in Nigerian scarification and body markings. The quantitative findings show that Nigerian ethnic groups scarify and mark their bodies for four main reasons. The highest percentage, 87%, said body marks are used for identification and recognition in their communities. The surveys also found spiritual protection, medication, and decoration or beautification. This supports qualitative findings on Nigerian body marking meaning and reasons. Scarification and body marks are cultural symbols across regions, according to our qualitative data. The findings support social identity theorists like Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Trepte and Loy (2017) by showing that these ethnic groups use these marks to express their heritage, which can boost pride and belonging. This research shows that understanding these marks as symbols is essential to fostering respect among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups and in Africa. Social cohesion is another key finding of this study. This study found that Nigerian communities practice scarification and body marks, which can unite ethnicities. These practices suggest ethnic groups are more united due to their similarities.

While body markings can unite people, the study found that some people, including those with marks, stigmatise and discriminate against those with body or facial marks. According to 93% of respondents, tribal marks on their faces or bodies make them feel different from others in their communities. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions from the study areas support this. Two-thirds of informants interviewed across regions in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions said they are stigmatised and discriminated against in their own communities due to body marks. FGDs show that people, especially youths, associate scarification and body marks with primitive life and feel pressure from peers and community members to avoid it, perceiving it as “old-fashioned” or stigmatised in urban settings. Adeleke (2021) and Adisa et al. (2024) agree with this result. According to Adisa et al. (2024: 444-445), modernisation and westernisation have led to cultural changes, making tribal markings, once considered fashionable and honourable, now seen as outdated, especially among young people. The above scholars add that tribally marked people look different from Western society. These body marks cause “tribal marks lookism”. This statement supports Corbett's observation that Nigerian society is highly focused on physical attractiveness (Corbett, 2011, p. 625). Rhode (2010) and Hamermesh (2011) note that lookism is subjective and based on visual perceptions, leading to appearance-based discrimination.

Due to these challenges, more than half of the people with body marks who participated in the research advocated for discontinuity of the practices and said they would never mark their children so they could avoid the psychological and emotional trauma their parents are going through. This attitude threatens national integration and may divide regions. Thus, open dialogue is needed to resolve cultural misunderstandings between these ethnic groups, which can impede national integration. These cultural practices must be acknowledged in national identity and integration discussions to improve inclusivity. Exploring the meanings of scarification and body marks in Nigerian communities through education may also help foster interethnic relations.

National integration is another important theme of this study. Quantitative data showed that national integration over ethnic identity reduces body markings. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions showed that city dwellers strongly opposed body marking in their communities. Most saw body marks as a sign of "otherness," dividing ethnic groups. The findings suggest that social identity theory categorises people to explain how they see themselves and others (Trepte & Loy, 2017). According to Korte (2007) and Stolier et al. (2016), this process often leads to stereotypes of out-group members, which promote prejudice and discrimination. Adisa et al. (2024) noted this. As mentioned earlier in this study, body-marked people show this. To shape interethnic relations and perceptions among diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria, this study suggests reevaluating body markings. Nigerians can unite and value their diversity by understanding and appreciating these important indigenous practices.

## **Conclusion**

Scarification and body marking are essential human practices which enable individuals and societies to express identity, distinguish groups, mark transitions, and negotiate self-other boundaries across cultures and generations. This study shows that body marking tradition is ingrained in human culture and how people interact with others. This study found that neighbouring ethnic groups, particularly in Nigeria, have learned to respect each other through scarification. We also noted that these body marks show similar patterns across Nigerian communities, suggesting historical interactions and cultural exchanges.

Traditional scarification and body markings have declined due to modernisation and globalisation, but their presence reminds us of shared histories and cultural interconnectedness, forming a national identity. Many informants across the region agreed that these practices are essential to their communities' sociocultural survival. Nigerian body marking traditions are active in other vital indigenous traditions like rites of passage, healing rituals, warfare, and festival celebrations, demonstrating their cultural power and untapped potential. According

to Utoh-Ezeajugh (2012: 130), body marks are a sign of social development and personal development from childhood to adulthood.

The study contrasted cultural heritage with civilisations' modern policies. This study shows that body marking is still practised within some cultures and nationalities, despite its decline. Thus, few in the communities visited use the practice as an identity. This research revealed the inevitable shift in cultural practices and the need to document them before they disappear and erase a part of history .

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