The Use of Tribal Marks in Archaeological and Historical

Reconstruction: Isale Abandoned Settlement as a Case Study

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Abstract

The paper examines the importance of tribal marks in archaeological and historical reconstruction. Isale was occupied by the inhabitants of Old Oyo before it was abandoned. However, the marks on the cheeks of the occupants and their descendants show that originally, their ancestors were Oyo people though they claim to be Egba. This paper shows the use of tribal marks in trying to trace the original home land of the occupants of the settlement before it was abandoned.

Keywords: Isale,Old Oyo,Tribal marks,Oduduwa,Idere,Egba,Akanni

1. Introduction

Isale, is located in the South Eastern part of Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria. It is only 32 kilometres from Abeokuta. The name, Isale, is derived from the settlement's location on a low topography. In other words, the name literally means "a village on the low topography". Another name of the settlement is 'Abule Onipaanu i.e. "a village with corrugated iron sheets", for it was the first settlement to use iron sheets in the area at the beginning of the 20 century (personal communication with Mr. Thomas Salako,55years,atAbeokuta, Ogun state,5 September,1995).

The climate, as in other parts of Nigeria, comprises two seasons: wet and dry seasons. The wet season starts from March to October, while the dry season starts in November and ends in February. The site is drained by a stream known as Atadi which traverses its southern part. The stream supplied the needed water to the people who occupied the settlement in the past. It is a seasonal stream. As a result of human activities on the site, the forest has turned to secondary forest (Odunbaku,1990).

2. Historical Background of Isale

The Yoruba civil wars of the 19th century created a lot of uproar in Yorubaland. During the wars, the demand for slaves on the coast by the Europeans added impetus to the wars and the whole of Yorubaland was involved. As a result of this, some people who were fortunate to escape being captured sought for refuge in other towns. One of the most important reasons for the wars was the fall of old Oyo Empire¹ in which some towns tried to fill its vacuum. At this time, a warrior known as Igbaro Ajalugbalugbalu left Idere with his followers for the Egba² forest because of internal wranglings and the menace of Dahomey since 1862 who raided their original homestead. On getting there, he settled in a town called Adawo, not very far from Isale (personal communication with Chief Abolade Igbaro, 89 years, at Abeokuta, Ogun state, 18 March, 1992). Before long, a disagreement ensued between the eldest son of Igbaro known as Akanni and his younger brothers. The former became angry and decided to part company with his family. All efforts to pacify him proved abortive and he left Adawo to settle very close to a stream known as Atadi. This settlement later became Isale. The Ifa oracle was consulted and he was advised to offer some sacrifices before the settlement could be founded. After the sacrifice, the oracle said, "Aja bo ni ti eja ninu odo i.e." fish will always struggle to freedom in a river" (personal communication with Mr. Kelani Igbaro, 84 years, at Abeokuta, Ogun state, 6 June, 1992). The oracle further informed him that as from that day, nobody would be able to overcome him in all his endeavours. He moved his family to the place and it became a settlement. However, the settlement was abandoned in 1971.

The focus in this paper is not to examine the archaeological finds recovered in the process of studying the settlement history of the Isale people. The concern is to examine the importance of tribal marks in aiding the interpretation of the finds as well as in reconstructing the history of the abandoned settlement.

3. Tribal Marks in Yorubaland

No one can really say when the art of tribal marks began among the Yoruba³. However, according to Adeoye (1980:175-176), it was the Ifa⁴ deity who instructed Oduduwa⁵ to put marks on the cheeks of all the families that left the East i.e. Saudi Arabia with him because of rebellion and internal feud on their journey. This was after they had left Saudi Arabia as a result of a religious crisis between the Muslims and themselves who were the adherents of traditional religion. This, the deity informed him to do, so that each family could be easily recognised on the basis of tribal marks which they wore. As a result of wars, internal wranglings and misunderstanding, a number of families and chiefs did not follow Oduduwa to Ile-Ife⁶ and that is why today in some places other than Yorubaland in Nigeria, some tribal marks similar to that of the Yoruba are being worn. People in places such as Aswan in Egypt, Southern Sudan, Ethiopia, Berbers in Bornu and some inhabitants of Daura in Kano state wear many of the marks similar to the ones worn by the Yoruba too.

The examples given above show how wars, rebellion, and crisis scattered the Yoruba to different parts of Africa and beyond and they preserved their culture and tradition. Up till today, some inhabitants of Aswan in Egypt still put tribal marks on their children. When Oduduwa eventually got to Ife, he settled there and he began to put tribal marks on his children whom he also circumcised . However, a large number of his children died. That was why in his life time, he had only one surviving son known as Okanbi . He was counselled to consult the deities on what to do to put an end to the death of grown up children in his family. He gathered his herbalists together and the name of the Chief Priest who consulted the Ifa oracle was Setilu.

The oracle commanded him that henceforth, his children should not wear tribal marks because he had reached his permanent place of settlement but his family members and chiefs should continue to put marks on their children.

Another account was recorded by Johnson (1921:149-150). Sango (one of the past kings of Old Oyo) wanted to worship at the burial ground of his mother and he could no longer remember her name because she died when he was a baby. His mother was the daughter of Elempe, a Nupe king, who formed an alliance with Oranyan by giving him his daughter as a wife and Sango was the result of the union. He, therefore, commissioned a Tetu (a sheriff or king executioner) and a Hausa slave to proceed to Tapa country for the purpose of giving them a horse and a cow for the sacrifice. They were warned to listen attentively to the first name to be uttered during the invocation which would be the name of his mother.

When his grandfather i.e. Elempe saw the duo, he entertained them very well and the Hausa slave became drunk but the Tetu was very careful. At the time of the invocation, the priest who performed the sacrifice said; "Torosi, mother gbodo, listen to us thy son Sango is come to worship thee". The Hausa slave who was blind drunk did not notice the name but the Tetu who was cautious heard the name and memorised it. On getting to Oyo, the Tetu who was faithful with the assignment was abundantly rewarded while the Hausa slave was given one hundred and twenty-two(122) razor cuts all over his body in order to serve as a deterrent to others in future. After the healing of the scars, the Hausa slave appeared more handsome than before and this took the fancy of the king's wives who suggested that such marks should not be made on slaves but on the royal family as distinctive marks of royalty.

Sango followed the advice of his wives and submitted himself for tribal marks too. The markers were Babajegbe Osan and Babajegbe Oru but he could only stand two cuts on the two arms and prevented them from making more marks on him. This is what is called Eyo marks and are reserved solely for the royal family of Oyo and for this reason, members of the royal family are called Akeyo. They are two broad ribbon marks on the arms from the shoulder to the wrist.

Moreover, it is said that Obemawe of Ondo and Ebumawe of Orile-Iwoye were twins. When Obemawe, the younger of the two had established himself properly as the king of Ondo, he wanted to know the marks on the cheeks of the children of his twin brother. He, therefore, sent a servant to Orile-Iwoye. But on getting there, he was not given a befitting welcome because he was only given some water to drink. However, before he left, he noticed that his children wore pele marks on their cheeks (this shall be discussed later). He left for Ondo and when he got home, he was given a rousing welcome but he was too tired to talk. They asked him the marks on the cheeks of the children of Ebumawe and he used his hand to draw long marks on both cheeks and this makes their tribal marks to be different from others (Adeoye,1980).

Some also argue that tribal marks started because of slave trade. This line of argument may not hold because the slave trade referred to is not clearly stated. There was the Inland trade, the origin of which is not known and the trans-Atlantic slave trade which did not begin until the contact with the Europeans on the coast. One thing is certain, during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the marked people were known to be stubborn and heady and they were known

as breaches, and were common among the Igbo. They preferred to die to going to other lands. They were known to stir up rebellion on the ships conveying them to Europe and the Americas. At times, they could throw themselves overboard. This, it is believed, could have led to the spread of marks on the cheeks since the Europeans resolved not to buy slaves who wore tribal marks on their cheeks (Adepegba, 1976:17).

Another source which could be of assistance in resolving the beginnings of tribal marks in Yorubaland is Archaeology. Some of the terracotta figurines (burnt clay objects) from Nok with tribal marks have been dated to between 5000B.C. and 200A.D (Eyo,1977).

Some of the Ife works art with tribal marks have come from Olokun grove, Wumonije Compound, Lafogido grove, Iwinrin grove etc. These artifacts have been dated to between 12th and 16th centuries AD. The Nok artifacts wearing the same tribal marks with that of Ife are the oldest dates for its beginning which Archaeology can give.

As suggested by Clinton (1990), it could be that the art actually started among the Nok people before it spread to different parts of Yorubaland. However, this theory cannot be proved to be correct but as we continue with our research, we may be able to know the truth about the matter. We can therefore submit that by the beginning of the 12^{th} century or even earlier, the art of tribal marks had started among the Yoruba. It is generally believed that at this time, the art in terracotta had started among the Yoruba.

In the pre-colonial period and in recent times, many families and lineages made sure that their children wore tribal marks. Despite the health hazards that were associated with open wounds when people had tribal marks, many families continued with the art even though its importance is on the wane today. In some families, it was a taboo not to wear tribal marks on the cheeks. Anyone who refused to wear the marks was seen to be incurring the wrath of the gods and their ancestors. Such a person would be seen as trampling upon the tradition of the family and at times, could be ostracised (Clinton,1990). People had to submit themselves for marks on the cheeks because at times, the marks to be worn must be given by the Ifa oracle and to go against the decision of the oracle would attract the wrath of the gods. About three days to this time, the oracle would be consulted whether the fellow was ready for tribal marks or not. This type of enquiry is called *Igbori* and it means to investigate in order to know the destiny of the child and to confirm if there would be no danger after the child had been given tribal marks (Adeoye,1980).

The Yoruba agree that the original purpose of tribal marks was to distinguish various Yoruba families and lineages as well as to identify people during intra-and-inter-state wars and slave trade. Hence, all the Yoruba sub-groups had different marks with which they identified themselves before and after the advent of colonialism. During the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, identification became important and as a result, many had to wear tribal marks (Oyetade, 1982). At times, some people who were sold into slavery were later discovered to belong to the same Yoruba sub-groups as those who had sold them off. Hence, by merely looking at the cheeks of an individual, they could easily know where the fellow came from in Yorubaland.

Moreover, tribal marks are means by the Yoruba to enhance their natural beauty. As observed by Meek (1931:30):

... as tribal marks are now and were even in pre-European days, commonly regarded as adornments, their original significance as tribal badges has been to a great extent blurred if not entirely lost. One tribe will adopt the markings of its neighbour as being more decorative than its own and individual members of tribes commonly effect any set of marks which happen to take their fancy.

In line with the above, Russell (1969:99) writes: ... among the Yoruba, though facial marks and body tribal marks are symbol of clan affliation, they are also means of beautification. '

Also, Babalola(1973:4) writes that among the Oyo Yoruba, there is a popular saying that: "Asa keke, aajo ewa ni nse, a bu abaja aajo ewa ni nse" i.e. "whether you wear keke or abaja tribal marks, your intention is to beautify yourself". Hence, it can easily be seen that someone who knows the different tribal marks being worn by the Yoruba can quickly know a person's hometown, family or lineage or the part of Yorubaland a person hails from. However, tribal marks also enhance the beauty of those who wear them.

4. Types of Tribal Marks in Yorubaland

Some of the popular tribal marks among the Yoruba are known by specific names and verbs expressing how they are made. Generally, the tribal marks of the Yoruba are usually vertical and horizontal lines concentrated on the face from the cheek bone to the jaw. Depending on the marker and the face pattern in question, the marks could either

be thin or wide, but most of the times, they are wide. The marks whether they are vertical or horizontal must be parallel (and are so in most cases) except in the case or cases of poor marksmanship on the part of the marker. It has been observed that the marks for medicinal or health reasons, are usually not parallel, inconsistent and incoherent. This may be as a result of the i-don't-care-attitude of the markers.

Abaja is one of the most popular facial marks among the Yoruba. There are about eight types of this and they are common among the Oyo, Owu, Egba, Egbado, Osun and Ofa. It may consist of three or two sets of three (i.e. six) horizontal marks. These are called Abaja Omo Oba (Abaja of the Prince of Oyo) or Abaja mefa-mefa (Abaja of a six horizontal strokes) (Oyetade,1982)^(fig. 1:1-2). There is the one which is made up four or two sets of four (i.e. eight horizontal marks)^(fig. 1:3-4). These are known as Abaja merin-merin (Abaja of four horizontal strokes) or Abaja mejo mejo (Abaja of eight horizontal strokes). The Yoruba also have a combination of three longitudinal strokes on a cheek and four horizontal strokes on the other cheek. These longitudinal marks are known as Pele which we shall discuss later. The combination of these two types are usually worn by the Basorun and they call it Abaja of the Basorun⁷

^(fig. 1:5). Abaja mefa-mefa (Abaja of six strokes) are three vertical marks which are made on top of three or four horizontal ones, or above a set of two three (i.e. six) or a set of two four (i.e. eight) horizontal marks)^(fig1:6-9). This type is also known as Abaja Olowu (Abaja of the Olowu) provided the number of the marks is six^(fig1:6). It is also known as Abaja meje i.e. Abaja of seven strokes provided the number is seven or Abaja mokanla (Abaja of eleven strokes) if the total is eleven ^(fig1:7&9) (Abraham, 1946).They may also be regarded as Abaja Alagbeele i.e the type where one is superimposed on the other. Another type of Abaja known as Abaja Ekiti (Abaja of the Ekiti) is usually a combination of three vertical strokes on three sets of three horizontal marks, totalling twelve marks in all (Adepegba,1982) ^(fig1:10).

Furthermore, there are marks known as Eyo marks (broad ribbon marks) which are drawn along the whole length of the arms and legs. Although among the Oyo, slaves who were born within the palace or those who were closely related to the Royal family were allowed to wear some of these facial marks, the Eyo marks were reserved majorly for the members of the Royal Family. All the above mentioned marks are very common among the Oyo people, especially those belonging to the Royal family (Johnson, 1921).

Keke also known as gombo has either thin long vertical lines which reach to the head across the temple (Johnson,1921). They occupy the whole space between the auricle and the cheek bone. Three small perpendiculars are also placed on the horizontal lines on both cheeks^(fig1:11). A variation can be made by adding on the left cheek, the Ibamu ^(fig1:12) i.e. a line running from the top of the nose to the horizontal lines. At times, they wear this to also distinguish the families. When the marks on the cheeks are bold and wide, they are known as Keke but when the marks are thin, they are known as gombo. The two marks are very common among the Oyo and Egbado sub-groups. The second one is Keke Olowu and it is like the Keke or gombo with the lines discrete or interrupted. ^(fig1:13).

The Ture marks are four perpendicular marks and they look like the Gombo marks but the Ture marks are longer, with the three small perpendiculars. The Ture marks do not have the horizontal marks. ^(fig2:1).

The Pele marks were not common among the Oyo in the past. The marks are usually three vertical strokes on each side of the cheek and they are usually called Pele meta (Three Pele) (Oyetade,1982). The Oyo of old wore the marks because of the Islamic religion.(^(fig2:2)It started in Ilorin after its annexation by the Fulani in the 19century. At this time, those who imbibed the Islamic religion hated to be plain faced like the Ife and they started wearing it because it was not common like the others (Adeoye,1980). Adepegba (1982) is of the opinion that other Nigerian groups who wore the marks lived on the possible land routes of Nigerian Muslims to Mecca, so it may be possible that the marks were introduced to Yorubaland by Muslim migrants.

As observed by Burton(1893:233-234):

...it was preserved as the mark of the Holy city in Mecca where in most families, male children, forty days old are taken to the Kaabah, prayed over and carried home. Here, the barber draws with a razor three parallel gashes down the fleshy portion of each cheek from the exterior angles of both eyes almost to the corners of the mouth.

The only differences seen in these marks as worn by other Yoruba sub-groups are the length, depth and width of the marks (Johnson, 1921). The other type that looks more like it is the Abaja Oro of the Egba but it is longer. They consist of three perpendicular lines each about three inches long on each cheek^(fig2:3)

The Ijebu also have their own marks and the first one is similar to Abaja Olowu and this is from the tribe from which

they were partly descended but the horizontal lines are curved ^(fig2:4). The second one is the Abaja Oro of the Egba ^(fig2:3) but the former is more common among the Ijebu than the latter.

If emarks are usually three horizontal lines like that of the Basoruns of Oyo but each being shorter, about half inch long. Apart from these, the Ife people do not wear tribal marks. ^(fig2:5&6)

The Ondo and Idoko have only one deep and long mark on each cheek. It is usually one and a half inches to two inches long over each malar bone. This type is also referred to as Pele Kan (One Pele). ^(fig 2:7)

The Ijesha have no distinctive marks and like the Ife, they are usually plain-faced. Some of their families can however be identified because each cheek may have five or six horizontal lines. The lines are usually very close to each other and longer than Oyo marks ^(fig2:8&9). Also, among the Efon, an Ekiti family, all the lines are so closely drawn together that they form a dark patch on the cheeks. ^(fig2:10)

The Yagba occupy the north-easterly part of Yoruba and they are identified with three long lines on each cheek, far apart but which almost join together at the corner of each mouth. The cat's whiskers' as it is normally called is also found among the Nupe and many ethnic groups around the Niger-Benue confluence.^(fig 2:11)

The marks of the Igbomina are like that of Oyo but long and far apart like the Yagba marks, but they do not converge in front. ^{(fig 2:12).}

According to Johnson, some of the tribal marks of Oyo are no longer in use and he noted specifically the Mande and Jamgbadi marks and the latter is said to be worn by foreigners who naturalised in Yorubaland. It would mean that the Yoruba might have worn other marks which were not mentioned in his book. Also, we do not have any information on the two marks, which he claimed were also worn by the Yoruba in the past (Johnson, 1921).

The names of the various marks mentioned above are used with different kinds of verbs in the Yoruba language. Consider the following:

to wear pele marks is o ko pele

to wear keke marks is o sa keke

to wear baramu marks is o fa baramu

to wear gombo marks is o wo gombo

to wear ture marks is o bu tire(Adeoye,1980:176).

In order to arrive at a logical conclusion, interviews were conducted in some villages very close to Isale. Some of the people wore the same tribal marks like the ones worn by the people who occupied Isale in the past. The people wore the Abaja marks which is a set of four horizontal lines on each cheek with three perpendicular lines on top(.^(fig3:1) In addition to this, some of them also had three pele marks on the foreheads together with the Abaja marks^(fig3:2). On closer examination, we observed that not all of them had the pele marks on their foreheads. Some had the marks on the chins others only had the Abaja marks with no pele marks on their foreheads and their chins (^{fig3:3&4)}. It means that aside the Abaja marks, some of them did not have any other marks on the chin or forehead. According to Mr. Thomas Salako, this was done in the past to add to the beauty of a woman or man. This they referred to as *eeni i.e. extra*. When a man or woman was incised with tribal marks, people would come around and request for *eeni* from the *Oloola* i.e. the marker. The *eeni* could be made on the arms or the legs too. This, according to him, they did in order to beautify themselves the more (personal communication with Mr.Thomas Salako, 55 years,at Abeokuta Ogun state,5 Sept.1993).

It is, however, important to say that we were rather surprised that all the inhabitants of Isale wore only the Abaja marks which is a set of four horizontal lines on each cheek with three perpendicular lines on top. This made me visit neighbouring villages such as Ajaaka, Abaku, Ota, Oluoro to examine the tribal marks on their faces. I also travelled to Abeokuta to examine the tribal marks on the faces of the occupants of Isale and their descendants. To my surprise, I discovered that they only wore the Abaja marks described above. According to Mr. Thomas Salako, all of them together with the inhabitants of the villages mentioned above only wore this type of Abaja. Again, I also noticed that all the Ijaiye people, Keesi people etc. who occupied different quarters in Abeokuta wore the same Abaja marks and these people claimed to have come to Abeokuta after the fall of Oyo. Mr. Sufi Salako said he was confused because he was told that they came to Abeokuta from Old Oyo and even now, he claimed that they have relations living in Ibadan (personal communication with Mr Sufi Salako,50years,at Abeokuta, Ogun State,10June,1993). This might be true because after the fall of Old Oyo, a large number of the people settled in Ibadan which was already a town in 1829. Abeokuta was established in 1830 after the Egba had been displaced from their original homeland in the Egba forest.

Moreover, another type of tribal marks seen among the Isale people are known as marks of beauty i.e. Ila Oge. As

one can see in ^{fig3:5&6}, the tribal marks are usually deep or shallow, about an inch long. This can be worn by either male or female. The marks in ^{fig3:7} are usually worn by females and they appear like stars. The number of it on each cheek depends on the interest of the individual female. It could be meta, meta i.e. three three or two two i.e. meji, meji(personal communication with Mrs Oluyemi Salako ,50 years, at Ibadan, Oyo state,6June,1993). The marks in ^{fig3:8} are usually worn by both male and female while the last one in ^{fig3:9} are worn only by spinsters in the family of those who occupied Isale (personal communication with Mrs Aduke Salako,65 years,at Abeokuta,Ogun state,8August,1993).

According to Chief Abolade Igbaro, the Asalumata of Egbaland, Abeokuta belonged to the Oyo people, because they were the first set of people to get there from time immemorial. Most of the towns of today were founded by the Oyo people after the fall of Old Oyo (personal communication with Chief Abolade Igbaro,80years,at Abeokuta,Ogun state,18March,1992). The interview I conducted with Prof. Cornelius Adepegba of the blessed memory may lend credence to this belief. According to him, after the fall of Oyo, the Oyo people did not enter the forest environment because it was occupied by the Egba. Some drove the Egba away from Ijaiye and occupied the place. But after the fall of Ijaiye, they moved towards the coast and settled in Idere, Igbo-Ora, Ibadan etc but the majority of them moved towards the coast (personal communication with Professor Cornelius Adepegba,60 years, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Oyo state,6 June,1992).

According to Mr. Gbenga Ogunbote, Idere was an Oyo town, because it was actually the inhabitants of Oyo who lived there after its fall(personal communication with Mr Gbenga Ogunbote, 48years,Dept.of Nigerian Languages and Literatures, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ogun State, 5July,2011). If this is true and with what Prof. Adepegba said, then, we can submit that the Isale people were originally Oyo people but because of challenges of life, migrated to Idere and with time, moved to Isale at a time in the past.

In conclusion, the use of tribal marks has enabled us to know the original abode of the Isale people who now occupy a quarter in Abeokuta. It is clear from the above that though the people claim to be Egba people, but it has been shown that originally, their forefathers were Oyo people. We have been able to arrive at this conclusion because of the abaja marks which the people wear up till today. It is, however, important to note that their descendants are no longer wearing Abaja marks. This is due to westernisation and today, anybody who wears tribal marks is detested since the art is now seen as barbaric among the Yoruba. The practice is fading and falling rapidly into disuse. Commenting on tribal marks, one of my interviewees with tribal marks on checks says:

Tribal marks should be discouraged in this modern age. The art is barbaric and parents should not put tribal marks on the cheeks of their children. I feel embarrassed at times when I find myself in a crowd and I observe that I am the only one wearing tribal marks (personal communication with Mr Thomas Ojo,47 years,at Ibadan, Oyo State7December2011).

A cross section of the people interviewed submitted that the art should be completely discouraged in order to guide against unnecessary embarrassment since some might find it very difficult to get married or even get a good job. Through the use of the artefacts collected during the investigation and the use of tribal marks, there is no doubt that the inhabitants of Isale were Oyo people who because of the challenges of life, moved to Egbaland after the fall of Old Oyo in the 19century even though their descendants claim to be egba. **References**

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Note 1:Old Oyo empire was destroyed in the 19th century Yoruba civil wars.

Note 2: They are a sub-group of the Yoruba.

Note 3: The Yoruba are one of the of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Others are the Hausa and Igbo.

Note 4:Ifa is one of the traditional gods of the Yoruba.

Note 5:Oduduwa was the progenitor of the Yoruba.

Note 6:Ile-Ife is the ancestral home of the Yoruba.

Note7:Basorun was the Prime-minister of Old-Oyo before its destruction in the 19th century.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to Dr. O.O Olubomehin of the Dept of History and Diplomatic Studies who introduced me to this Journal. I also want to thank Mrs. Olayemi of the Dept of English Language and Performing Arts and Mr. Taiwo Olatunde who read the journal article before I made the final submission. I also seize this opportunity to thank Mr. Kunle Odunbaku who assisted me in the payment of the publication fee from Britain.





Fig. 1: Tribal marks in Yorubaland





Fig. 2: Tribal marks in Yorubaland





Fig. 3: Tribal marks among the Isale People.