

## THE ART OF DEVOTION: EXAMINING RELIGIOUS BODY ART PRACTICES IN GHANA'S GA CULTURE

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### Abstract

Body marking, a profound and ancient tradition across indigenous Africa, continues to serve as a significant marker of identity, cultural affiliation, and spiritual expression. This practice involves deliberate physical alterations to the skin, typically in the form of permanent incisions or tattoos, which carry deep personal, cultural, and religious meanings. Historically, body marking has been employed for various purposes, including identification, beautification, and religious observance. These markings are designed to be enduring, as the incisions made on the skin are intended to leave lasting scars that are difficult or impossible to fully remove. This paper explores the role of body marking in indigenous African societies, with a focus on its significance as a form of identity and its evolving meanings in contemporary contexts. By examining historical and contemporary practices, this study highlights the cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions of body marking and its enduring impact on individual and collective identities.

### INTRODUCTION

Body marking is one of the oldest traditions in indigenous Africa (DeMello, 2007), and today it is viewed as one of the simplest ways to associate an individual with a notion or concept of a unique identity, whether for mere identification, beautification, or religious inclinations. Body marking, as defined by various authors, refers to physical alterations made to the skin, typically in the form of permanent incisions that leave lasting scars (Roper, 2004; Ayeni et al., 2007). These incisions are considered permanent because they cannot be fully removed or healed, and attempts to remove marks like tattoos often result in permanent scarring. The description and definition of body marks encompass all forms and types of such modifications, including tribal marks, body piercings, tattoos, scarification, branding, beading, and dermal anchors (Summers, 2007; Wessely, 2013; Abbasi, 2013). In indigenous cultures in Ghana such as Ga, Ada and Ewe, there are however, some temporary markings that are done with a mixture of white kaolin and water, known in the Ga and Ada languages as ayilo and in the Ewe language as ɛɛ. This mixture is applied to the skin and can be washed off with water.

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*Ga-Mashie* is the oldest community in the Greater Accra region of Ghana and may also have the oldest tradition of body markings. This assertion is supported by Amartey (1990), who stated that body marking has been practiced among members of the *Ga* ethnic group for centuries, possibly since the 16th century. It is evident that issues such as migration, affiliations, alliances, origin, tradition, and intermarriages have significantly influenced the practice of body marking among the *Ga* today. For instance, according to Amartey (1990), the *Ga* of presentday Ghana once inhabited the eastern part of the River Nile around 1700 BCE – 1250 BCE during the reign of Thothmes II. Conversely, body marking in ancient Egypt is traced back to the 11th Egyptian Dynasty between 2160 BCE – 1994 BCE. Given this timeframe, which predates the estimated settlement period of the *Ga*, it is plausible that the *Ga* were influenced by the body marking practices of ancient Egypt, adopting and adapting them to suit their own cultural needs. It is therefore reasonable to assert that during the 294-year period from 1700 BCE to 1994 BCE, there were developments in the practice of body marking among both the elite and commoners of Egypt, and these practices may have influenced the different ethnic groups they encountered through trade and other interactions along the River Nile.

Amartey also postulates in his book, “*Omanyeba*” that, when slavery was at its peak in and around Egypt, Pharaoh Amenhotep II (the then pharaoh of Egypt) freed slaves and it is believed that these slaves included some Nubians and among them were some *Ga*. On the other hand, Tassie (2003) and Frecentese (2013) also believe that ancient Egyptians may have also adopted the practice of body marking from the Nubians; this then points to the fact that, the possible affiliation between the *Ga* and the Nubians is what contributed to their initial and present practice of body marking.

During the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, body markings were at a peak among the *Ga* (as had been the case among many other areas susceptible to the buying and selling of slaves). This was shortly after the arrival of the Portuguese in 1482 on the coasts of *Osu Klotey*, currently around the Christiansborg Castle, *Osu*. Slave masters marked the faces of their subjects to prevent them from escaping. This is in line with Cullivan’s assertion that, body markings became very common in Africa during the slave trade (Cullivan, 1998). This write up concedes to the fact that facial markings were most common during the slave trade as this made slaves easily identifiable. As stated earlier, it is possible that the origin of body marking as practiced by the *Ga* could have come from any of their affiliations at any point in time through any means. Although there seem to be varying sources and evidence, proving the true ‘origin of the *Ga*’ (as known to the indigenous *Ga* as *Gamei ashikwei*), it can clearly be stated that the practice of body marking was woven into Ebeheakey their cultural fibre one way or the other; a practice they have held on to for several generations since their arrival in the Gold Coast.

Among the several indigenous groups that practice body marking, there are various reasons attached to them. These range from cultural, medicinal, religious, military, sexual enhancement and fertility as well as aesthetic reasons (Ankrah, 2012; Chano Metal, 2012; Murano, 2013; Roper, 2004). Others are for protection from evil and death, family pride and royalty, as well as strength and courage (Uzobo et al., 2014). This study zooms in on the marks done for religious purposes among the *Ga*. During the research, I discovered that these marks are having a steep decent in history and this is associated with a plethora of reasons, including the fight for human rights, modern concepts of religion (such as Christianity) and fear of incarceration. The *Ga* based on their position as one of the earliest settlers in modernday Ghana and the role they have played in establishing and affirming the opulent religious beliefs in the country, makes them an essential study. Also, as an ethnic group who appear to be desperately holding on to indigenous practices in an urbanised society (in the bustling metropolitan area of Accra, Ghana), it has become eminent to safe-guard some of these age-old practices.

Body markings for religious purposes among the *Ga*, although deemed necessary by some indigenous people, are declining rapidly at the hands of contemporary concepts and modern philosophies regarding faith, religion and belief. These have caused a deterioration in the practice as more people are gradually shying away from it although some still hold on to the thin thread of faith and belief in the ancestors and the power of their gods. Considering that in a few years, this practice may be lost; this study forms a part of a broader agenda of safeguarding the practice of indigenous religious body marks of the *Ga*.

### Concept of religion

The role religion plays in the history of human civilisation is said to be one of great value and importance (Medda, n.d). This is based on the cognitive theories that human beings attach to will and feeling; considering that religion is one of the most pervasive and influential forces in people's lives (Myhre, 2009). Irrespective of how recent the concept of religion is, it is almost impossible to have a single wholesome ascription to it. Its variedness and indirectness make it a compelling concept to explore, especially in situations that have some form of permanency attached to them such as the issue of body marking. The term religion is elaborated on by Astrow et al. (2001) as a set of languages, beliefs and practices that characterizes a community in search of a transcendent meaning. This meaning is generally based on the belief in a deity or divinity. Perhaps, the definition provided by Wilson (2002) better helps grasp the concept that is being propounded in this study. According to Wilson, religion is a "product of biological and cultural evolution with immense adaptive value for group survival". This can only mean that, although the belief among the *Ga* is seen as foremost and essential, their attachment to religion could be a product of their cultural evolution and a means of survival for them. As an important factor in the lives of individuals, religion is an unforeseen force that draws people to a greater being of worship. Although established that religion is one of the most difficult concepts to explain, this study terms it basically as the belief in spiritual beings. This 'definition' is meant to use some of the tenets of religion in its explanation so as to suit the terms of the study and not necessarily an avid or concise ascription as it has proven almost impossible to do so. Again, this definition is based on the "Philo metaphysical" foundation, considering metaphysics as beyond the physical and bordering on the spiritual.

### Ethnographic background

The *Ga* is believed to have migrated from *Ile Ife* in Nigeria and this is based on several archaeological discoveries and the tracing of their migration history. They are said to have trod the Gulf of Guinea in several colonies just like soldier ants (Fordjour, 2013). This made the *Ga* to be associated with soldier ants, '*nkranii*' in the *Akan* language as it was the *Akan* who were believed to be the first settlers in present-day Ghana (WatsonQuartey, 2011). There are different writings, however, that suggest that the *Ga* may have originated further from Nigeria. This is supported by writings of Amartey and NaiTete who are well versed in the history and existence of the *Ga*.

'Ga' is believed to be a derivation of *GaGa*, the giant black ants that are dangerous to other ants including the white ants. Watson-Quartey (2011) avers that, the indigenous *Ga* often associate themselves with *loei* which are a specie of dark brown ants that move lithely and are believed to be invasive and have killing and devouring tendencies. These attributes are always associated with the *Ga* as they are believed to have behavioural instincts like that of the *loei* hence they (the *Ga*) sometimes refer to themselves as *loeiabii* (children of the *loei* ant).

Currently, the *Ga* are mostly found in the south-eastern coast of Ghana although sections of them are scattered around the country. They now constitute 3.4% of the total population of Ghana and include approximately

600,000 *Ga* speakers (Wulomei.bb, 2017). The *Ga* district lies between the *Chemmu* lagoon and the *Densu* River with *Ga-Mashie* as its central district.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For ethnographic research, it is essential to employ a method that facilitates detailed exploration and explanation of concepts, phenomena, and ideas under study (Sangasubana, 2011). Therefore, this study opted for the qualitative research approach. This approach was chosen because it enables a comprehensive understanding of the religious marks practiced by the *Ga*, allowing for a deeper and broader exploration of concepts and notions related to their body marking traditions. The qualitative approach proved invaluable due to the intricate nature of the ideas surrounding body marking among the *Ga*. It facilitated easier data collection by conducting interviews with indigenous people in their natural settings, where they could provide detailed explanations of body markings used for religious purposes, supported by relevant examples from their environment.

Data analysis in this study was conducted using inductive reasoning, as described by Sauce and Matzel (2017), where multiple premises believed to be true or found true most of the time was combined to derive specific conclusions or provide evidence for conclusions. Thematic analysis of the primary data was also conducted through inductive reasoning to assess consistency, frequency, and accuracy of data in relation to the research objectives and questions. These identified themes facilitated the organization and interpretation of data effectively.

### **Research philosophy**

Cultural study has been founded through human actions using Franz Boas' modern anthropological conception (Chowdhury, 2014). To Boas, culture is a working system and it needs to be considered as an integrated system of ideas, values and symbols that need to be studied. As such, Boas advocates interpretivism as a prudent way of achieving this. Interpretivism, having its roots in traditional philosophical thought explains and supports the notion that reality is multiple and relative. Ponelis (2015) asserts that, the viewpoint that every reality (as exists among groups of people) is socially constructed by humans and their actions.

Taking the stance of an interpretivist, a researcher is able to not only view the world through the participant's eyes but construct and interpret the data based on the participant's viewpoint. This study, bordering on qualitative research and bearing significance in the cultural behaviour of groups of people, adopts the interpretivist stance. This does not only enrich the qualitative approach as used by the study but allows for better understanding of the concepts behind body marking for religious purposes.

### **Data collection**

Data for the study were collected using two primary methods: interviews and observations. The study employed a general interview guide approach, where participants were asked a specific set of questions designed to elicit detailed information about the existence and practice of body marks. The structured nature of the questions allowed for a relaxed and informal conversation, enabling participants to provide in-depth insights into their beliefs and values associated with body marks. Additionally, observation was utilized to study participants who did not explicitly articulate their beliefs and values regarding body marks. An observation guide was employed for this purpose, allowing me to systematically observe and document details about the nature of body marks among the participants. Together, these methods, interviews with a structured guide and systematic observation, were instrumental in gathering comprehensive data for the study, ensuring a thorough exploration of the topic.

### **Population and sampling for the study**

The accessible population for the study were 20 respondents who were from the indigenous *Gbese* community of *Ga-Mashie*. The respondents were purposively selected because of the wealth of information they had

regarding body marks for religious purposes and their willingness to partake in the study. In-depth face to face interviews were conducted with the participants for a one-year period. The data were collected from opinion leaders, chief priests and priestesses, devotees and initiates, administrative assistants to the *Nae Wulɔmɔ* (the highest priest of the entire *Ga* state) and indigenes of the community. Snowball sampling formed a major part of the sampling techniques employed for this study. This technique required that referrals are made to other people with relevant knowledge about the subject matter. Snowball sampling assisted in tracking down some opinion leaders and the indigenes with the wealth of information needed for the study.

### **Classification of body marks done by the *Ga***

Body marks among the *Ga* are identified by classifications or groups; these are different groups of marks that are classified under one due to them purportedly serving the same purpose. Though the *Ga* have several marks, they have common classifications which the marks are identified with. Body markings as done by the *Ga* are categorized into four main groups including other subgroups. These are marks done for family identity known in the indigenous language as *weku gbé*; marks given to serially incarnated children known as *gbobalɔi agbé*; marks done by priests and priestesses or practitioners of medicine (both male and female) *wɔjiatsemei agbé*/*tsofa gbé*; and marks done for medicinal purposes known as *hela gbé*. The other classifications include marks done for identification as a member from a clan, known as *akutseii a gbé*, marks that identify an individual as belonging to a particular house known as *shia gbé* and marks that identified people as slaves belonging to a slave master known as *nyɔjii a gbé*.

In this regard, all marks that are done by families and for family members is called *weku gbé*. These are somewhat similar in appearance to the *shia gbé*, taken as they both mean identification to a particular home. All those marks given to serially incarnated children, that is, children who die shortly after birth and are born again to the same parents are called *gbobalɔi agbé*; marks that are done by traditional priests and priestesses and practitioners of medicine (both male and female) are called *wɔjiatsemei agbé* or *tsofa gbé*; all marks that are done for medicinal reasons on any part of the body are called *hela gbé*. *Akutseii a gbé* as identified from the interviews from the field research are the types of marks that are done based on the clan an individual belongs to and all those marks that are done for easy identification of slaves are *nyɔjii a gbé*. It is eminent to note that all these classifications of the marks done by the *Ga* include both marks done on the face and other parts of the body. Of all the marks identified, *hela gbé* and *wɔjiatsemei agbé* or *tsofa gbé* are the marks that are done on different parts of the body. The others, *weku gbé*, *gbobalɔi a gbé*, *akutseii a gbé*, *shia gbé* and *nyɔjii a gbé* are those done on the face. These marks are all indicated in Table 1.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the *Ga* language, the practice of body marking is termed as *gbé bāā*. This practice has been in existence for thousands of years now and has continued to serve the purposes for which it is done. Body marks among the *Ga* are done at distinct points in time in their lives. The practice of body marking in general is gradually dwindling, however, the *Ga* have stood unswervingly by the practice among other traditional and indigenous rituals and practices.

The varying angles about the conception of body marks make it exceptionally difficult to trace the history to the actual starting period of body marking among the *Ga*. This is because there is not a single myth surrounding the conception or the first practitioner and this may have been lost due to the several migrations the *Ga* did from their origin to the 13th century and beyond when they allegedly finally settled in the Accra plains (Amartey, 1990; Randolph-Macon College, 2013). It is the belief that from the several encounters the indigenous *Ga* had with other body marking cultures, especially those of the ‘horn of Africa’ and some parts of West Africa, they



may have adopted the different types of body marks and adapted them to suit their needs. It may have been a derivative of their own minds or may have been churned as a means of survival. Either way, the practice of body marking among the *Ga* is now strongly revered and it is sought after as part of their traditional cultural practices.

There are seven clans (otherwise can be referred to as quarters or factions) in indigenous *Ga*, known in the native language as *akutseii*. These are *Otublohum Sempe*, *Abola*, *Gbese* (*Gbese*), *Asere*, *Ngleshi Alata* and *Akuɲmadzei* (*Akuɲmajei*). Body marking is practiced by all these indigenous factions. In the *Ga* state, the practice started as scarification done on the backs of children with very little concentration on marks done on the face. Facial marks later started as a means of identification (N.A Mensa, personal communication, 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2018). These facial marks were later done in different ways to differentiate between different forms of identification. Some were done on the forehead, on one cheek and sometimes on both cheeks (A.O Ansa, personal communication, 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2018).

The different forms of facial marking for identification is mainly due to the polygamous nature of marriages in indigenous *Ga*. One man was entitled to more than one woman. These women did not all have to be *Ga*; they could be from other ethnic groups. To make the children identifiable, the man (husband) may decide to mark children of one or all of the wives in distinct ways. This was also used as a means of taking ‘inventory’ of the number of children a man has. After the identification marks, other marks arose with symbolic interpretations and these have helped attach a sense of purpose to the different types of marks and the reasons for which they are made.

### **Religious marks of the *Ga***

Traditional religion in Ghana continues to retain its influence despite presence of Christianity and Islam among other thriving religions. This is because Ghanaian traditional religion bears an intimate relation to family loyalty and local mores, that is, the social rules prescribing behaviour of individuals in a society which, if violated results in strong punishment or disapproval. All this becomes possible because of the belief in the existence of two worlds co-existing in parallel and the belief in the cosmological hierarchy or order.

The marks that are practiced among the *Ga* for religious reasons is meant to satisfy mainly the balance between the physical and metaphysical realm, that is, the spiritual realm (not metaphysical as in the prior assumption of Aristotle’s editor, Andronicus of Rhodes, as ‘after the physics’). Using the definition of religion as mentioned earlier for the purpose of this research, body marks identified that have beliefs guiding their process are all classified as body marks for religious purposes. The body marks discussed in this section are those that are done per guidance received from the deities and divinities that the indigenous *Ga* believe in.

The indigenous *Ga* portray an ardent belief in their deities and divinities, therefore, in practicing body marking, they strictly go by the information provided to them by the priests and priestesses who are seen as the mouthpieces of the deities and divinities and serve as intermediaries between them (community members) and the spirits. Perhaps, Mbiti’s clarification of religion in relation to indigenous African people better explains this practice and belief. According to Mbiti, it is religion more than anything else which colours indigenous peoples’ understanding of the universe and their empirical participation. To them, to be is to be religious in a religious universe. Further, Mbiti explains that this is the philosophical understanding behind African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships. Hence, this understanding of indigenous peoples’ belief can be transcended onto the ancient practice of body marking by the *Ga* of Ghana. This belief regarding religious body marking is also seen among the *Yoruba*, where the *Ifa* oracle is consulted before giving any form of facial marking to a child. This is also seen among the *Borneo*, who consult their spirit gods and ancestors for

inspiration and designs. Finally, this is also among the *Ada* who consult their deities and ancestors to ascertain whether or not an individual needed to be marked.

Of all the eight marks identified among the indigenous *Ga*, three (3) of them can be classified as body marks for religious purposes. The three marks are *wɔ̃jiatsemɛi a gbɛ́* (marks done by for devotees of a deity or divinity), *gbobalɔi a gbɛ́* (marks given to serially incarnated children) and *yitso yɛ wɔ̃ shishi* (marks done for children conceived with assistance from a deity).

### ***Gbobalɔi a gbɛ́***

The term *gbobalɔ* has its etymology from two *Ga* words; ‘*gbo*’ meaning die and ‘*balɔ*’ literally translating as ‘comer’, hence ‘one who dies and comes back’. This term is used to refer to children who are serially incarnated. This basically means that a *gbobalɔ* is a child of a particular gender (male or female) who is born to a mother, dies shortly after its birth and on the next birth by the same mother, comes the same gender of child as before. To prevent such a child from dying again, shortly after its birth, special marks are given to the child particularly on his or her face; these marks are therefore known as *gbobalɔi a gbɛ́*.

It is the belief of the *Ga* that once a woman gives birth to a child of the same gender for two consecutive times and the child passes on, it may be the same child returning to the same mother. This aligns with conceptual ideologies of reincarnation as it exists among several indigenous and contemporary religions. As a philosophical or religious concept, reincarnation involves the beginning or continuation of a physical life by a nonphysical essence of a living being after biological death (Gross, 1993). The belief in reincarnation is commonly seen in Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism and Jainism (Juergensmeyer and Roof, 2011). This belief, according to Taliaferro et al. (2010), was also held by Greek historic figures such as Plato, Socrates and Pythagoras.

Reincarnation forms an essential tenet of many African traditional religious systems (Unuigwomen, 2005; Ndemanu, 2018). Although its existence is common, there is a wide range of variations in understanding the process of birth, death and rebirth. Among the *Ga*, two things remain obvious in their belief in reincarnation; a situation like that of serially incarnated children and that of ancestors being reborn to members of the same family or different families. To them, the former can be avoided, more so ‘controlled’, whereas the latter borders greatly on actions in the physical life of individual and concurrent happenings in the spiritual realm.

Amartey (1990) postulates that, per the practice of this particular type of body marking, immediately after the second birth and death of a child of the same gender to the same parents, the next child is protected by giving the child intentionally specific marks on the face. Aside the marks, the child is usually given derogatory names such as ‘*Atseafɔ*’ (Throw it away), ‘*Namɔale*’ (Who knows?),

‘*Kuɲtso*’ (Toilet), ‘*Etɔmighbemi*’ (My vagina is tired), ‘*Kukue*’ (Pot) and so on. These names, via a psychologically draining technique with a spiritually intense undertone, are meant to make the child appear ‘unwanted’. The reason for this is that the indigenous *Ga* believe in the existence of two worlds; the physical world and the spiritual world. Before anything manifests in the physical world it has to have happened already in the spiritual world. Hence, for a child who dies shortly after his or her birth, the belief is that the spiritual mother or some forces in the spiritual world have developed a great liking to the child and this makes it impossible for them to let the child stay in the physical world. These forces or this spiritual mother tends to come for the child and returns it to the spiritual world, hence the cause of the serial deaths.

If such a child is marked upon the third birth, he or she then becomes unidentifiable to the spirit mother hence, the child stays alive. Not only that, the derogatory name that is given to the child after he or she is marked suggests to the spirit mother that even in the physical world, a marked child is unwanted therefore, such a child will equally be unacceptable in the spiritual realm. This is what is believed to save the lives of children identified

as *gbobalɔi* (plural of *gbobalɔ*). The *gbobalɔi a gbé* are also done to break the spiritual link between the child and the spirit mother. For it is through this link that the spirit mother takes the spiritual essence for which the physical body of the child depends on from the physical world.

The belief of the indigenous *Ga* in the spiritual realm and the connection between the two realms (physical and spiritual) allows them to explore ways of maintaining the balance between both realms. This is indeed in support of Cromwell's (1994) assertion that, humanity needs to develop a comprehensive understanding of the inner dimensions of man's life (relating to the internal, spiritual, dimension of reality) in order to put man's existence into proper perspective. Cromwell further states that, human beings have been created to be a centre of harmony between the spiritual and physical worlds and have been endowed with a spiritual nature to achieve this. This could perhaps explain the practice of the *gbobalɔi a gbé* (among other religious body markings) by the *Ga* as part of their spiritual nature, in order to maintain a balance between both worlds.

Every clan in the indigenous *Ga* setting associates itself with a particular deity. This deity is seen as the protector of the clan from the many evils of the physical world they live in and the spiritual world they cannot see. However, some individuals have personal divinities they believe in aside the clan deities. Before the *gbobalɔi a gbé* are given, the clan deity is consulted. It is the consultation with the deity through a priest or priestess who informs the parents of a *gbobalɔ* on what needs to be done to ensure the child's safety. The traditional priest (ess) in the end usually gives the special facial marks or directs on the type of mark to be given to the child.

The deity allegedly gives specific orders through the priest(ess), first as to whether or not the soul of the child agrees with the marking process and secondly the specific way the marks should be done including the mixture of medicines, plants and herbs known as *ti*, that should be inserted into the mark after it has been completed. This practice is similar to that of the *Baule* who also protect their children from dying by giving them body and facial marks (Vogel, 1988). It is also done by the *Yoruba*, who protect such children, known as *abiku* by giving them marks that would render them unattractive to their spiritual mother, thus ensuring the safety of the child (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2003). The main constituents of the *ti*, which is the medicine inserted into the mark include charcoal, neem leaves, mahogany tree bark, hibiscus leaves, tigernut grass among others. However, this concoction sometimes contains a mixture of plants with animal by-products, weeds, herbs and spices. Charcoal remains the primary component of this medication and is regularly mixed with hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*, known in the indigenous dialect as *nyenyera*), mahogany (*Swietenia*), eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus*) and neem (*Azadirachta indica*). The mixture of these leaves with the charcoal may be because of their highly functional medicinal properties. Neem leaves for example, are said to exhibit a vast array of biologically active compounds and have been used traditionally for the treatment of several disorders. According to Subapriya and Nagini (2005), neem leaves exhibit antifungal, antimalarial, antimutagenic, anticarcinogenic and antiviral properties among others. This may as well be one of the main reasons why neem leaves are also common in these mixtures. The *gbobalɔi a gbé* among the *Ga* are given beside the eye, on the cheeks and beside the lips making it six different parts of the face (N.A Mensa, personal communication, 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2019). These marks often range in sizes and can be between half an inch to one and half inches.

The marks beside the eyes are done to resemble the feet of a cockerel; a cockerel being the totemic animal of the *Ga-Dangme* ethnic group. These are three lines (two diagonal lines and one horizontal line between) that converge directly beside the eye. On the cheeks, two diagonal cuts are made, one on each cheek. The marks that are given beside the lips are a replication of those done beside the eyes.



The marks appear on both sides of the eye (towards the temple) and on both sides of the lips as confirmed in a study conducted by Kwakye-Opong (2011) about the *gbobalɔi a gbɛ* among the *Ga*. This is similar to the *gbeba* mark done by the *Ada* also of the *Ga-Dangme* ethnic group.

### ***Yitso Ye Wɔŋ Shishi***

This term literally means ‘one whose “head is under a deity”’. As painful as that might sound, it is rather comforting to an indigenous *Ga* with this type of mark. This is a mark given to children who are conceived through the assistance of a deity or divinity. Such children are revered in the society and treated as honourable people (A.T Abrantee, personal communication, 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2019). The belief in deities is quite common all across Africa and among other cultures such as Maya, Inca, Aztec, Inuit and religious inclinations such as Vodoun. The avid belief in deities and their perceived assistance in conception and birth are in relation to fertility gods and goddesses. In indigenous African religion for example, there are a vast number of fertility deities that people rely on in times of need. These fertility gods and goddesses including deities are believed to provide these believers with the children. Wigington (2019) provides a list of gods and goddesses and the duties they purportedly serve; a list comprising of gods for harvest, fertility, artisanship, motherhood, magic, chaos and many more. Although the indigenous *Ga* believe in various deities, there are only a few who are identified strictly by their duties. For example, Naa Kɔɔle is the goddess of the *Kɔɔle* lagoon in the heart of their current settlement and Naa Afie is the goddess only for the king of the *Ga*. These two are among a few who are identified by the duties they serve. For fertility, conception and pregnancy, almost all the deities and divinities are believed to have the power to assist women conceive. This accounts for the practice of this particular body marking.

Just as it is currently, where one health condition or the other might prevent a couple from conceiving, so it was in ancient times among families. If after a number of years of marriage, a woman is not able to conceive after numerous tries, two major advices are given; one is for the man to marry a second wife, with whom he will hopefully conceive and the other is to consult a deity or divinity to ascertain what the problem was. For those who choose to consult deities, they supposedly have positive responses as shortly after the intervention of a deity, the woman conceives (N. Lamley [nom de guerre], personal communication, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2018).

Such children are believed to be gifts to their parents from the deities hence they are given ‘S’ shaped tattoos between their eyebrows to identify them as children of deities. After such children are born and they receive their marks, at a certain age they are taken through special initiation rites that make them apposite to serve the deity in the shrine. This was a very common practice in the past (A. Annan [nom de guerre], personal communication, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2018). The making of the mark is guided by the belief in the deities and divinities as being higher beings with connections to the spiritual world and the belief in them as beings that possess the powers to grant them their needs.

The length of this tattoo is usually half an inch and it is done by combining sewing needles and repeatedly dipping the tips of the needles in a mixture of charcoal, soot from lanterns, plants and herbs provided by the priest (ess) and marking the forehead. The reason for this particular body marking is closely related to body marks done by the *Ada* known as the *agbee bi bɔ* and this literally means mark of the child of a deity. It is also done for children who are conceived with assistance from a deity. This mark however appears of the left cheek of the child and it is in circular cicatrices (Ebeheakey, 2015).

### ***Wɔjiatsɛmɛi a gbɛ***

The indigenous *Ga* believe in the existence of a higher power or a supreme being, the existence of deities and divinities which they term as smaller gods, the existence of good and bad spirits and their ancestors (M.N.A Tackie, personal communication, 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2018). According to Kwakye-Opong (2011), their belief is that, the

Supreme Being, infinitely knowledgeable in every means possible, possessed both male and female properties. This meant that the name *Ataa-Naa Nyɔɔmɔ* (male and female God) simply seemed fit. According to ancient myth, the indigenous *Ga* believed that God used to live among man but incessant disturbances and evil deeds of man drew God further away into the heavens. Before his departure, *Ataa-Naa Nyɔɔmɔ*, in his love for mankind left his gods in charge of man's life. In the indigenous *Ga* hierarchy of beliefs, after *Ataa-Naa Nyɔɔmɔ*, who is the Supreme Being, there are *jemawɔjii* who are the deities, after which come the *sisai kpakpai* which literally translates as good ghosts or good spirits and these included their ancestors. Finally, are the powers of heaven and earth which in the *Ga* dialect are known as *ɲwei ke shikpɔɲ* (A. Annan [nom de guerre], personal communication, 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2018).

Ancient myths are seen to grant answers to phenomenon that cannot be explained easily by man. Belief in gods, goddesses and deities has however been one consistent aspect of the existence of man. In most cases, man often does as he is told by gods, goddesses and deities in which they believe. Similar is the "Myth of Adapa", an ancient Mesopotamian story. Adapa, who was the first man created heeded to the counsel of Ea, the god of wisdom on how he needed to behave in the court of the gods when he was summoned (Mark, 2011). This shows that man, since the onset of his existence has maintained a channel of communication and continually received counsel from the gods that guided him. The *wɔjɔtsemɛi a gbɛ* is a mark that has its fons et origo from a story similar that of the *Myth of Adapa*, where initiates or devotees, bound to eternal servitude, heed to the counsel of the divinities and deities they serve. These are marks that are done by the devotees and initiates of *wɔjii* or *jemawɔji* (Figures 1 and 2) and these are people who decide to go into priesthood or are 'caught' into priesthood (caught in a sense that a deity may choose that particular individual as a channel through which it would want to communicate with the people).

There are different *jemawɔjii* or *wɔjii*, the difference between these two is that, a *jemawɔɲ* (singular of *jemawɔjii* which is plural) serves a multitude of people; for example, people of a particular faction or clan in the *Ga* state and a *wɔɲ* (singular of *wɔjii* which is plural) serves an individual. These deities and divinities have different names, different groups of people serving under them and different rules guiding their likes and dislikes.

There are usually several practices done by the devotees that are performed based exactly on the request of the divinity (A.O Ansa, personal communication, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2018). After a rigorous initial training session, the initiates are made to go through body markings with strict guidelines alleged to be from the deities or divinities. These markings are meant to provide a wholesome protection to the initiate throughout the rest of his or her training and throughout his or her life as a priest or priestess of the deity. The body marking stages in the life of a devotee does not only protect but goes to reaffirm the faith of the devotee in the deity or divinity (J.N.Y Aboi, personal communication, 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2019).

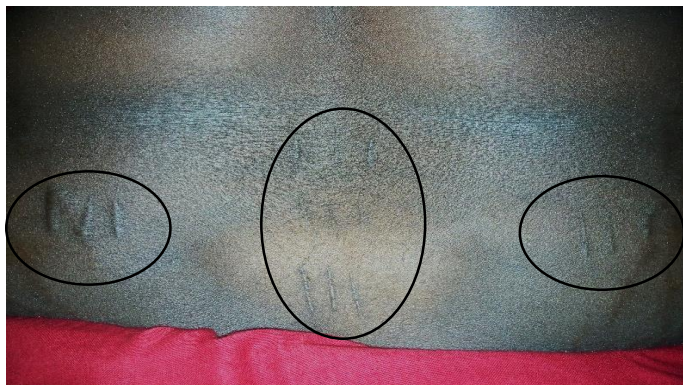
The *wɔjɔtsemɛi a gbɛ* also known as the *tsofa gbɛ* are done on five different parts of the body. These are on the chest (Figure 1, circled), the back (Figure 2), the lower back (small of the back) (Figure 3, circled), above the wrist (Figure 4) and on the calf (Figure 5, circled). These marks are done in sets of three. The marks on the chest is 15 in number however, they appear as sets of three incisions of vertical running rows with three vertical lines on both sides of it. The marks on the back (upper and middle back) are 42 incisions in all with 14 sets of 3 incisions running vertically and diagonally and 4 sets of 3 horizontal incisions running down vertically, as indicated in Figure 2.



**Figure 1.** *Wɔjiatsɛmɛi a gbɛ* on the chest of female initiates  
Source: Field Research (2018/2019).



**Figure 2.** *Wɔjiatsɛmɛi a gbɛ* on the back of initiates.  
Source: Field Research (2018/2019).



**Figure 3.** *Wɔjiatsɛmɛi a gbɛ* on the lower back of an initiate.  
Source: Field Research (2018/2019)



**Figure 4.** *Wɔjiatsemei a gbɛ* above the wrist of an initiate.  
Source: Field Research (2018/2019).



**Figure 5.** *Wɔjiatsemei a gbɛ* on the calf of an initiate. Source: Field Research (2018/2019).



The reason for the marks being in a set of three incisions is attributed to the indigenous *Ga* belief in a trinity, the three forces of nature that have to work together in perfect harmony for the existence of man; these are the heavens (*ɔwɛi*), the earth (*shikpɔɔ*) and the seas (*ɔshɔ*). The belief in the existence of a higher power is a pivotal aspect of the life of an indigenous *Ga*. Consequently, for a person to be termed as a necessary piece of this existence meant a great responsibility has been bestowed on the person. Hence, there was no other way to portray such devotion and commitment than through serving the *jɛmawɔɔ* (deity) and being a mouthpiece to and for the people.

This research opens up several discussion areas and questions for other indigenous groups that are at risk of having their cultural practices on the verge of extinction. It poses the questions: what other indigenous cultural practices exist among the *Ga* and the bigger *Ga*-Dangme umbrella that have not been researched? Is this the full extent of body marking in Ghana (and other areas)? Taking into consideration the call of institutions like UNESCO on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, such research bears great significance to this mission.

### **Conclusion**

A small price to pay for showing one's belief (among the *Ga*) in a deity and ultimately in the Supreme Being and devotion to a divinity is bearing a body mark. This mark remains a permanent physical reminder of the belief an indigenous *Ga* carries. Similarly, the body marking for religious purposes among the *Ga* is seen as a physical expression of the steadfast conviction in their belief systems. This conviction transcends into their faith and devotion to their deities. This then helps them, including their surroundings to emit a powerful belief-fuelled energy that promotes peaceful coexistence among themselves, the physical realm in which they exist and the spiritual realm, thereby creating a fluid synergy.

These body marks are not just scarring but belief-induced practices that will earn them the will they require in following their gods and doing the bidding of the Supreme Being. These they believe allow them to go through life without bothering about what is to come as they know the deities and divinities, including their ancestors are always available to assist them in all their endeavours. While doing these (body marks), they show prodigious belief-oriented lifestyles, continuation and preservation of an age-old tradition woven into their cultural fabric that has been passed on to them from their ancestors.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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