



## **Mark of the Spirit: Body Marks as Icons of Spirituality among the *Dangme* in Ghana**

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author AKE designed the study, collected and collated data, performed the analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors SK and EAA reviewed the analysis and managed the analysis. Author CBN assisted in the data collection procedure. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

In African traditional religion, priding oneself in the beliefs and practices of one's culture is intensely essential. The driving force for this is mainly the need to satisfy the will of a higher power. Cultural practices, being a channel between the living, the dead and the spirits is one of the ways in which a group of people satisfy the will of these higher beings. Body marking, among the *Dangme*, forms a great deal of aspects of cultural practices which connotes spirituality. This study discusses the concept of spirituality as enshrined in the body marks of the *Dangme* people of Ghana. To obtain the relevant information needed, the qualitative approach to research has been adopted using interviews and observation as the main data collection tools. These give a rich and in-depth understanding of the body marks that are practiced for spiritual purposes among the *Dangme*. This

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paper is a collation of findings from studies conducted between February, 2012 and February, 2019. It is evident from the research that, marks for spiritual purposes seemed to be practiced irrespective of the clan individuals hail from. These marks are seen as methods (or modes) of maintaining direct contact and proving allegiance to the spirits that protect them as a people.

*Keywords: Body marks; art; culture; spirituality; Dangme.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be marked by a spirit? This is a question we hope to answer at the end of this paper. As spiritual people, the *Dangme* pride themselves in their cultural practices through various artistic expressions like body markings. African spirituality, often entails various practices performed by a people to show allegiance, respect and reverence to the 'gods' who are believed to cater for the people in all aspects of their lives. Spirituality in Africa and Ghana is no new bailiwick irrespective of where it is applied.

In order to better comprehend the subject matter at hand, body marking as defined by some scholars and authors have been taken into consideration; some of these definitions entail the purposes for which they are made. According to [1] body marking is an all-encompassing term used to describe several methods of changing the surface of the skin through intentional and potentially irreversible alteration. In the literary work, *Tribal Marks, Mythology and Folklore*, [2] explains that body markings are a form of identification each group of people have to differentiate their families, lineages and tribes from others; the basic course of body marking is for identification. A study conducted by [3] in the *Wa* municipality of Ghana concludes that body marks are marks made on the body with its main uses being medical, decoration, spiritual protection and tribal or family identification. [4] infers that body marks are marks used as a symbol of identity in particular tribes and they express the individual's religious or spiritual beliefs, self-protection, identification, social status, medical protection and mythical identity.

A concluding definition by [5] elucidates that body marking is also an art that is common to certain tribes, who use these marks as a form of identification, beautification and protection or spiritual purposes. Drawing from the above definitions and for the purpose of understanding spirituality in the context of this study, body marks will be defined as marks on any part of a

person's body based on the individual's belief, cultural, spiritual or religious affiliation.

Related to body marking of the *Dangme*, very little has been written and documented. This makes exploration and explanation into various forms of body markings made by the *Dangme*, as discussed in this paper, a relevant source of information. Previous studies conducted regarding these issues can be found in the works of Amartey in 'The Making of *Ada*' and Ankrah regarding body marks in the African culture in general. Other studies regarding this subject area are those conducted by one or all of the authors of this paper. Due to the lack of information on the rich cultural and religious/spiritual body markings, this paper proves very important.

### 1.1 Spirituality

There are many intangible aspects of spirituality and it is a particularly personal issue. The word spirituality is derived from the Latin word "*spiritus*" meaning breath; spirituality is also said to be related to the Greek word "*pneuma*" also meaning breath which refers to the vital spirit or soul of any physical being. Like breathing, spirituality is therefore believed to be very essential to human existence.

Spirituality is typically conceptualized in more subjective, individualistic terms. As such, there are two common themes, these are the existence of a transcendent reality that is transpersonal in nature and the reality that is personal, existential and subjective and involves a union with the non-temporal [6]. Spirituality therefore becomes the existence of a reality that surpasses the ordinary and deals with the area of consciousness beyond limitations of personal identity. This reality deals with personal existence and relates to spiritual affairs. Spirituality encompasses all aspects of being human and is a means of experiencing life. It is a belief in a power greater than one's self operating in the universe. It is also defined as a sense of interconnectedness with all living creatures, and an awareness of the purpose and meaning of life [7].

As a multidimensional phenomenon, spirituality is reflected in everyday life as well as in diverse disciplines such as philosophy, literature, psychology, psychotherapy, medicine, sociology, science and nursing. It is in this respect that these disciplines have different descriptions of what spirituality is; theology describes spirituality as one's belief in God or a higher being, expressed through religious beliefs and practices; in psychology, spirituality is explained as an expression of one's internal motives and desires, concentrating on the self instead of God or the higher being; psychology on the other hand examines one's spiritual search for meaning, purpose and guidance. Sociology describes spirituality as the spiritual practices and rituals of groups of people as well as the social morality within personal relationships [8].

Spirituality is best understood as a way of life embedded in a tradition and woven together with relationships with God, self, neighbour, community and the created world [9]. Though spirituality may include traditional religious beliefs and practices, it is much broader in that it also includes the non-religious beliefs and expressions [10]. [9] supports this by saying that spirituality offers transformative practices and a language to express human experience; these experiences also include spiritual practices which pattern people into faithful living and enables them to know something holy. The definitions or more specifically descriptions of spirituality vary on some points, however, they do agree that all people are spiritual beings and everyone has a spiritual dimension that motivates, energizes and influences every aspect of his or her life.

## 1.2 History of Body Markings

Based on archaeological evidence for body marking and body modification, the practice is said to have been in existence since the Upper Palaeolithic Era. According to these evidences, early man used various stone tools for various body modification practices. Ancient oral traditions also point to the fact that, these practices have existed over time and the key aspects are passed on from generation to generation. Examples of such oral traditions and anecdotes are those propagated by [11] of King Sango and [12] of King Kpasse.

In Ghana for example, according to [13], body marking is believed to have begun as a form of identification for children who were hearing-

impaired. These children were marked to make them easily identifiable such that when necessary, they are provided the assistance they need. At that point in time, body marking was viewed with sympathy towards the bearers.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade changed the story of body marking for most parts of Africa as indigenous members marked their faces and parts of their bodies in hopes that the marks will serve as distinctive identifying characteristics in assisting them trace their origins. Hence, several tribesmen marked their bodies for this reason. However, as time went on, different meanings and reasons were attached to different types of body markings.

## 1.3 Body Markings for Spiritual/Religious Purposes

Indigenous people perceive religion as belief in the spiritual realm [14]. Due to this, practices that reflect one's religion are often considered as spiritual ones, although the two are generically different. There are several body markings that are done to reflect people's religious beliefs and due to their attachment to the spiritual, are considered as marks for religious purposes. [15] states that among most indigenous cultures, the most common purpose for making any type of body modification (tattooing, scarification, piercing) are religious purposes. These they did to reaffirm their relationship with a higher being they believe in.

In Africa, according to [14], several indigenous people mark themselves for religious purposes and these can be seen all over their bodies. Among the *Yoruba* of Nigeria, it is believed that there are some religious marks that can grant children spiritual powers and prevent them from dying. Among the *Ga* of Ghana also, some marks given to individuals may be based on their religious affiliations and these are known as *wɔjɔtɛmɛi agbɛ*, although they are not the only types of religious/ spiritual body markings. The *Baule*, have special facial marks that appear as three linear scars from the side of the lip towards the jaw line; these marks are associated to both slavery and the spiritual protection of children.

According to [16] many tribes believe in an apparent spiritual connection through the act of body marking that they incorporate it into their religious rituals. The *Kayapo* for example, practice body marking for spiritual purposes. This is often based on their beliefs and their choice of

colours [17]. For example, black is said to represent spiritual or religious significance as it is connected to the idea of transformation between an unsocialized manner of a being and the society. It is also associated with a period where the soul is yet to forsake its social ties with the body. Hence body paintings with the colour black in them are perceived as valuable connections between the physical and spiritual realms.

The belief people accord to religious body markings are rewarding because the marks purportedly serve their functions [1]. These beliefs range from marks for spiritual protection, marks for superstitious beliefs and marks that ward off malignant spirits. These are all reflected in the values and beliefs of individuals in relation to spiritual body marks.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative approach to research and interviews were the main mode of data collection. The use of the qualitative research approach proved plausible because, inferring from [18] it allowed for extensive study and understanding of the various meanings the *Dangme* had attached to body marking and the spiritual connotations linked to them. This approach to research also made data collection easier since the *Dangme* were studied in their natural setting, that is, their indigenous locale. The qualitative approach also aided in the provision of detailed explanations and narrative expressions of the body markings that were and are done for spiritual purposes. Photographs and illustrations, based on the information received during the data collection was also used to express and explain the various body marks identified.

### 2.1 Population for the Study

The general population for the study consisted of *Dangme* living in the indigenous community of *Ada*. The *Ada* were selected because they are considered as the major *Dangme* group in Ghana and the group with the most spiritually-inclined body marking practices that are adopted by all other indigenous *Dangme*. Like the other sub *Dangme* groups, they share a similar language, cultural practices, norms and beliefs.

The accessible population for the study were 20 respondents, most of whom had body markings for peculiar spiritual reasons. The respondents were purposively selected due to the information

they were meant to provide and their willingness to partake in the study. The selection process was done to avoid having unnecessary data and have a direct focus on the factors involved in conducting the study successfully. Extensive interviews were performed and particular information was sought from the respondents. Generally, data were collected from traditional leaders, elders (the elderly in the communities with ages from 41 years and above) and the youth (18 years – 40 years), living in the indigenous *Ada* community with information about body marking. Certain aspects of the study required snowball sampling, which according to [19] is the referral of a researcher by a respondent to another subject and so on. Where particular information was inadequate from a respondent, referrals were accepted in order to complete the information sources.

### 2.2 Data Collection Instruments

As stated earlier, interviews and observation were the main instruments through which primary data were collected. The interviews were conducted mostly in the *Dangme* dialect. The semi-structured interview technique was adopted. Although a prior list of questions to guide the interview were prepared, the respondents were allowed to augment the type of questions asked and their answers provided new waves of responses that were equally relevant to the study. The participant as observer stance as propounded by [20] was taken where a researcher becomes a member of the group being studied and the group is aware of the ongoing research. This stance renders the researcher more interested in observation than in participation. Primary data were collected from the respondents, most of whom were bearers of body marks. Secondary data were also obtained from various libraries, selected theses and dissertations, journal publications and documents from the internet.

### 2.3 Data Collection Procedure

Of all the 20 respondents, 11 were females and 9 were males. Thirteen (13) of the total number of respondents had body marking and the remaining seven (7) did not have any but had relevant information regarding body marking. In relation to the variables from which data were collected, that is, the groups of respondents, 5 of them were traditional leaders, 11 were elders in the community and the youth made up the remaining 4. These respondents provided the

requisite information about body marking done for spiritual reasons as practiced among the *Dangme*.

Data collated was analysed through traditional manual methods and the thematic approach. Themes were employed as they relate to data collected in order to ensure its validity. The themes were employed effectively to check consistency and accuracy of the data.

## 2.4 Ethical Considerations

Blumberg et al. [21] outline two philosophical approaches with regard to ethics in research, these are teleology and deontology. In teleology, the end justifies the means, that is, the end served by the research justifies the means. The benefits of the findings of the research could be weighed against the costs of being unethical. On the other hand, in deontology, the end does not justify the means, that is, the end served by the research cannot justify the use of the research as it is considered unethical. This study was conducted from the deontological stance in that actions that were taken in relation to data collection and analysis of findings were in agreement with the moral and social norms of the respondents. A letter confirming to the Belmont Report of 1979 regarding the use of humans for research was drafted for the respondents. This was necessary to assure respondents of confidentiality and to ensure they understood what the research was about and what was required of them.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 The Origin of *Dangme* Marks of the Spirit

Several practices of various cultures and ethnic groups mostly follow a pattern of cultural diffusionism; where a practice spreads from one culture to another after exposure. This is the same for the practice of body marking among the *Dangme*. Awetse Djagblete on 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2018 in a personal communication indicated that, the *Dangme* and their counterparts, the *Ga* are believed to have originated from ancient Egypt and migrated over time to their current settlement in the Greater Accra region of Ghana. After settling in the Greater Accra, some sects migrated further into the country leading to the scattered settlements of *Dangme* people all across Ghana. Taking into consideration their migration from ancient Egypt through some parts of Ethiopia, Nigeria, Togo, Benin and finally to

present-day Ghana, it is possible that groups of indigenous people residing in these countries, that are known for their continuous practice of body making may have in one way or the other influenced the practice of body making among the *Dangme*. This study revealed that, the slave trade, that led to most indigenous people along the coasts of the then Gold Coast, to be sold or forcibly taken into slavery, also influenced the practice of body marking. This is because members from different ethnic groups marked each other peculiarly for identification. This supports findings from [12,22] regarding the effect of the slave trade on most parts of Africa.

Although it is uncertain the exact starting period of body making among the *Dangme*, it is believed that the practice may have been influenced by or adapted from exposure to other body making cultures and the slave trade. On the other hand, a personal communication with A. Adjonyo on 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2015 revealed that, another contributory factor to the increase in body making was when wives who were in desperate need of children consulted divinities or deities. The deities in their rights and power, through spiritual manipulation and manifestations granted these women with the children. After the women were granted the children, the terms of these deities were for the children to bear the mark of the deities on their faces (especially their cheeks) to show how powerful the deities were and to serve as identification of these children; an example of such a mark was the *Agbee bi bo* (literally translated as “mark of the child of a deity”) (Fig. 1). When these children grew older, they were sometimes made to serve these deities.

### 3.2 Body Marks and Their Spiritual Connotations

In Ghana, body marks are usually addressed by either the part of the body where it is found or sometimes it is given a general name that has been accepted by the people. Among the *Dangme*, names of body marks are mostly based on the part of the body where the marking was made or the reason for which the mark was made. Body marking among the *Dangme* is generally termed as *gbeba* or *bo pomi*.

#### 3.2.1 Marks done by devotees of a traditional deity

In a personal communication with Ofoe Tekperte (nom de guerre) on 12<sup>th</sup> July, 2018, he agreed with other respondents that the *agbee bihi a bo*



**Fig. 1. Mark of the child of a deity on the left cheek of the figure**

Source: Illustrated by Sylvester Lumor

among the *Ada* is one of the most revered spiritual body marks. The name of this mark literally translates to 'marks done by initiates or devotees of a traditional deity'. A personal communication with Numo Tetteh Ofoe (nom de guerre), who is a 'drum holder' (known as *mihielɔ* in *Dangme*) for the traditional deity in *Ada*, indicated that such marks take their root from guidance provided by the deity they serve. His comments suggested that, based on their original migration as a people, the *Dangme* identify as descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel. This he supported with the indication that a greater percentage of the practices they perform, including the body markings for spiritual purposes are queued from their use of the sixth and seventh books of Moses, regarding Moses' necromancy and magical spirit art as directed by God. His testimony aligns with that of Na Jaja who is the leader of all the *Awa* bands of *Ada*.

The connection between the religious and spiritual marks of the *Dangme* is discernible in the sense that, both are related to their beliefs, hence, they deem both body markings as bordering on the spiritual. These marks come in two different forms as disclosed from a personal communication with Numo Tetteh Ofoe (nom de guerre) on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2019. He indicated that, the two forms of the *agbee bihi a bɔ* are those worn by the *mihielɔ* (literally translates to drum holder) and the *agbee yo* (translates to female priestess). These two forms employ scarification; the marks worn by the *mihielɔ* are 42 in total on his left shoulder (Fig. 2). The *agbee yo* on the other hand has 84 scarification marks on both shoulders (Fig. 3), 42 marks on each shoulder. Both these markings are made up of 3 rows of 14 marks. Aside the 84 incisions worn by

the *agbee yo*, she may have other markings on her back, chest and face and these usually depend on the deity the priestess serves. These marks, when they are made are impregnated with special herbal mixtures that are meant to provide all-round protection for the bearer.

### 3.2.2 Health-related body marks

During the study, some marks although medicinal had spiritual attachments hence were considered partly as spiritual body marks. This is because, aside their general medicinal reasons, it is for the spiritual protection of the bearer that they are made. The term *tsupa bɔ* describes all medicinal marks. *Tsupa* translates as medicine and *bɔ* means mark. Generally, these marks are made for health-related reasons. They are done on different parts of the body, sometimes where the ailment is most severe. According to Numo Tetteh Elias on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2019 the assistance of a traditional priest, known as *nipeelɔ* in the *Dangme* dialect, is sought before the marks are made. In a trance-like state and through revelation, the gods allegedly give specific instructions on the parts of the body where the marks should be made and the specific medication that should be inserted into the marks. This consultation is done for ailments the *Dangme* consider as having non-physical origins; ailments such as convulsion, epilepsy and mental illness among others. Plates 1 and 2 show a *tsupa bɔ* on a respondent's arm, done during her childhood. This was done to protect her from imminent death due to excessive convulsion. Among the *Dangme*, convulsion is one of the most common conditions caused by attempts of malignant spirits who unsuccessfully try to end the physical lives of certain children.



**Fig. 2. The 42 marks on the shoulder of the 'drum holder'**  
Source: Illustrated by Boneger Oduro Kwarteng



**Fig. 3. The 84 marks on the shoulder of the female priestess**  
Source: Illustrated by Boneger Oduro Kwarteng



**Plate 1. An elderly woman with a health-related mark (*Tsupa bo*) on the arm**  
Source: Field Research, 2018



**Plate 2. An elderly woman with a health-related mark (*Tsupa bo*) on the elbow**

Source: Field Research, 2018

### 3.2.3 Marks for prevention of convulsion

This type of mark is made on rare occasions and can be attributed to or considered as a type of the *tsupa bo* (medicinal mark). This mark is made, also to cure children who suffer from extreme cases of convulsion. In the *Dangme* dialect, this condition is considered as the 'heavens sucking up children' (*hiwe saa jukwewihi*). This type of mark is often used when the children shake and shiver uncontrollably and the pupils of their eyes either get dilated or disappears completely. If a child has been "sucked up" before or has experienced this convulsion before, there is the high tendency of this child convulsing again. Such a child is given this peculiar mark to prevent such an incident from reoccurring. As stated earlier, this is done by a few as they have been the only ones to experience this doleful event.

There are also different conditions under which the *pusu hiɔ bo* (Plate 3) can be given to a child; an example is when the father of the child dies before the child is born. The spirit of the father is believed to occasionally visit his child and this is what causes the extreme convulsion. After such a child is marked, there is the possibility that he or she will not experience the convulsion again. Sometimes, there are names that are given to the child to accompany the marks as a silent way of telling the father to leave the child alone. An example of such a name is *Ajesiwo* which literally translates as "we have been left". In a personal

communication with Awenye Kor Attiapah on 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, she indicated that, on other occasions, if the father of the child dies shortly after the child has been conceived, his wife is given to a relative of his which is usually his brother, for marriage and this will cause the name of the child to change; also a silent reminder to the spirit of the dead father that the child does not belong to him anymore. The common name given is *Doku* if the child is a boy and *Dokuyo* if the child is a girl.

### 3.2.4 Marks done for serially incarnated children

*Gbeba* has its etymology from two *Dangme* words, "*gbeno*" which means death and "*ba*" which means come; put together, it is 'death and come' and it is the type of mark that is given to a child, who is believed to die shortly after birth. Such children are believed to die because of their attachment to their spirit mothers (who are believed to be the mothers of the children in the spirit world). The *gbeba* mark is done after the third birth and death of a child of the same sex by the same mother. An incident was reported as happening in the Attiapah family where a child was marked allegedly after the sixteenth birth and death. This happened after the deity of the family insisted the child be marked and given the name "*Swalaba*" (K. Attiapah, personal communication, June 30, 2015). These children after they are marked, are believed to appear



unappealing to the spirit of death and they are the ones who end up staying.

There are different variations when it comes to the *gbeba* mark and different conditions under which the *gbeba* mark is given. One of such conditions is when twins

are born and one of them passes. To prevent the remaining one from dying, the face of the child is marked as shown in Plate 3. It is very common for the remaining child to die as it is believed that the soul of the deceased sibling summons the soul of the remaining child.



**Plate 3. An elderly man with the mark for serially incarnated children close to his eyes and lips**  
*Source: Field Research, 2015*



**Plate 4. A young man in *Ada* bearing the mark for prevention of convulsion**  
*Source: Field research, 2015*

On certain occasions, when a mother continuously miscarries a pregnancy, the child that is finally born is given this mark. This is because it is believed that it is the same child that is trying to be born. Before the mark is given, there are certain rites that are performed. These include taking the child to a cemetery, putting the child in a shallow uncovered grave dug for this purpose and giving appalling names to the child. Among some of the *Dangme* ethnic groups, when the child is taken to a cemetery, it is left on the ground for about five minutes and then is taken home for the body marking to take place. The significance of this is to tell the soul of the child that since he or she feels the need to die every time it is born; the cemetery is the appropriate place for it. As the spirit of death cannot physically grab the child, it was a way of telling the soul of the child that it is the earthly parents who are willing to accept him or her as their own hence they take the child home and mark the child as theirs. Such children are given names such as *Kuku* which in the *Ada* language means “dumpster”, *Gbooyaa* and *Obaaya*. The name *Gbooyaa* is a question, “now that you are dead, where are you going?” The name *Obaaya* literally means “you will go” yet in this context it is to mean that the body mark will be given to see whether or not the child will die (K. Attiapah, personal communication, June 30, 2015).

### 3.3 Major Findings

Discourses regarding body marks in Ghana are seen in the works of Ayiku (1998); Cullivan (1998); Dakubu (2000); Awedoba (2006); Ankrah (2012); Ebeheakey (2015) and in some of these discourses, body marks are mentioned in passing. However, this is often discussed in general terms with little focus on specific types. Per findings from these previous researches and in comparison, this paper considers some general forms and types of *Dangme* body marks and particularly, detailing the religious/ spiritual body marks. Peculiar to this paper also, are the variations of some body markings that are generically considered as body marks for other reasons that have some religious/ spiritual connotations.

### 4. CONCLUSION

What then does it mean to be marked by a spirit? For the *Dangme*, it is more than a mere mark going on their faces or other parts of their bodies. It means a more spiritual level of identification, eternal protection from all forms of evil and a

strict will to satisfy their gods and their deities. It also means being identified as a people who are deeply rooted in obedience and veneration of their gods. Finally, it means that they are a part of a phenomenal culture where all their steps are directed and guided by their ancestors, gods and higher beings and this they believed made them invincible and immune to the challenges they faced.

Body marking to them is not an act of mutilating the face or the body but a wave of self, ethnic and cultural identity where very little harm is done them if they follow the guidance from their higher beings. Knowingly or unknowingly, bearing the mark of the spirit provides them with a certain confidence in their culture and their practices; by so doing, utilizing body markings appropriately as icons of spirituality. This helps them maintain their culture in an unadulterated form and makes them a closely knit people with common goals.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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