

# Read My Face

facial scarification and  
tattoos in Benin



All across Benin, nearly every man and woman has a unique scar pattern or tattoo on their face to mark their ancestral tribal membership. Some say these facial markings were a way of distinguishing friends from foes during wars between the region's pre-colonial kingdoms as the prisoners of war were sold to European slave traders by the victorious. For years, Benin was the world's primary supplier of slaves.

Scarification practices are now illegal in bigger cities like Cotonou. As a disappearing art form, it survives largely in the rural areas.

The Holi, Somba, Otammari, Fulani, and Fon ethnic groups still have impressive scars and tattoos.



The Otammari tribe people have an especially interesting pattern. When a member of the group turns 10, they make hundreds of scars on their face called “tchoudanfas” using a thin blade. Since it is very painful, many children are now refusing to undergo this traditional procedure. Sometimes, babies are given the scars when they are sick or refuse to eat. It allows the “evil” to escape the body.



The Otammari people etch the same patterns into the adobe walls of their homes as they do onto their faces. They even call these decorations “the house’s scars”.



Usually, the Otammari children are unaware of their impending scarification rite. They are led to the ceremony by a distant relative in order to limit the resentment they would feel towards their parents after they have been scarred. Not a very pleasant surprise. The culture considers patterns that change depending on the angle of the light to be the most beautiful.



The pattern made on the stomach of the Otammari men is determined by cowrie shells!: the scarmaster divines which pattern to do by observing how the shells fall onto floor. Thousands of cuts are needed to cover a whole body. Women are very attracted to men's scars. Nice scarification can help land a more beautiful spouse.

The cross-shaped scars on this man's chest represent Ogun, the god of iron and war.

This Otammari man knows that it may cause problem for him when he interacts with the modern world in the big cities. *"My clothes will hide them though,"* he assured me.



Pregnant Otammari women are given additional scarifications on their backs that are said to bring them good luck and health.



The Holi tribe women still wear these incredibly ornate scarifications on their bellies. These designs are considered beautiful and all the women are proud to show them off. Legend has it that the more scars a woman has, the more children she will give birth to. Once the scarifications are completed, the girl is ready for marriage.





This Holi woman has dots tattooed on her arm. Imagine how many cuts are needed to complete the whole pattern. The process can last more than three days. Women scar their arms and shoulders in order to reveal more personal information to the public: this part of their body is always uncovered. The more scars, the braver she is considered.



Each pattern in the Holi tribe is dedicated to a specific family. By looking at her face, you can deduce which family she belongs to. Some scars are strictly reserved for the royal family.



At a Holi market, the scars denote the particular clan each woman belongs to. *“When I go to the market with my sister, I like that people can see we are from the same family,”* one woman says. *“I’m proud of this.”*



Unfortunately, the Holi are largely unaware of the dangers of HIV and hepatitis so the scarmasters often use the same unsanitized blade for multiple people.

The culture believes these blades to be imbued with magic powers, making their practice sacred. No discussion is possible.

Tattoos and scars are the tribal people's ID cards..



They Holi people rub a mix of charcoal and palm oil called "chocho" into the cuts in order to alleviate the pain and help the scars form.



Fewer and fewer Holi children have scars since they mix with other ethnic groups in school and do not want to be mocked for their society's practices. Parents who were educated understand that it is a brutal procedure and often opt their children out of this tradition. When a child is born with no complications, a small horizontal line is cut into the middle of their cheek.



The Holi women often fill their scars with black powder. These dyed tattoos are usually on their cheeks and eyebrows which they sometimes shave. These scars have become a sort of makeup.



Scarification is also seen as a way to connect a woman to her ancestors and receive their protection in Holi tribe.





Giving babies scars is also a way to communicate an important message to them: the world they are born into is tough and they must be ready to suffer.



*“My parents gave me these scars when I was just a baby. I was crying so much. After they finished, they told me to stop crying.”* said this Holi girl.



*“In the times of our Holi ancestors, after battle, we could easily identify which clans the dead warriors belonged to and thus honor them with the appropriate funeral rites,”* an old man told me. *“Also, slave traders would be more likely to take those with unscarred faces as they were looking for perfection and saw our scars as a flaw.”*



In the Fon tribe, whose members actively practice voodoo as their primary religion, these markings signify a voodoo priestess.



Some voodoo adepts within the tribe have their face totally covered by scars and tattoos. It is a way to frighten off the evil spirits who live all around.



The Bariba ethnic group gives their 2 year-old girls facial scars around the mouth.



The Fulani are a subset of the Peul people, nomadic cattle herders who inhabit many countries across Africa. In Benin, they are famous for the tattoos the women wear on the month corners.



During a sort of Fulani baptism, a girl receives her first scars. They are just around her mouth and make her resemble a little cat.

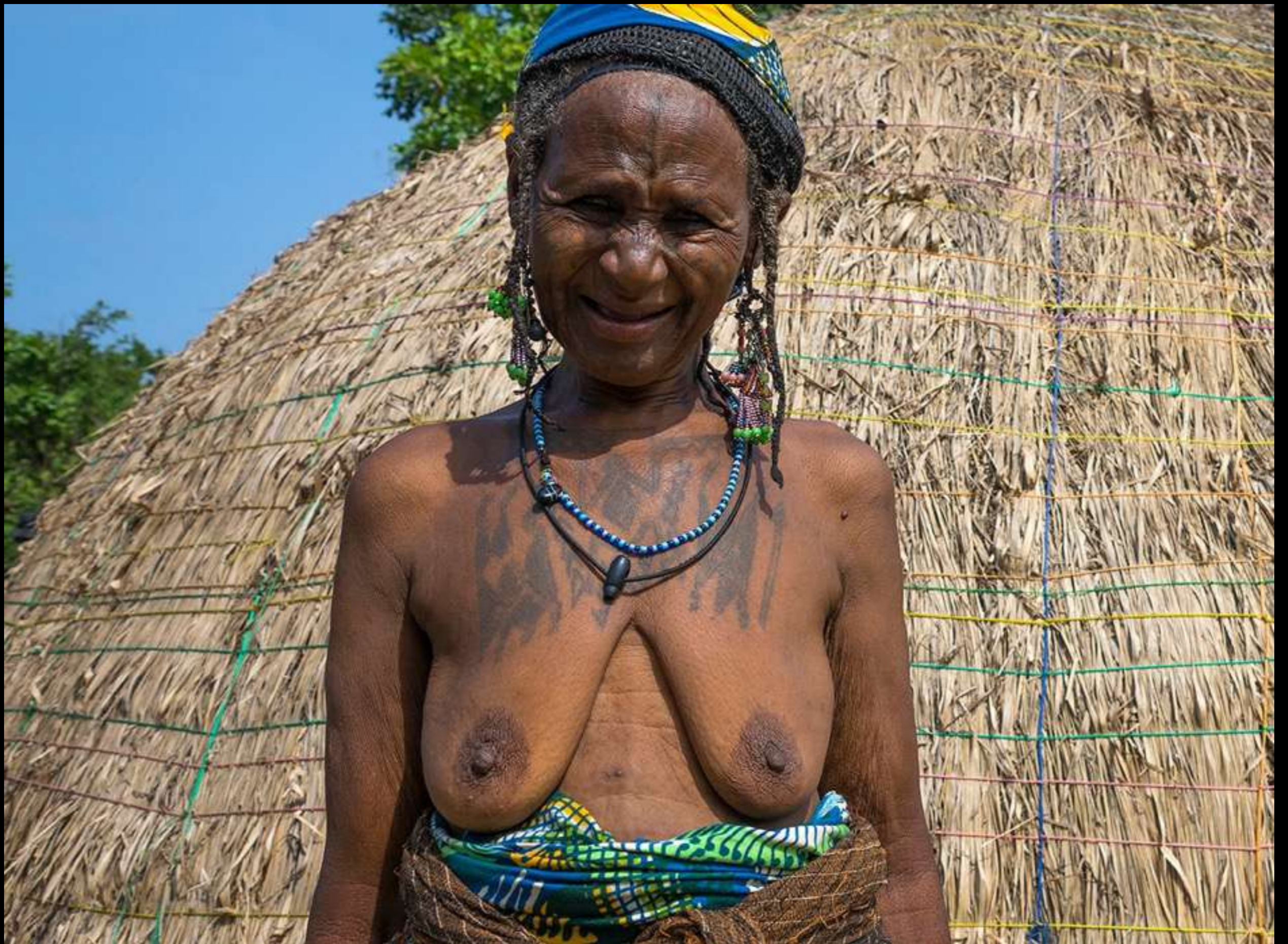




The Fulani used to travel great distances during the dry season in search for water for their cows. Women may have begun the scarring themselves to impress the few men they meet along the way.



The Fulani youth now venture into towns and confront western culture as propagated through globalization. They don't want the huge scars of their mothers. Instead, they take a more minimalist approach and a lighter touch to their scarifications. This allows them to better assimilate.



Fulani women who live in the most rural areas continue to tattoo their chests. The most common depictions are of trees, birds, and animals.



The Peul people value modesty, hospitality and physical beauty. Their tattoos consist of a combination of aesthetically pleasing designs and markings that are said to protect them.



In the Peul tradition, the tattoos are a sort of coming of age. They are the primary indicators that a girl has passed into womanhood.



Some Peul women have tattoos composed of geometric patterns that give them a rather unique look. According to these women, they are not attractive without them.

eric lafforgue  
[lafforgue@mac.com](mailto:lafforgue@mac.com)  
[www.ericlafforgue.com](http://www.ericlafforgue.com)