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## Recapturing Traditional Culture – A Survey of Uvinmi Body Tattoo as a Curative Procedure in Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria

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### **ABSTRACT**

Body tattooing in traditional Nigerian culture was basically believed to be used for identification as well as aesthetic purposes. In some cultures, such as seen amongst the traditional ethnic Hausa and Fulani people, permanent facial marks were used to identify slaves within a community and also used to enhance the beauty and appearance of the women folk especially. In the southern part of Nigeria, amongst the Yorubas, it is used as a tribal identification symbol that provides information about the individual, as well as some culturally-related beliefs. The use of tattoos among the Esan ethnic people transcends the purposes of identification and enhancement of physical appearance as discovered. Thus this study examines the use of tattoo as a curative process for the illness called Udeh among the Esan ethnic people of Edo state Nigeria. Udeh is an illness associated with infection of the spleen. Data was collected through visitation of traditional healing venues, oral interview of some traditional doctors and elders as well as direct observation of the treatment processes. Findings indicated that the practice of Uvinmi has been in existence from time immemorial and it is a familial profession inherited from generation to generation as the most effective medium for treating spleen related diseases among the Esan people. It was also discovered contemporarily modern medical anaesthesia is employed to help reduce the agony felt in the process of blade incision as practiced by one of the traditional doctors. Recommendation made include an indebt study of the herbs used during and after treatment to gauge its efficacy on Western medicinal practices as well as proper sterilization processes on incision equipments and procedures amongst others.

**Keywords:** Esan land, Nigeria, spleen diseases, tattoo, traditional doctors, traditional medicine.

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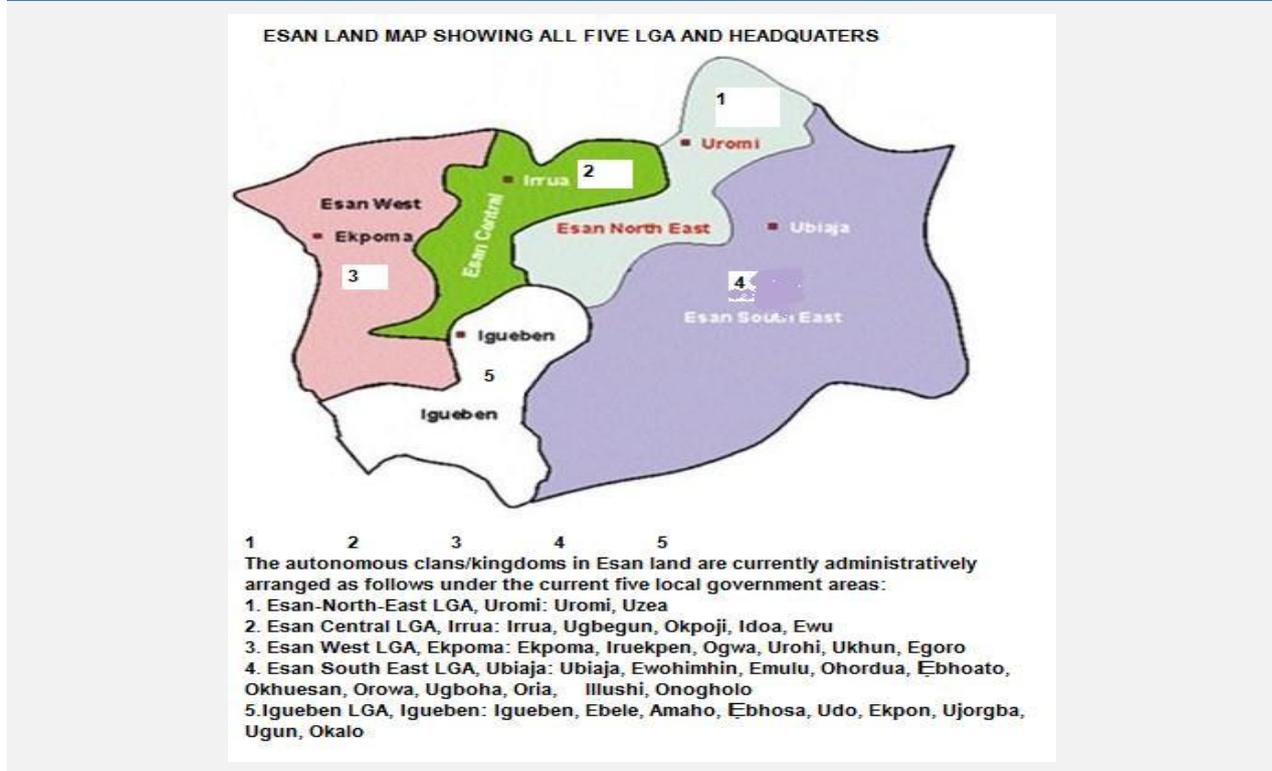
## 1.0 Introduction

Tattoos have become a vogue among youths especially in the southern part of Nigeria. It is viewed as hype fashion, imitating western Hollywood movie stars. It is especially common within the ranks of Nigerian movie (Nollywood) celebrities, musicians and other performing artist including the crew members and has thus permeated into society. The relatively new trend in permanent body marks motivated this study, to find out if the aesthetically pleasing designs of the ethnic Esan traditional body tattoo of Edo state in Nigeria was also a fashion statement as initially assumed by the author. Thus the study was carried out within a period of three months, in which several visitations to traditional healing places in Esanland was done. Data was collected through oral interview of some traditional doctors and elders in the communities visited, as well as directly observing the procedure of consultation and subsequent treatment ritual.

Esanland is Located in Edo central Senatorial District, Edo State southwestern Nigerian. It is predominantly occupied by the Esan language speaking people, made up of about 35 clans some of which are Ekpoma, Irrua, Ubiaja, Ewu, Udegun, Ewohimi, Ewu, Ugbegun, Iruekpen, Uromi etc amongst others. It is about 65km southwest from the famous Benin City, the capital of Edo State in Nigeria.

Esanland shares its other boundaries with Delta State from south, the River Niger by the East. Northern Edo (Sabongida Ora, Auchu etc) by the north. With a population estimated at about 1½ million people, excluding those living in the Diaspora.

**Map of Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria**



The Esans are an extraction of the Benin people of Edo state, it is believed that in 15<sup>th</sup> century communities and kingdoms called Eguares with Onojos (traditional rulers) as the leaders of individual communities were formed from the existing Benin Empire. Occupationally, the Esans were basically farmers and hunters and served in the preservation of the old Benin Empire as warriors, thus, the Esan

people are traditionally and culturally linked to Benin. Some oral tradition has it that internal disagreement led to the migration of the Esan from the central ruling power of the Benin Kingdom and the subsequent settlement in their present location. Another mythical version has it that during the great deluge, when the earth was covered with water, some of the Benin people moved to higher grounds northwards, and in the process of coming back after the great deluge, groups of communities were formed when the long trek back became too stressful for some of the returnees due to exhaustion, old age and probably illness and in the process settled down when they could not go any further, and this is the reason for the similarities of culture viz political structure, kingdom system as well as regalia and accoutrements between the Esan and Benin people .

The traditional religion of the Esans was basically animism and to an extent, despite the introduction of Christianity, the traditional worship is still practiced and evidenced in cultural festivities and worship of several gods referred to as Osonubu'a, such as Ogun (the god of Iron) and Olokun (sea god) to mention a few. The belief in 'spirits' controlling all human endeavors was and is still practiced though to a lesser extent due to the influence of Christianity, hence, it is not unusual to hear that a sick individual has been afflicted by witchcraft through spirits sent by another person either out of jealousy or when people feel that another has committed an offence against them. Therefore insanity, and unusual illnesses are commonly associated or attributed to results of committing taboos or some other inter relational offences within the community or between individuals.

## **2.0 Alternative medicine and the role of traditional native doctor**

Traditionally, the native doctor called 'Oboh' is the preserver of the medicinal culture and beliefs of the Esan people, and also acts as the healer of the different ailments that befall the community and the people. They consult with the Oracle and proffer curative solutions to be carried out as prescribed by the spirit of whatever god been represented by traditional healer. In several cases, sacrifices to gods and deities accompanies the use of herbs, roots with other substances, depending on the ailment or based on the recommendation of the deity, in the treatment of an ailment. It is in this category that the use of 'Uvinmi' (literally meaning, to make an incisive mark using a sharp object) tattoo as a curative procedure is employed in the treatment of the disease called 'Udeh'.

### **2.01 Tattoos as curative alternatives**

In the medical field, tattooing has been used in plastic surgery to cover scars from injuries or even birth marks. According to Demello (2014), tattooing has long had medical uses in non-western cultures such as in many Pacific North Western Indian groups, as well as in Arctic and sub Arctic groups who tattooed joints of the body believing that spirits can access the body through the joints and thus use the tattoos for spiritual protection and medicinal function of driving out spirits from the body as curative procedures. Other civilizations that used tattoos for curative purposes are in Central Europe and South America as well as Ojibwa, Iroquois, Pomo, Yuki and Cree. Even early European Americans may have believed that tattoos were curative. The writings in the 1930's of Albert Parry, a tattoo historian indicated that tattoo customers used inkless tattoos on their joints because they believed that it helped their arthritis, while others believed that it cured syphilis. The whole idea might be based on bleeding a patient for curative purposes known as bloodletting as observed in the Uvinmi procedure. Though bloodletting as a general health measure has been shown to be harmful, it is still commonly indicated for a wide variety of conditions in the Ayurvedic, Unani, and traditional Chinese systems of alternative medicine ([www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/tech](http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/tech)). Unani is based on a form of humorism, and so in that system, bloodletting is used to correct supposed humoral imbalance.

### **2.02 'Udeh' traditional curative treatment**

The Esan people believe that Udeh is an ailment caused by a diseased spleen. The spleen is the organ that preserves and cleanses blood in the human system. The Esan people believe that when the spleen is diseased, a lump with a rope-like attachment evolves and stays by the side of the stomach while the rope

moves to the heart and sucks blood from the ill patient. This is according to Prince Francis Akhere (plate 1) who inherited the art of treatment from his father Prince Akhere Umuebuaria (1923-2012). Prince Akhere Francis of Ugbegun Community also said that the art of Uvinmi is familial and inherited by the first male child from his father and thus the tradition is carried on from generation to generation. He also informed that the signs and symptoms of udeh is different between children and adults, whereas in children it manifests in the form of high fever, with adults they appear anemic. The feeling of pain is felt from the side of the stomach to the ribs then to the heart. He said that the lump usually hides in the day time and that is why incisions (uvinmi) are usually done in the mornings and evenings. If the disease is allowed to mature, it is followed by labored heavy breathing and in most instances usually leads to death.



Another traditional healer is Mr. Benson Omo Awode (plate 2) an indigene of Idumebo quarters, Irrua town in Esan Central local government area. He is a lettered retired government worker of the Nigeria Prisons Services who resides in Benin City, and is now a farmer as well as a traditional native doctor who is a practitioner of the art of Uvinmi healing procedure. An interview with him revealed that he inherited the art from his late grandmother, Mrs. Margaret Enaboifo an indigene of Ekpoma, Esan west local government area, whom he lived with while growing up. Mr. Awode claimed that his grandmother blessed him with the ability by incanting on poured on his palm and prayed that he will use the skill of Uvinmi tattoo in treating udeh to feed his family, so that the tradition will not die from the family. The fact that he inherited it from his grandmother means that the skill is not bestowed on only male children, but the female as well.

### 2.03 UVINMI

Uvinmi is a derivative word from the sentence “akhi vion nela” in esan dialect, (which literarily translates to the action of cutting with a sharp object).It is the art of making incisive marks with an incision blade called uche or eloh (Plate 3) with the aim of removing ‘bad’ blood from the sick patient.



It is believed that if the patient is bled he/she becomes healed. The same incision blade is used for several patients without being disinfected or cauterized. The procedure of uvinmi traditionally is very painful for

the patient as the child or the individual is held down on a boarded bed (plate 4) while incisions are made (plate 5) bleeding is cleaned with the base of the eloh/uche and immediately a black powered concussion (plate 6) is applied directly to the incised body.

**Plate 4**



**Plate 5**



**Plate 6**



The patients are not allowed to take a bath till the next day. Thereafter, they are given a cooked bitter tasting concoction (plate 7 and 8) of selected roots, leaves, and bark of trees to be taken twice a day for as long as needed. All the healers agreed that the intake of milk and blood tonic is prohibited after udeh treatment for at least three to six month (as the case may be) because it is believed that this may re-infect the spleen or the blood again.

**Plate 7**



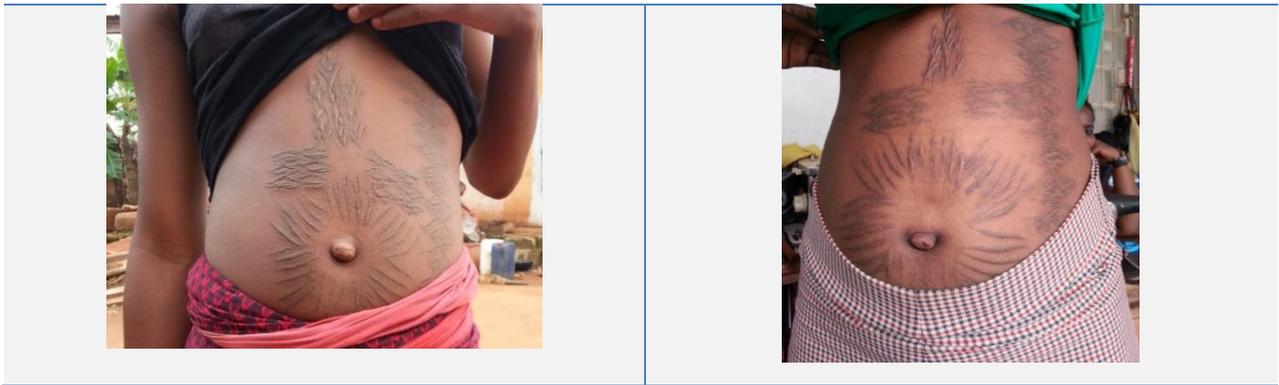
**Plate 8**



There are different designs/patterns of uvinmi determined by gender as well as being the signature mark of the traditional healer. Plates 9-10 are examples of female uvinmi incision marks.

**Plates 9**

**Plates 10**



Note the outward marks facing to the east and west above the pattern (reminiscent of a sunflower design) round the navel and beneath the chest cavity. According to all the people interviewed, traditional doctors have their particular signature mark in uvinmi design. Prince Akhere for instance, said that his father used lizard's motifs for his uvinmi marks but he created his own motif as seen in plates 11 and 12 below. When asked why, he reiterated that it was mainly to distinguish between works by different healers, and had no significant effect on the treatment process. Plates 11 and 12 are examples of male patterns.



In contemporary times as opined by some traditional doctors, uvinmi does not require oracle consultation rather a superb knowledge of inherited skills acquired on the use of incision blade and a good knowledge about herbs are of paramount importance. This is because some of the traditional doctors are now Christians and still practice their inherited herbalist customs. Also, Prince Francis Akhere has introduced the use of lignocaine and adrenaline injection as anesthesia on patients with the help of western-trained medical nurse. He said that a western-trained medical doctor whom he treated for udeh introduced him to it when the patient (the medical doctor) said he could not stand the pain of incision. This insinuates that some western trained medical doctors of Esan extraction also believe in uvinmi as a curative procedure for treating spleen related infections.

Some traditional doctors, in the process of reducing the agony patients go through resorted to making little haphazard marks (Plate 13) in place of the intricate designs/motifs usually associated with uvinmi tattoos.

**Plate 13**



### 3.0 Conclusion

Uvinmi, the traditional tattoo practiced by the Esan ethnic people of Edo State, Nigeria is the curative process employed for the treatment of spleen related infections and diseases, usually believed to be domiciled in the stomach of the patients. Traditionally, Udeh is believed to be a disease that sucks up blood from the body of the individual causing intense feverish condition and weight loss and if not timely treated, could be tragic. The fact that these signs and symptoms could possibly be from illnesses unrelated to the spleen, has no means of been investigated as there is no proper diagnostic procedure involved to determine if the spleen is actually infected? Therefore, it is a process of guessing, and can be likened to the old age tradition of bleeding a patient that was practiced by surgeons for almost 2000 years worldwide known as Bloodletting (Disambiguation), which is the process of withdrawal of blood from a patient to cure or prevent illness and diseases. Based on ancient system of medicine (Ayurveda) in which blood and other bodily fluids were regarded as 'humors', that had to remain in proper balance to maintain health. In Europe the practice continued to be relatively common until the end of the 18th century. The practice has now been abandoned by modern style medicine for all except a few very specific conditions ([www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/tech](http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/tech)). Despite scientific knowledge and development in modern medicine, this traditional system of treating spleen disease through incision and in the process losing blood is still very much in practice to date in Esan land, resulting in body scarification and possible infections from the incision blades due to lack of sterilization.

### 4.0 Recommendation

The practice of uvinmi tattoo for the treatment of udeh spleen diseases should be discarded as there are effective and more reliable modern types of treatments for such diseases.

Researches should be carried out on the types of herbs, roots, barks of trees and condiments used during and after treatment for udeh to find out the efficacy of such for modern medicine.

Records of uvinmi traditional procedure should be preserved for posterity as well as an avenue for data resource.

Further researches should be carried out on the efficacy of uvinmi traditional procedure in the treatment of spleen diseases.

If uvinmi procedure must be continued, then appropriate and adequate sterilization procedures must be strictly followed.

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