

## Exploring *Tiro*, the Facial Ornamentation of the Yoruba in Western Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study investigates *tiro*, a facial ornamentation cosmetic. It dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is widely popular with the Yoruba ethnic group of western Nigeria. Owing to the variegated ways by which body ornamentation is carried out, the study adopted the qualitative method to ascertain the relevance of *tiroo* in the contemporary setting. A total of 15 *tiro* enthusiasts were interrogated while five producers of ornamentation materials also agreed to discuss their business models in a snowball method of interview, conducted in Ota, Ogun State, one of the country's subdivisions well known for the ornamentation. Further analysis elaborates on its developmental trend, functions, ethnographic significance and influence on culture. Findings showed that *tiro* performs some skin-cleansing functions and this medicinal ramification has prompted the call by ornamentation devotees for more awareness and the modernization of the process of application as a build up to global acceptability.

**Keywords:** Facial Ornamentation, *Tiro*, Yoruba Community, Culture, Nigeria.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

*Tiro* is a cultural eye-lining cosmetic for facial ornamentation widely in the western part of Nigeria where the Yoruba ethnic group is located. It is an age long phenomenon and has been worn by both men and women but became very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of the popularity in western Nigeria, *Tiroo* has a national and universal character. The Hausa in the Northern part of the country call it *Kwali* and *Uhie* in Igbo in the Eastern part while American Indians are also found with the tradition.

The base material from which *tiro* is made is called galena Page (2010). Page alluded to a common metallic mineral and the most important commercial ore of lead and silver mined. To the typical '*elewe omo*' (*tiro* vendor, or, trade-medical practitioner) and end users in Ota, where the study was carried out, it is excavated from earth like the common rock-salt (*kan-un*) used in cooking to catalyze softening tough meat. Galena subsists as characteristic cubic (4-sided) and octahedral (8-sided) crystal formations. The metallic crystals' appearance is silvery lustrous gray, sometimes with a blue tint. Crystals tend to be bright silver color when first mined, but tarnish to a dull metallic color after exposure to air (Page, 2010). The appearance of *tiro* as accessible in Yoruba land is in the form of smaller chips as shown in figure 2. If its character is as described by Page, then the Yoruba *tiro* is merely a piece of the ice berg from a grand octahedral (8-sided) crystal formation.

Page is a precious stones specialist and has a comprehensive analysis of all the stones she has encountered and researched. She iterated a catalogue of the functional benefits of *tiro*. It is regarded as a healing crystal used in treating problems related to the heart, lungs and the circulatory system. It is also used in cleansing and strengthening these vital systems. It is believed to be a useful all-round healing crystal that boosts the immune system (Amatore, 2010) and promotes general good health and well-being. Galena-based *tiro* is associated with the energy of elemental Earth and is said to increase confidence, self-belief and inner strength. It is an excellent crystal to keep near when you are working towards important life goals, as it helps you find the enthusiasm and determination to achieve your goals, no matter how distant they might seem. According to Paula, galena strengthens and balances human energy, helps to create a state of being where your spiritual, physical and mental powers are working together harmoniously for the highest good of all. These statements imply that the galena-based *tiro* has some mystical characteristics capable of performing unfathomable feat. *Ti*iro has a silvery shining charcoal grey colour such that attracts one's attention at first sight. These small chips are ground into powder from the crystalline state.

It is antimony, which when ground with a piece of charcoal, is applicable to the eyelashes. The ground grayish black mixture is often kept in a conical dispenser made of metal (Adekunle, et al (Fig. 2). The powdered form is neatly packed into conical metal pot or dispenser and applied to the lower rim of the eye with a round

ended stick for facial beautification. A small rod in the container allows the application to the margins of the eyelids.

Further study identified the galena-based tiro as the most important and abundant ore of lead. The Egyptians were mining deposits of galena at Gebel Rosas as early as 3000 BC, and used the mineral to make fishing net sinkers, plumb bobs and religious figurines. The earliest recorded use of tiro/galena is as kohl (Page, 2010). Kohl is an ancient Egyptian eyeliner cosmetic worn to reduce the glare of the desert sun and repel flies (Hardy, A. *et al*, 2004). Studies have shown that tiro has been applied for its beautifying and attractive effect on the eyes. It is also used for its protective or sunlight shielding effect on the eyes as well as in the treatment of ophthalmologic infections to cleanse the eyes (Page, 2010, Chukwuma, 1997). It was made by grinding galena (lead sulfide) and other ingredients. Studies on traditional make-ups used in Nigeria have reported very high levels of trace metals in locally produced facial make ups (Ajayi *et al*, 2002). However, there is dearth of information on the trace metal content and toxicological effects of repeated and prolonged exposure to galena based tiro. Today the trend is to make it without poisonous ingredients. It is also widely used in the Middle East, North Africa, the Horn of Africa and South Asia to darken the eyelids and as mascara for the eyelashes. It is used mostly by women, but also seen on men and children (Hardy, 1998).

Further investigation revealed that the mineral is a natural semiconductor, once widely used as the 'crystal' inside early wireless radio sets. The scientific quest to understand the properties of galena led to the evolution of many of our new-fangled electronic devices, including the telephone, television, GPS systems and medical equipment, making this humble mineral an essential part of modern life (Page, 2010). This however, is not the focus of this study.

Notable deposits are found in the states of Texas, Oklahoma and Missouri, and galena is an important ore in the silver mining regions of Colorado, Utah, Idaho and Montana. It is also the official state mineral of Missouri and Wisconsin. In the United Kingdom major deposits are found in Scotland, Northern England and Cornwall. The mineral is also mined in France, Germany, Romania, Austria, Belgium, Italy, Israel, Australia, Peru and Africa. This substantiates the facts plausibly by oral tradition alluded to by the Ota market women, specifically the trado-medical practitioners indigenously known as *elewe omo* that tiro is normally dug from the ground.



Figure 2. "Tiro" (antimony) container and crystals  
Pix taken after purchase from Ota market, Ogun State



Fig. 3. Galena crystal.  
Pix from Laura Page's web page



Fig. 4. Ground 'tiro powder ready for use

## Yoruba Aesthetics

According to Riedel, (1998) aesthetics is commonly perceived as the study of sensory or senso-emotional values, sometimes called judgments of sentiment and taste. More broadly, scholars in the field define aesthetics as "critical reflection on art, culture and nature. It comes from the Greek word for "sense of perception" and can be defined only within particular cultural systems (Cordwell, 1983). In the Yoruba aesthetic

context, it is pertinent to ask these questions. 'What does the Yoruba consider aesthetic or beautiful'? 'How and why have aesthetic concepts come to hold value'? Answers to these questions will give concise and appreciable insight to the Yoruba artistic inclinations and creative values.

This ethnic group of people is endowed with a whole world of talents comprising weavers, seamstresses, tailors, potters, goldsmiths, brass casters, carpenters, calabash carvers, photographers, and the beauticians who engage in that contemporarily termed field of cosmetology. The field of cosmetology, that tends to be financially rewarding, is that of make-up or skin specialist. These specialists may or may not be licensed, but tend to acculturate aesthetics to the human facade. Quite a number of them do not have a formal education in the four walls of an institution but, learnt their trade or profession by apprenticeship. However, with contemporary formal education in Nigeria and predominance of educated folks all around, these professionals also cut a niche for themselves in the society by improving their products quality, enhancing the overall outlook for more appealing packaging matching the finesse of their clients (Cordwell, 1983).

Historically, the Yoruba people accepts change and that, constantly. Conversely, nothing was adapted that could not be used in an old pattern, but with greater efficiency or meaning. In other words, the Yoruba may have external influences; they mostly improve on such and eventually emerge with originality of design and purpose.

Yoruba body art uses the human body to express an individual's status, spiritual beliefs, or ethnic affiliation. It can be created on the body itself in tattoo form, scarification, body painting, or coiffures. Decorative markings in the form of tattoos face and body scarification are common amongst the Yoruba. The abdomen and arms are common locations on the body for these decorative markings. Unlike in other racial groups, black is the only color adopted. The pigment is usually carbon in burnt organic materials, usually from plants (Adekunle, *et al*, 2006). Scarification is a long and painful process, and a permanent modification of the body. It conveys complex messages about identity and social status. Permanent body markings emphasise fixed social, political and religious roles. Facial scarification in Yoruba is used for identification of ethnic groups, families, individuals, as well as personal beauty expression. It is executed in girls to mark stages of life process, such as puberty, marriage etc. This phenomenon presents them more attractive to men, the scars being regarded as appealing to touch and to look at, in addition to demonstration that women will be able to withstand the pain of childbirth with raised scars. The art of scarification is tending towards extinction as scarification patterns can now be seen only on the elderly as explained by Coleman (2002).

Scarification is viewed as boundary marker in terms of life stages, and also as accepted cultural differentiator between self and the other, or the civilized and natural self. As Susan Vogel states, "Scarification and other forms of body decoration were traditionally considered marks of civilization. They distinguished the civilized, socialized human body from the body in its natural state and from animals." (Vogel, 1986)

Body art are also created for wears on the body in form of garments, hats for men and head-ties for women in addition to jewelry. Today many Yoruba people embrace a variety of traditional forms of body adornment, creating a sumptuous visual display and turning each decorated person into a vibrant and unique work of art.

### **Yoruba Aesthetics imbued in Character**

The Yoruba aesthetic concept surpasses superficial facade decoration but reaches into moral, good character and spiritual realms. Studies have shown that Yoruba philosophy reveals how and why their varied arts look and do things the ways they do. Morality is linked with the aesthetic in everyday Yoruba discourse. Studies have shown that Yoruba believe that the purest or highest form of beauty, or '*ewa*', in humans is a good moral character, or *iwa rere* (Lawal, 1974, Cordwell, 1983 Barry, 1997). Thus in Yoruba culture, character *iwa* is synonymous with beauty *ewa*. What lacks beauty *ewa* is simply bad or *buru*. The physically ugly female 'lacks beauty' or *oburewa* while her male counterpart is simply 'not good' or *eni ti ko dara* according to Lawal (1974). They appreciate that in purely physical terms one person may be more attractive than others. As this is a matter of chance rather than choice, it is of superficial importance when a person whose moral character can be relied upon in any situation. This means that a person who happens to be physically unattractive may still be deeply admired and praised for the beauty of their words and actions. Conversely a person of remarkable physical beauty is a suspect and may come to be regarded as viciously immoral on the basis of their words and actions. This preference for a beauty, or *ewa* that is 'moral' or an 'inner trait' is summed up by the Yoruba aphorism '*Iwa l'ewa*', meaning 'good moral character is beauty' as explained by Hallen (1997).

*Iwa*, meaning character, is also perceptible to those who have "under studied and walked with the elders and ancestors" and thus acquired critical and discerning eyes. Important to *iwa* are *oju-inu*, an "inner eye" or the artist's insight and *oju-ona*, the external harmony of artworks and sensitivity for taste. To the Yoruba, the beauty of objects, performances, or texts lies not only in what catches the eye but also in the derivatives from wholeness of the work. From these elements one can then recognize the artifact's *iwa*, (character) or essential

nature, and finally its *ewa*, or beauty. These are some of the considerations for Yoruba aesthetic concepts and values.

### The Eye Symbolism in Yoruba Sculpture

Corroborating literature, the eye rendering in Yoruba sculpture particularly the 'Ibeji sculpture' is symbolic. The powers of *ibeji* can be seen in the large head and eyes, where the Yoruba believe spiritual power resides (Fig.5 and 6). The Yoruba call this power *ashe* (authority). The eye is the lamp that leads one through the jungle of life as explained by Lawal 1985 as well as being proverbially regarded as the lamp of the body. *Oju ni imole ara*. Once a person goes blind, it is allegorical to a paradigmatic black out when compared to power outage and consequent to groping in darkness. Considering blindness in man, it is a total blackout for life if there is no remedy. That is why it is so sensitive in Yoruba culture and elaborately emphasised in Yoruba sculpture as illustrated by Lawal (1985) being the light of the body as well as catered for and adorned. Most renderings in Yoruba sculpture are depicted bulging (Figs.5-7) and Yoruba women with big eye balls are usually attractive and appealing.



**Fig 5:** The Ibeji Figure with big bulging eyes  
Source: Kilmartins (2002)



**Fig 6:** Another brand of twin figure *ere ibeji*  
Source: [www.bing.com/images/search?q](http://www.bing.com/images/search?q)

The+eye+in+Yoruba+sculpture



**Fig 7:** Figure of a cup handle with bulging eyes  
Source: [www.bing.com/images/search](http://www.bing.com/images/search)

The Yoruba Ibeji sculpture has both infant and adult characteristics, such as scarification, and elaborate hairdo, representing an entire lifetime. They are sometimes adorned with beads and polished with red camwood powder, or highlights of indigo blue paint. A patina results from the frequent handling, since the family would oil, wash, dress and feed the statuettes in order to placate the spirit as explained by Kilmartins (2002)

### **The application of *Tiro* in Yoruba Civilization**

The constitution of any culture or race is usually a hybrid of people; the rich, the poor, young, old, middle aged, adolescents, educated, illiterate, educated illiterate, men and women, male and female, the fashionable, the indifferent to fashion, and so on. These individuals have diverse likes and dislikes, attractions and repulsions, motivations and inhibitions, judgments and choices. The *tiro* eyeliner has become an obscure beauty-enhancing cosmetic tool possibly for factors iterated above. Contemporary eyeliners have sufficed the effective use of *tiro*, yet subsisting.

Yoruba use '*tiro*' for beauty enhancement and attractive effects on the eyes is primarily aimed at females, by extension it has broadened its appeal to the male market. Its use was initially observed on traditional religion worshippers such as Sango and Obatala and used by other uninitiated women in Oyo and other Yoruba towns according to Shryock (2004). The 'uninitiated women' refers to any other women/persons outside the religion. Devotees of these traditional religions illustrate confirmation and commitment to their religions by marking their bodies and applying *tiro*. The use of *tiro* in traditional religion would neither be considered for ornamentation nor attraction. The plausible purpose for this presumably, would be for the exploitation of mysticism surrounding the galena based *tiro*. Page alluded to this as the science and magic of crystals.

Looking attractive is important to members of virtually every culture, especially to the young who seek romantic partners and to those who desire to extend their influence in society through contact with others, usually front desk personnel or those desiring to secure a good looking spouse for marriage. Attraction is significant to individuals whom persons encounter for marriage. Attraction to a psychologist means how others perceive and rate the desirability of a person's features. Such ratings or opinions depend partly on inherent physical attraction of the facial features and partly on other factors, for example, how these features are "packaged" or presented. The facade is the window of attention when it comes to physical attraction. This part of the body represents the person's identity and is most exposed to public impression. Thus, whether a person is in general considered beautiful or otherwise depends much on facial beauty (Roberts, et al, (2004). This in my opinion is fundamental to women's motivation to invest in cosmeticism. Yoruba women are not precluded in the truth of this proposition attempting to improve their appearance applying *tiro*. Merely using cosmetics, women increase their attraction through contact with the eyes.

Consciously or otherwise, sexual development and attraction to facial characteristics is a reproductive strategy and process. According to psychologists, when it comes to potential mates, women are as complex as men claim they are. Corroborating this statement, the actress of the famous 'Titanic' film (Winslet 1997) once said '*the heart of a woman is as the depth of the deep ocean*'. Beginning with the most basic assumptions of human female/male differences: females invest heavily in offspring, through pregnancy and lactation; males by contrast need only contribute sperm for successful reproduction. To maximize reproductive success (by producing as many offspring as possible), males are thought to take the approach of capitalizing on as many mating opportunities as possible, but are constrained by female choices and demands for investment in rearing children to build homes (Trivers, 1972) as cited by Cornwell (2006). According to Cornwell, some men look for good bodies for short term mates and pretty faces for long term mates. Psychologically, Yoruba women do not consider men hunting for short term mates as responsible and caring enough to father their children. Consequently, some women may resort to explore the mystery behind *tiro* on the one hand or adopt impregnation to trap the man they admire to father their child. This phenomenon is an extreme game of chance, as some men may accept the child and refute getting married to the lady.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The galena based *tiro* was purchased from Ota market on one of the market days. Ota market is operational every four days. Oral interviews were conducted with *tiro* vendors using snowball method to locate other vendors in the market. Interviews with other local people, beauticians or hair stylists, have been employed in the data collection process. Oral interviews were conducted with others, numbering fifteen (15) to investigate the awareness of *tiro* subsistence but who may never have worn it for facial ornamentation. Males and females, young and old were included.

All interviews were conducted at the respondents' premises and business domains. The time taken for the interview ranged between 10 to 15 minutes. The participants were each asked about their awareness of *tiro*, where found and what is its use. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to aid subsequent analysis.

20 questionnaires were also distributed to educated folks; 5 men and 15 women. This is because men do facially apply *tiro* but not to as large percentage as women.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the interviews are discussed in this section. The application and use of *tiro* among the Yoruba is far more than meets the eye and far beyond human imagination regarding the context of mere facial ornamentation. Indeed, apart from lifestyle, living conditions and culture have influenced the use of *tiro* eyeliner among the Yoruba. The people's desires and aspirations motivate them to exploit the mystery of *tiro*. Everyone interviewed, others given questionnaire as well as reviewed literature (Arise, et al, 2010, Amatore and Walter, 2010, Chukwuma, 1997) indicate the healing properties of *tiro* when engaged as a facial ornamentation tool. This assertion substantiates (Page, 2010) submission of *tiro* as a healing crystal.

The use of *tiro* is beyond superficiality for some Yoruba young ladies, men and women. The findings of this research support several studies on the application and potentialities of galena (*tiro*). There are more of its exploits peculiar to Yoruba society. Marriage for example is paramount and valuable to most young Yoruba ladies and women usually for mutual all round development. The husband is honoured, respected and metaphorically considered as '*ade ori*' or crown. Aspiring ladies who desire to have a good home and marriage usually fall prey to the class of men who look out for good bodies for short term mates (playboys) thereby, bringing such hopes into jeopardy. Such ladies consequently become heart hardened and resolute not to experience such heart breaks again following several encounters. An interviewed young female adolescent in Ota market reiterated that *tiro* is used as an antidote for men who seek short term affairs. She said and I quote:

*Tiro is applied so as not to be used and dumped by sex driven men.*

In other words, she applies *tiro* for the purpose of pinning down men whose intention to use and discard her contrary to the man's desire. As a result the roaming playboy may find himself ending up in marriage with the *tiro* ornamented lady or woman. Enlightened men in this sense of *tiro* application simply steer clear of any *tiro* decorated spinsters or women.

#### Current practices

Few young undergraduates in their teens and twenties are aware of *tiro*. Most of them have never come across it. Quite a number of young ladies and middle aged women from age 35 and above among the educated folks are aware of *tiro* but chose to utilize contemporary cosmetics. One of the respondents said *she prefers to use eye brow pencils because, that is what she grew up to know, it is in vogue and comes in different colours.*

Most Yoruba young ladies and women are fashionable as well as colour-match conscious. A very fair in complexion young woman (of the learned profession) claimed '*my facade is already appealing and would not want an added glow.* Other persons interviewed claim;

*Tiro is used for alleviating secretions of the eyes that tend to close up the lower and upper eye lids.*

Other persons interviewed attributed the application of *Tiro* as illustrated:

*Tiro is used as fashion and appealing. It makes your eyes glitter and attractive.*

Some interviewed men wondered why some men dabble into *tiro* eye beautification while some reacted as illustrated;

*Most men using tiro do it for a purpose, and that, sinisterly. Some men do it in favour to win contracts, while some others Supernaturally use it to lure women sexually.*

Styles of facial ornamentation can be studied in reference to specific culture which developed unique forms of decoration, or modified through cross-cultural interactions. The Ancient Egyptian culture for instance is the first recorded civilization to adorn themselves with decoration that gave Queen Nefertiti and other ancient Egyptian royals those stupendous gazes and legendary beauty that stuns the eye. Some scientists in France have reported that the alluring eye makeup also may have been used to help prevent or treat eye disease by doubling as an infection-fighter (Amatore and Walter, 2010). This global unilateral data regarding *tiro* as eye cleanser up

to the grass-root among the Yoruba of South West Nigeria could plausibly have been through the instrumentality of oral tradition. Fig. 5 shows a *tiro* laced eyes of its vendor in Ota market used basically for eye cleansing as she claimed.



**Fig. 5** *Tiro* laced eyes of its vendor

#### **IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Studies have shown that *tiro* is good and acceptable as a cosmetic tool for beauty enhancement. Other benefits accredited to the facial ornamentation material in the area of eye cleansing and other medicinal attributes such as revving-up the immune system to help fight ophthalmologic infections as indicated by the two French scientists. The general notion for *tiro* ornamentation in Yoruba women is basically to look good and attractive. This may not necessarily be a way of sexually attracting the opposite sex. One of the myths of contemporary culture is that looking attractive is the key to success attainable by anyone psychologically. In socially happy ones, a certain level of attraction is achieved. Many believe in the truth of the proposition that looking good enhances self confidence and satisfaction in their attempts to improve their appearance. Looking good and attractive lifts the spirit and makes one feel good but this is merely a psychological phenomenon. *Tiro* has won for itself a global acceptability and relevance and should be embraced as such. It can therefore favourably compete with other cosmetic eyeliners if repackaged and marketed for wealth creation.

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