

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
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Oral Presentation

Scratching the Surface: Female Scarification in the Nuba of Sudan

This proposed paper presentation is based on research I conducted at the University of Florida for my M.A in Art History. My secondary area of interest was African art, and this will paper explore the treatment of the female form in the Nuba culture, specifically body scarification. The Nuba reside in a remote area of the foothills of the Nuba Mountains in the Southern Kordofan Province of central Sudan. A bewildering complexity of people, the Nuba practice Islam, Christianity, and animistic religions. This presentation will examine a tradition sanctioned by the latter.

The Nuba follow a prescribed set of standards for daily grooming and dress of the body. Both men and women apply oils and ground pigment (red or yellow ochre) to their skin, maintain elaborate coiffures, and wear age and gender appropriate items of clothing and jewelry. Nuba women also participate in one additional form of personal adornment: scarification. Unlike the previously mentioned forms of personal adornment, the scars are permanent changes made to the women's bodies and they reveal the depth of Nuban beliefs and customs.

This presentation will argue that the Nubans do not use forms of personal adornment such as scarification to draw attention to individuals. Instead, personal adornment enhances and complements a Nuban's natural beauty and blends him/her into the community. Nuba women receive three sets of scars at defined stages in their lives, and each set serves as a rite of passage. The procedure is performed by a scarring specialist, who uses a sharp, hooked thorn and a single blade to hook, raise, and quickly cut the women's skin to create a series of small keloid scars. Nuban women remain stoic during the painful procedures, and after they receive the final set of scars, virtually their entire bodies are covered with abstract, geometric scarification patterns.

The Nuba believe the scars are the correct way to "dress" the female body, and almost all Nuba women, except those with hemophilia and related blood disorders, undergo the process. I believe the scars are visual markers; they serve as communication devices to the community about that woman's age, her relationships with members of the opposite sex, her reproductive state, her sexual availability, and her ritual status for religious purposes. Even though the scars are aesthetically pleasing to look at and touch, these sensory reactions are secondary to the social custom of scarification. According to Nuba legend, the practice also has medicinal effects.

In this presentation, I seek to educate the MU community about a form of personal adornment used to permanently alter the body by exploring the origins, scarring processes, cultural significance, and aesthetic qualities of female body scarification in the Nuba culture. My talk will also be documentary in nature. The rise of Islam and Christianity and the formation of radical government structures have severely decreased this practice. Even though scarification appears barbaric to western sentiments, it plays a vital role in the Nuba culture as a rite of passage and status marker, which are also important concepts in western cultures.