

A STUDY OF TWENTIETH CENTURY WEAVING IN ILORIN, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT This paper is concerned with the history of indigenous technology in Nigeria. In this regard, I examine the features of traditional weaving in Ilorin, Nigeria, in the twentieth century. In the course of discussion, I reflect on the value of traditional crafts in general and cloth-making in particular. I then proceed to study the general structure of Ilorin weaving with particular attention to organization, production and the looms utilized in weaving. It is inferred from this study that the traditional techniques of weaving need to be modernized.

Key Words: Ilorin; Traditional crafts; Weaving; Cloth; Loom; Technology; Modernization.

INTRODUCTION

Of recent, the call for modernization of traditional crafts as a means of developing indigenous technology in Nigeria has rather been persistent. This paper is an attempt to make further contributions in this respect, by paying particular attention to traditional weaving in the twentieth century Ilorin.⁽¹⁾ Firstly, there is a brief attempt on a general basis to focus on the values of some of the traditional crafts. Secondly, the values of weaving are highlighted. I then proceed to examine the features of the Ilorin traditional weaving in terms of its organization and production technology. It is noted that like in other communities of weaving culture such as Iseyin, Oyo, Shaki, Awaye-Ibarapa, Ondo, Okene and Nupe, the techniques of weaving in Ilorin have not appreciably changed over the years. It is against this background that some guidelines are suggested for the modernization of the craft. The modernization is studied within the context of the cultural environment of the craft and the general conditions of its practitioners. However, since the idea is to keep pace with the technologically advanced countries, the paper sees the need for interactions with textile industries elsewhere in the efforts to modernize the techniques of traditional weaving. I conclude with the view that there is the need to harness the traditional crafts for an indigenous-based technology.

THE VALUE OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

Nigerian communities are rich in a wide variety of crafts which possess great technological value. Some of these crafts include weaving, dyeing, pottery, black-smithing, soap-making, leather-work, canoe-building, carving and sculpturing. In the nineteenth century, most of these crafts developed into extensive industries. For instance, tradi-

tional weaving among the Ilorin and Iseyin communities was noted to have developed into an elaborate industry in the nineteenth century (O'Hear, 1983). Similarly, pot-making in the Abuja region was recorded as an important nineteenth century occupation of the Gwari tribe (Thomas-Emeagwali, 1988). Some of these crafts even grew up with the people and became part and parcel of their culture. Afigbo & Okeke (1985: 7) have remarked for instance that "the manufacture of textile for weaving apparel is long established in Igbo culture". Because of this close identity between the crafts and the people, the traditional crafts had responded in various ways to the technological needs of the Nigerian communities long before the era of modern technology.

The case of the blacksmiths readily comes to mind in this respect. In order to meet the challenges of agriculture, the blacksmiths evolved a kind of technology which responded to the peculiarities of the local environment. For example, they manufactured farm implements such as hoes, cutlasses, axes, etc. which should be seen as a significant landmark in the history of agricultural technology in Nigeria, in the sense that the tools so manufactured replaced wooden and stone tools. Thus the innovation in agricultural technology contributed to the massive food production which ensured a good degree of self-reliance in food for the people. Also in the area of defence, the blacksmiths had played a creditable role in the manufacture of weapons such as dane guns, arrows, axes, cutlasses and knives. With these weapons, the Nigerian and for that matter African communities had been able to defend themselves against internal and external threats including resistance against European penetration. These traditional weapons were creditably used, for instance, during the Yoruba Civil Wars, Aba Women Riots and Franco-Mandinka military confrontation (Webster et al., 1967). The use of these weapons was no doubt an epitome of indigenous technology in military hardware.

We may also cast our mind on the traditional technology in iron-smelting. Benin, for instance, was reputed for brass and bronze industry. The Nupe on the other hand specialized in the glass and bead industry. Yet there was the Ife bronze and terracotta, and the historic iron technology of the culture area of Jos, Bauchi, Kano and Zaria. The products of the iron, bronze and brass works such as cutlery, utensils, weapons and artistic works had been of great domestic values. In the same vein, the use of the products of gold- and silver-smithing such as ear-rings, necklaces and bangles, and advantages of the products of the traditional leather-work, soap and canoe industries were a good reflection of how the Nigerian communities had used traditional crafts to satisfy their technological needs.

THE VALUES OF WEAVING (CLOTH-MAKING)

At a very early age, there had been desperate efforts of the communities in Africa as in fact in other parts of the world to devise a means of covering their naked body. In historical perspective, therefore, textile technology was the outgrowth of the early experimentations with and use of fibrous materials. These experiments were themselves preceded by the use of flat or round vegetal materials to make basketry and matting before the spun yarn in weaving. It has been noted, for instance, that in West

Africa the earliest forms of clothing were made from animal skins, the bark of trees such as baobab and the leaves of raffia palms (Stride & Ifeka, 1971). In Nigeria, the evolution of weaving was said to have been traced through archaeological discoveries in eastern Nigeria to textiles over a thousand years old, woven from bast and leaf fibres (Afigbo & Okeke, 1985). The availability in some areas of wool and locally grown cotton later led to the growth of a more developed textile industry before A.D. 1000. Therefore, the value which was attached to clothing made weaving one of the earliest fundamental arts of civilization.

Throughout the ages, cloth has always been used as protective material for the body. Cloth covers up our skin from direct effect of the sun. It also protects our body from the danger of bites, incidental cuts, scratches and bruises which could result from contact with animate and inanimate objects.

Besides the value of cloth as wearing apparel and soft-goods, cloth also reflects the identity and status of men and women all over the world. Nweke (1987) remarks, for instance, that the way a Nigerian woman arranges her head-tie or ties her wrappers, summarily highlights the social chasm between a groundnut hawker and a lawyer. While clothes can indicate who you are, they also reveal what you think and believe in. It is possible, for instance, to make distinctions between a Reverend Father and Ulama (a learned Muslim Scholar) through the way they dress. What is more, the various cults of traditional worship such as *Sango* (god of thunder), *Ogun* (god of iron), *Egungun* (masquerade), etc. have different modes of dressing which distinguish their worshippers from one another.

From time immemorial cloth has been describing far more vividly the history and culture of a people than any history manual. Woven cloth represents a key traditional activity to the people of Nigeria as in fact to the people of other countries like Mali, Ghana, Togo, Burkinafaso and Kenya among others. In pre-colonial Nigeria, for example, cotton fabrics such as *ewu etu*, *sanyan*, *petuje*, *akwaete*, *kijipa*, etc. represented a stage in the history and culture of textile technology of the people. While the *akwaete* cloth reflects the cultural history of the Ibo, the *alari* and *sanyan* cloths manifest the cultural history of the Yoruba. Yet, there is the *upatesi* which is identifiable with the Ebara culture. Among the Yoruba, the sombre *olowu dudu* is reserved for funerals, depending on the status and age of the dead, while the now-fashionable *adire* was formerly for humble folk. It should be pointed out that the cloth which is worn at any point in time is usually a reflection of the history of that period. For instance in Nigeria apparel with the picture or inscription of the Queen of England readily reminds one of an era of British colonial rule in the country. Similarly, a cotton print with the pictures of national leaders boldly emblazoned on the clothes indicates the history of Nigerian independence. Shortly after the independence in Nigeria, it was common to see dresses with the pictures of national leaders like Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo. It is to be noted then that changes in the make, design and fashion of clothes are often consistent with changes in the history and culture of a people.

The social values of a people have always been influenced by clothes as well. Events such as marriage, wake-keeping and house-warming are usually marked with

choicy clothes in most communities in Nigeria. During marriage ceremony, for example, it is common for the celebrants and well-wishers alike to dress in expensive *aso ofi* (cloth from the loom) such as *sanyan*, *alari* and *etu*. Furthermore, the social values in vogue are usually reflected in the patterns, designs and styles of clothes. There was a period in Ilorin, for instance, when the cloth *oloruko* (name design) which reflected the names of heroes such as Mallam Alimi and Emir Abdulsalaam was in use as a mark of respect (Usman, 1985). In addition, there were other cloth designs like *aso-eleya* (cloth with holes), *onidi-awodi* (design of ostrich bird), *elerin* (design of elephant), etc. which were used at one time or another in response to the existing social value. Even in social hierarchy, the use of cloth is of cardinal importance. It has been noted, for example, that before now, among the Yoruba, *sanyan* and *alari* which were known to be the most costliest handwoven cloths were produced purposely for princely folks, wealthy individuals and those who made important achievements (Usman, 1985). It should be stressed also that the concept of *Egbe* (association of age-groups or friends) which is prominent in most parts of Nigeria, is often closely linked with the concept of dress. For example, *egbe Amuhudun* of Erin-Ile in Kwara State of Nigeria, which is a social group, has for a long period established among its members a tradition of common clothing, at least once in every year, to mark one occasion or the other. As a matter of fact, the use to which cloth is put in such events like welcome and send-off parties, cultural and sporting festivals, National Day Celebrations, etc. underscores the importance of clothes in the socio-cultural history of man.

In point of fact, the social significance of clothes in most parts of the world could not be over-emphasized. While the Bedouin women wear red cloth to show that they are married, a blue dress indicates that they are widows. On the other hand, a widow who is searching for a new husband by tradition wears a blue cloth which is sported with some pink. Similarly in Europe, the logic of colour and clothes is noted to be intricately linked with chastity. For while virgins traditionally wear white wedding gowns, a bride who is pregnant wears white with a red rose affixed to the gown. We can also take a look at the aristocratic tone of dressing where in Africa, Asia and Europe, aristocracy has always set the tone for beaded dressing. The Court of Louis XV of France was for instance noted to be famous for fashion, while distinctive and unique court clothes, became the key to many a French King's favour (Nweke, 1987).

Here in Nigeria, though the use of beads and embroidery is no longer restricted to traditional rulers or members of their courts, nevertheless, its use is still substantially an aristocratic emblem. At times, clothes can be used as a political and economic weapon. This was the case during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) when the Federal Government put a ban on the importation of second-hand clothes into the country. The measure badly affected the Ibos who were the major dealers in this trade. As a matter of fact, economic activities in the buying and selling of clothes were known for ages to be a good source of wealth. In Ilorin, for instance, the traditional weaving industry was observed to have boosted tremendously the nineteenth century economy of the city (Olaoye, 1987). Thus it can be seen that the thousands of years of culture and history, rich in the artistry and craftsmanship of clothes have influenced virtually all facets of human life.

ORGANIZATION OF THE ILORIN WEAVING

In Ilorin, there are two types of loom used by the traditional weavers, namely the horizontal and vertical hand-loom.⁽²⁾ While the horizontal loom is worked by males, the vertical loom is worked by females. Similarly, while the male weavers practice the craft in the open air, under sheds or the veranda of a house, the female weavers usually confine their activities within doors. Although indoor weaving by women may not have been unknown in other communities, it seems that in Ilorin the tradition of Islam particularly influenced it. However, it is interesting to note that today female products of primary and secondary schools are taking to open air weaving thereby breaking the male monopoly of the horizontal loom. On the other hand, male apprenticeship to indoor weaving is not yet known. At present the city has a weavers' population estimated at 6,500, with males numbering about three-quarters of this figure, based on recent calculations through random sampling.

Either in the case of the horizontal loom or the vertical loom, hand-loom weaving is still found in numerous units without organized workshops or factories. The weaving units are located in different compounds of the city. The number of weavers in each unit varies averagely from four to nine, while between three and seven of such units could be located in a compound. In some compounds the number may be higher as it is the case in Ojuekun's compound where there are nine of such units. In addition, there are several single weavers who are scattered over a large area of the city mostly in the old section of the city, while the new section—*Sabon gari*—which is settled mainly by strangers is not known for weaving.

The loose organization of hand-loom weaving is reflected in all aspects of the industry. For instance, the system of apprenticeship in the industry has no clear arrangement. A person may be apprenticed to weaving at any time of the year, while the period of graduation depends on how short or long one can master the techniques of the craft. In this case, the industry lacks a specific training programme. Similarly, those who are in training are usually apprenticed to a master weaver who is independent of other master weavers even within the same unit. The result is that the majority of trainees are usually limited in skill since they are restricted both in training and exposure. It should be noted also that in spite of the recent expansion of the industry, there are no cooperative societies of weavers in the city.

Archival sources have however revealed that, for a brief period during the colonial administration, there existed the Ilorin Weavers' Guilds. But ironically, the guilds were a loose association of middlemen (and not the actual weavers) who wanted to protect their own economic interest. Therefore, as a product of circumstance, the guilds eventually collapsed (Renold, 1950). Field evidence revealed, for instance, that the middlemen and traders in the local textile materials preferred to deal with the weavers as individuals rather than as groups in order to safeguard their interest. Each middleman was said to have his own weavers to whom he supplied yarns, and from whom he bought cloth for sale. Moreover, individual interest of the weavers also prevented any idea of guild. Each weaver appeared to be contented as long as he could secure market for his products. Even the spinners as well as the dyers who were

supposed to be members of the weaving families were not professionally under the weavers' control since they preferred to sell their skills and materials to anyone whether a family member or not. In fact up till today, traditional weaving still reflects this poor organizational structure.

THE PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY

In the nineteenth century, the preliminary stage of weaving technology in Ilorin involved the process of ginning, fluffing and spinning by a great deal of human labour. Today, this traditional technique has not itself changed even though it has considerably declined as a result of machine-spun yarns, synthetic threads and rayons which are now available. As a matter of fact, from the second half of the twentieth century, the common practice for the Ilorin weavers was to buy the machine-spun yarns for their weaving. But before they are put into use, the yarns are usually subjected to starching and rewinding. According to the weavers, starching toughens the threads against the tension of weaving thereby protecting them from possible cuttings during weaving. Rewinding on the other hand, separates the threads sufficiently from each other for easy weaving. In Ilorin, two materials are commonly used today in starching, namely *eko* which is prepared from maize and *eba* which is prepared from cassava. However, most weavers prefer *eko* because of its solubility and fine texture. To prepare the starch, *eko* or *eba* will be mixed with water to produce a solution of low concentration. The threads will then be 'washed' in the solution after which they will be spread in the sun to dry. When dried, the threads would be stiff enough to resist the tension of weaving. The next stage is the rewinding of the threads into spools to make for easy shedding and warping.

In Ilorin, like in most Yoruba-speaking communities such as Oyo, Iseyin, Shaki, etc., the rewinding of threads is traditionally called *owu didu*. However, the name of the winding device which is used for this purpose varies from place to place. While in Ilorin the device is called *ajo*, in Oyo and its surroundings it is called *akata*. In Ile-Ife on the other hand, the same device is called *abiribiri*. But in spite of the differences in name, the winding device is generally a cone-shaped object which rests on a pivot and revolves freely when the threads are pulled from the hank by the use of a spindle which is called *igowu*. *Igowu* is a device which is made of a short stick of about 35 cm in length, inserted into a paper bobbin. Through the movement of the hand, the spindle (*igowu*) is set in rotation thereby enabling the threads to wind on the bobbin or spooler. The spooled yarn is later converted into warps for weaving. Except now that *ajo* is made of planks instead of ordinary woods, there appears to be no spectacular change in its twentieth century structure.

The horizontal loom possesses major features such as treadle, shuttle, pulley, harness, beam, sleight and a beater. The loom uses the rafters of a shelter either in the open air or the veranda of a house to suspend the necessary cords. Running from suspension are two treadles each with a loop which fits around the weaver's big toes thereby facilitating the pressing of the treadles by foot. At the weaving end, the warp is tied to the beam while at the other end, it is spread out at a desired distance to the

weaver. At that distance, the warp is held taut by a heavy object, usually a stone which rests on a wooden object that drags the warp towards the weaver during the weaving process. In a weaving posture, the weaver then sits on the ledge with his legs stretched under the cloth beam and on top of the treadles. Thereafter, he would proceed to pass side-ways, the shuttle which is already carrying the weft. Weaving progresses as the boat shuttle which brings in the weft passes through the warp with the alternate depressions of the foot pedals (treadles) opening the sheds. In order to give patterns to the cloth, a smooth stick called *apasa* is used. In this process, a cloth is woven on the horizontal loom.

The vertical loom has a rectangular frame, fixed in an upright position usually indoor on the wall of the house. It possesses a heddle-stick or sword but no treadles. Even though the loom accommodates some aspects of the structure found in horizontal loom, it has a peculiar process of weaving which goes perpendicularly from the lower to the upper part of the loom. The weaver, who is usually a female, arranges the warp threads around the lower and upper cross-beams. The warp yarns are kept in tensile posture by adjusting the cross-beams appropriately and get them fixed in a proper position. The weft thread is then wound on a stick of about two-feet long and passed through the shed in the process of weaving. In order to make for easy weaving, there is another stick which separates the warp yarns in the event of any sticking together. To give patterns to the piece, a patterning stick called *apasa*, which is identical to the one used on horizontal loom, is inserted into the warp threads and aids the weaver in this respect. Like in the horizontal loom, the weaver passes the weft threads alternately over and under the warp threads to form a plane of fabric. But unlike it, hands are more incessantly engaged on the vertical loom since it has no treadles. From the starting point on the ground upwards, the weaver continually adjusts the warp from the upper cross-beam downwards during weaving, until she gets to the starting point of the warp again before the weaving is completed. When finished, the length of the cloth is usually wider than the cross-beams.

Through the traditional techniques above, the main varieties of *aso ofi* produced in the city are *sanyan*, *etu*, *petuje*, *alari* and *kijipa* cloths. The cloths are generally of narrow strips. For instance, the cloth woven on a horizontal loom is about 4.5 inches wide, while the cloth produced on a vertical loom has an average width of 16.5 inches.⁽³⁾ The production rate of the industry is very low as well. *Gbariye* which is a complete man's wear of 32 yards takes, for example, an average of five days to weave, while a complete woman's outfit of the same number of yards takes about eight days to complete. Thus except for the knowledge of the weft-float pattern recently acquired by the weavers, the industry has apparently retained most of its nineteenth century features.

From the preceding views, it is clear that today the process of traditional weaving in Ilorin, as in fact in other communities in Nigeria, is still rather tedious requiring almost an incessant use of the legs to press the treadles and the hands to arrange the thread and give patterns to the piece. Despite the advantage of machine-spun yarns in saving time and labour particularly in ginning, fluffing and spinning, the technology of production in all the facets of the industry is still very backward. Thus the general

poor condition of the traditional weaving calls for the need to develop and modernize it.

SOME GUIDELINES ON MODERNIZATION

There are avenues open to the modernization of the traditional crafts in general and weaving in particular. First and foremost, there must be a pragmatic policy of reviving the crafts most of which have gone into oblivion. Onimode (1984) has noted that "much of Nigeria's indigenous artisan technology has atrophied through disdain and lack of patronage and improvements...blacksmithing, iron mining, smelting, military weaponry, brassworks, cloth weaving, dyeing, soap making (brewing) all being discarded in the elusive pursuit of the modern technological mirage." From this observation, it is clear that the first step towards the modernization of the crafts is to evolve a concrete policy of developing them. After all, the development of technology stems from the development of the possessed or acquired know-how.

In respect of traditional weaving, the weavers must be carried along with the efforts to modernize the industry. They should be educated on the shortcomings of the traditional techniques to be able to appreciate the need for modernizing them. In particular, they ought to be more informed of the values of their industry to national development. Once they are convinced of the need to innovate, a start could be made along the line of what some writers have described as "appropriate technology" i.e. technology which can be handled locally, be it an improved antiquated or adapted modern one. In this regard, the incessant use of the hands and legs on the traditional loom could be improved upon, for example, through an appropriate simple mechanical device which could reduce labour and enhance productivity.

It may appear rather illusory to create a gap between traditional and modern technology. Thus the traditional techniques of the hand-loom weaving should not be completely abandoned. Rather some good aspects of them should be retained and improved upon along the line of new technological ideas. Such new ideas could come through meaningful scientific and technical pursuits at home and technical information from technologically advanced nations. After all, countries do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in a competitive environment where the need to keep up with trends is the order of the day. Japan through such interactions has been able to 'sniff out' technology from the West which she successfully adapted to her local environment. Therefore as it has been the case in Japan and other advanced countries where the development of technology reflects environmental conditions, the cultural milieu of the traditional weaving and its practitioners should be generally considered. As a matter of fact, any scientific invention has always got a history of the dialectical relationship between the society of its origin and the environment for which it was created. Gana (1983: 6) apparently buttressed this point when he noted that "there is something British, German, French or Japanese in the products originating from the borders of these distinct geo-political entities, notwithstanding the universality of science whose application resulted in the specific technologies." Put succinctly, technology that does not originate from within the socio-cultural environment of a people

can hardly be useful in dealing with their peculiar problems. In modernizing the indigenous weaving, therefore, there is a need to look into our past in order to have a link between the modern and traditional technology.

Nigeria has an abundance of one of the essential components of a technological process, namely human resources. The issue of financing technological development is, however, important in any quest for technological acquisition and/or adaptation. To put the human resources at work, the Nigerian Universities, Research Institutes and Polytechnics must be adequately funded. Both the government and private sector must be involved in the funding of the technological process. Appropriate departments of our institutions could then embark on research studies in traditional weaving with the goal of identifying areas of problem and possible remedies. Furthermore, since acquisition of know-how often comes from the study of relevant process, the educational system must be deliberately and closely fitted to technological pursuits. Therefore through the medium of relevant education, the skill to choose, copy, analyse, adapt and rename processes could be developed for the modernization of the techniques of traditional weaving.⁽⁴⁾

A textbook on technology is not effective without the will, opportunity, skill and organization to use it. In this case, the traditional weavers must be motivated and re-organized. Actually, the general poor condition of the weavers must be fully taken into account by offering them some forms of assistance both in cash and in kind in order to motivate them towards acquiring new skills in the industry. O'Hear (1985) underscores this point when she observes that a craftsman is unlikely to embark on any large scale expenditure, say for a new item of equipment or to forego present or expected profit while retraining, unless he is first and fully convinced of the reward and worth-while nature of the innovation in question. For the purpose of modernization the present weaving units should be organized into large centres of instruction and training in new operational skills in textile technology. Through these processes, it is possible to make a good start in modernizing traditional weaving in Ilorin in particular and Nigeria in general.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussions have given us an idea of the values of indigenous crafts and the role which they can play in the development of technology. The value of cloth is particularly highlighted in order to justify the need to modernize the traditional weaving craft. As a reflection of the general pathetic situation of the local crafts, the paper has brought into a bold relief the poor condition of the Ilorin indigenous weaving industry as manifest in its present organizational structure. But at a time when Nigeria is becoming more concerned with the question of technology and development, it will be appropriate to explore the possibilities of modernizing traditional crafts instead of abandoning them.

In respect of traditional weaving, we have seen the avenues which are open to the modernization of the craft. The weavers must be motivated through a pragmatic policy of incentives for them. There is also the need for small scale technological im-

provements in the industry which should be within the control of the weavers. For organizational improvements, the merging together of the present numerous weaving units should be considered. This will make for a manageable number of units which may serve as training centres for the weavers in new operational skills. In this way, it may be possible to provide a good basis for the development of indigenous textile technology.

NOTES

- (1) Ilorin is the capital of Kwara State, Nigeria. It is one of the largest areas of textile production in the country. A series of interviews were held in this area between January 1987 and May 1988.
- (2) A loom is locally called *ofi*. The cloth woven on it is, therefore, called *aso ofi* i.e. cloth from the loom.
- (3) The width of cloth is determined by the structure of the loom.
- (4) The Federal Government of Nigeria has embarked on a system of education which has bias for technical training and is referred to as the 6-3-3-4 system of education.

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