

TRADITIONAL VOCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL STABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Traditional vocation, in the strict sense of this paper, refers to professional activities, which are built on, or developed out of the existing traditional arts and crafts in Nigeria, That is, the discussions in this paper are centred round the development/encouragement of viable traditional art forms which will not only develop the mental and physical capabilities of youths but will go a long way in checking unemployment, hooliganism/thuggery and other social vices among our teeming youths. This paper, therefore, focuses on traditional cloth weaving of the Ebira popularly known as "Okene Cloth". In the paper, efforts are made to highlight the developmental stages of Okene cloth weaving, the teaching/learning process of the art over time, the need to give modern training to youths for self employment since not up to a half of our youths today are able to have post secondary school education due to many factors. The paper also addresses the need to establish vocational centres or cottage industries, which will reduce the current high rate of redundancy, political thuggery/hooliganism, and all other social vices, which many youths now engage in. The paper, in its conclusion, recommends various ways through which the above objectives could be achieved. It is recommended, for instance, that traditional cloth weaving should be taught in our schools up to tertiary level along with other art forms. The paper also recommends, among others, that efforts should be made to improve the cloth weaving technology so as to increase the aesthetic quality of hand-woven cloth; that 'Trade Centres such as "Okene School of Weaving"¹. "Akwete Weaving School" be established by State Governments and meaningful individuals.

Cloth Weaving in Ebiraland:

Cloth weaving was in existence'in Ebiraland before the 13 century A. D. The fibre of a shrub (Evaze) was the first known material used by the Ebira to weave cloth. However, around the 13th century A. D., locally grown cotton, mainly of two types - purely white cotton and a brown variation, displaced the use of Evaze as fibre for cloth weaving. Other colours like blue; black and red were obtained by dyeing the hand-spun white yam. By the 1930's, the importation of multi-coloured machine spun yarns from England to Ebiraland began. The imported yarns increased the variety of colours that could appear on woven cloths. At this stage both locally hand spun and imported yarns were combined in a weave. Gradually, the use of imported yarns became widespread and the use of hand spun yarns was drastically de-emphasized. And by 1931. silk yarn found its way into Ebira market. Cloth weavers took the advantage of the fine multi-coloured imported yarns both the cotton and silk types, exploring their creativity in colour arrangement. By 1951, the availability of multi-coloured yarns, and the ability of cloth weavers to manipulate the yarns perfectly, encouraged cloth weavers to explore possibilities of creating more complex patterns into the woven cloths.

By 1960. cloth being woven in nice patterns abounds in Okene Central Market, and traders from outside Ebiraland called the cloths "modern Okene cloth" or simply "Okene cloth". Thereafter, various fascinating patterns of colour and figurative/non-figurative motifs were effected on hand woven cloth.

Apprenticeship System:

The apprenticeship in cloth weaving in Ebiraland was once solely a family responsibility. That is, up to 1960, mothers were teachers of their daughters on cloth weaving. There were instances, though, where expert weavers taught their neighbours particularly whenever new patterns were created. However, around 1964, teaching of cloth weaving was introduced in a primary school at Okene as one of the Domestic Science subjects. Girls in primary four to seven classes then were to benefit form the teaching of cloth weaving during such domestic lessons.

In the 1960's, a private businessman - Alhaji Yusuf Utohu, established a weaving centre - "Okene Weaving Centre". Some expert cloth weavers were employed at the centre on full

time weaving, and to teach other weaver-employees on pattern creation. At the Centre, both the traditional vertical loom and floor loom were used, the latter being a new innovation in cloth weaving in Ebiraland. In the early 1970's another private weaving centre - "Ododo Weaving Centre", was established at Ogaminana by a Rev. Father. Among the objectives of the Centre were to encourage primary school leavers (girls) who had no opportunity to pursue further academic studies to improve themselves on modern cloth weaving? It was the hope of the Centre that such girls would eventually become full-time expert cloth weavers. These two private weaving Centres faced some financial problems at one time or the other, and the "Okene Weaving Centre" has since closed down, while the "Ododo Weaving Centre" operates on a skeletal basis.

In 1972. the Ebara Education Authority followed the examples of the Domestic Sciences Centre of Okene and the two private weaving Centres by sending some female teachers to a State established Home Economic Centre (an extension of the State Ministry of Agriculture/National Resources) at Ageva (Okene Local government Area) to receive more training in Domestic Science, cloth weaving inclusive. As student - teachers continued to graduate from the Centre. the education authority embarked on establishing domestic Centre at primary schools in different parts of Ebiraland. By 1990, about thirteen (13) such Centres were established. The trained teachers henceforth assumed the responsibility of teaching the female pupils cloth weaving techniques, particularly on modern and complex pattern making on cloth. Similar to the fate of the two private weaving centres mentioned earlier, the Domestic Centres at various primary schools were not adequately financed. Materials required for cloth weaving, particularly yarns, were not supplied by the School Management Board. This resulted into teaching only the theoretical aspect of cloth weaving, with at most one loom per Centre for demonstration purpose. This consequently led to lack of interest on both teachers and pupils, making the traditional apprenticeship system the main mode of imparting cloth-weaving knowledge.

In the late 1980s, a new approach to cloth weaving was introduced. This is cloth weaving on horizontal loom, first practised by a Yoruba woman cloth weaver resident at Ihima (Okehi Local Government Area). Within a short period of time, young girls from different parts of Ebiraland had mastered the new weaving technique. The result of this development is that while middle-aged women, engage in cloth weaving on vertical loom, young girls carry out the art on horizontal loom. These two categories of cloth weavers operate on individual -basis. Weaving organizations, which ought to be responsible for negotiating commissions, inventing new designs, and possibly training members of the community on more advanced weaving, are not in place. The only existing Centre - "Ododo Weaving Centre" at Ogaminana only has few young weavers on part-time employment. Most of the girls at the Centre are primary school and junior secondary 1-111 pupils who only go to the Centre after closing from school.

Recommendations:

From the foregoing, it is clear that Okene cloth, and in fact, most Nigerian handwoven cloths, are not well practised and patronised as much as the machine printed cloths. This results from low level of awareness of the aesthetic qualities and functional values of handwoven cloths by Nigerians. In addition to this, is the lukewarm attitude of the relevant agencies responsible for the promotion of the art. The situation leads to less attention being paid to the profession and the appreciation of the cloth. In schools where art appreciation is being taught, concentration tends to be given to sculpture painting, architecture and ceramics.

To have a fully trained mind artistically, all aspects of art must be taught, with particular attention to appreciation of art works. Traditional cloth weaving generally, and Okene cloth in particular, could be encouraged through many possible means in order to explore all potentialities for the purpose of creating employment opportunities for our youths, and also for

boosting the traditional industry in Nigeria. This noble objective can be achieved by educating Nigerians on the aesthetics and functions of hand woven cloths through constant exhibitions of the cloth in museums, art galleries and at Trade Fares.

The Federal Ministry of Education could make Art Appreciation and Art History a compulsory subject in most Nigerian schools. This would help to equip students well enough to appreciate traditional art works. The appreciation of the aesthetics could be taught in the following order:

1. At Primary School Level, the pupils are acquainted with hand woven cloths.
2. Students at Secondary School level are directed to realize colour combination of various hand woven cloths. The students are also exposed to the different "types of weaving materials that are employed in the production of the cloth.
3. The aesthetics and functions of hand woven cloths are taught to students of institutions of higher learning. That is, the characteristics of hand woven cloths are exposed to the student during the Art History lessons. These include materials employed, technique/style of productions, textures and patterns created in the cloths, and the functions of the cloths.

Alternatively, Okene cloth weaving or traditional cloth weaving in Nigeria generally and the appreciation of it, could be more encouraged in institutions of higher learning where students are mature enough to handle the complexity of the loom and the fineness of yarns used.

In addition, better devices could be utilized to increase the quality of hand woven cloth aesthetically. An example of this is the establishment of Trade Centres like "Okene School of Weaving", "Aso-Oke Weaving School". The Federal or State government could embark on this, while individual bodies or State Agencies could send people to the established Centres or Schools for training. Graduates of the Centres or Schools would eventually teach both the practical and theoretical aspects of cloth weaving in Schools and Colleges. Besides, some of the graduates could easily establish their weaving centres purely for commercial production. More, the Federal government could organize traditional cloth weaving into recognized industries whereby both the staffing and production activities are controlled, thus encouraging some individual entrepreneurs to establish similar industries in the country. This will reduce unemployment rate in the country drastically and exportation of goods from Nigeria to overseas countries would definitely increase.

Further, there is the need to modernize the technology of Okene cloth weaving. The loom, for instance could be made wider to avoid joining stripes together to achieve one complete woven piece (a woman' wrapper is made of two or three stripes sewn together). This would further enhance the aesthetics of the cloth since the patterns woven into it, for instance, would not be broken or part of it being cut off in the process of joining the stripes together.

CONCLUSION

Okene cloth weaving has been a prominent art in Ebiraland. Many Nigerians use the cloths. From the findings of a study carried out some times ago, the popularity of Okene cloth is not limited within Nigeria, but extends to outside countries. For instance, the cloth is sold in overseas countries like U.S.A., Britain and Western Germany. Within Nigeria, the cloth features prominently in many major markets, textile stores and Hotels. *Lamb a Holmes (1980)* note that there are few majors markets in Nigeria which do not have cloths from Okene on sale. The popularity and viability of the cloth is also stressed by Lamb and Holmes (*Ibid*), stating that... next to Akwete, the town of Okene is the best centre of the women's vertical loom weaving in Nigeria. This popularity of Okene cloth both within Nigeria and in some overseas countries is the result of the multi-functional values of the cloth. Murnane (1976) remarks, for instance, that throughout Nigeria, cloth fashioned from Okene cloth are prestigious and in high demand. Presently women and young ladies are major dominant artists in cloth weaving profession in

Ebiraland, which is purely as a result of division of profession. That means participation of men in cloth weaving profession is not against the tradition of Ebira culture, rather it would imply that women cloth weavers would work harder in order to withstand men's competition, 'Such competition would not only increase the rate of production of the cloth, but more incentive and creativity would build stronger in cloth weavers, subsequently developing the aesthetic qualities of Okene cloth. Besides, the teaching of the aesthetics of hand woven clothes in Nigeria, and of Okene cloth in particular would greatly increase the awareness of the public on the importance of the cloths. When the public is exposed to the aesthetic qualities, the functions, and the durability of the cloths, the taste for acquiring the cloths would compete favourable with the imported textile materials.

In conclusion, therefore. Okene cloth is one of the best hand woven cloths in Nigeria, and the continued existence of the production should be encouraged. The technology should be improved whereby Secondary School leavers, and even graduates of Polytechnics and Colleges of Technology could go into self-employment venture in cloth weaving. Through such development, both socio-political and economic stability of Nigeria is ensured, A Hungry person is an angry individual. If most employable citizens in Nigeria are gainfully engaged, social development of the people will be meaningful and political thuggery/hooliganism by both youths and adults will reduce to the barest minimum. By that, the Government of the day will have conducted environment to plan and execute progressive projects for the generality of the country. The development of traditional vocations such as cloth weaving could bring all these to reality,

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