

Research Article

Hand Woven Cloths among Ebirawomen of Central Nigeria in the Past and Present

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Article History

Received: 04.02.2019

Accepted: 11.05.2019

Published: 01.08.2019

Journal homepage:

<https://www.easpublisher.com/sjh>

Quick Response Code



Abstract: Historically, Ebira women have contributed greatly to social, economic and political growth of their society; these can be dramatized in Ebira hand weaving industry. This paper is concerned with hand-woven cloths among the Ebira people popularly called Okene cloths in Nigeria. In this regard, I examine the environment having influence on the cloths and location of Ebira people in Kogi state. In the course of discussion I reflected on the production technology and development as well as organization of the weaving among the Ebira people. I then proceeded, to study the functions alongside with decoration of hand-woven cloths, and the change in the hand-woven cloths.

Keywords: Ebira women, weaving industry, Okene cloths

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Introduction

Like in many other parts of the world, women occupy a significant position in Nigeria. Women represent a significant portion of the population and play vital functions which contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities some functions of women in local communities include child bearing, domestic labour, trading, wage labour, employment and agriculture. Furthermore, the women are also active in indigenous crafts and industries as well other duties in formal and informal sectors of their various communities. The contributions of women which have been subjected to changes because of such factors as cultural variables, changing development policies and trends, among others. Among the Ebira of north central Nigeria women have been active in food crop production, animal husbandry, trade, crafts and industries (such as basket weaving, pottery making etc.).

In this paper, an attempt is made to examine the development and functions of Ebira women in the art of hand-woven cloth in Kogi state, Nigeria. Generally cloth weaving is one activity or indigenous industry which has been largely neglected by scholars in studies of local crafts and technology. Overtime, attention has

concentrated on the functions and significance of such crafts as pottery, blacksmithing, leather works and woodworks.

The Handwoven cloth in Ebiraland: Influence of the Environment

Man is a historical being. The study of the past revolves around him and what he creates for himself. His material well-being is substantially determined by his environmental features. This explains why historical geography and physical environment are important factors in facilitating the understanding of socio-economic life (Okene: 1995). Geography has been an important variable in shaping the fortunes of a community. In other words geography influences the course of people's activities in their various environments. Geography has a powerful influence on the people dress, on the food people eat and on the occupation of the people (Okene: 1995). Each community related in its own way to its surrounding. The physical environment of the Ebira people has contributed in determining not only their settlement patterns, but also their production system, social and cultural settings as well as security arrangement. Kogi central is surrounded by various hill tops, when the Ebira finally settled in their present abode from their

long historical sojourn dating from the late 17th century; they lived on hill tops and organized themselves in various clan and lineages. The unique geographical features were complimented by the conducive climate and vegetation which favored the practice of craft such as hand-woven cloth apart from agriculture the Ebira people engaged in various craft like basket weaving, pottery, calabash carving and cloth weaving (Sani: 1994).

At every time when it was clear that the finished cloth weaving is in high demand especially in urban centers, as wears for occasions; people are willing to shift occasionally from farm activities to hand-woven cloths. This provided alternative sources of income used for various important purposes (Ododo: 2014). One feature of the hand woven cloth worth mentioning is the fact that most people who participated in the aspect of cloth weaving lacked formal education. They were rural peasants who manipulated their environment in this manner to augment their incomes (Ahmadu: 2004).

Location of Ebira People in Kogi state

Ebiraland lies approximately between 6^o and 8^o north of latitude and between 6^o and 10^o east longitude. Situated within a hilly sketch of land south west of the Niger-Benue confluence area, it shares common boundaries with the Yoruba speaking people of Owe, Akoko, Ijumu, and Aworro to the west and north-west, the Ogori, Ososo and other Akoko-Edo people to the south and South-west, the Hausa, Nupe and Ebira group at Lokoja to the North and River Niger to the East. Just across the River live the Igala and BassaNge. Ebiraland covers an approximate area 2,977 SP. The Ebira are found predominantly in Kogi State, some of them are found in Nasarawa and Edo state as well as Federal Capital Territory. The word Ebira refers to the people themselves their language and their geo-political location (Ozigi, 2004). They are known to be a very extrovert and hardworking people (Okene, 1995). Traditionally they are cloth-weavers and farmers. These people are located in Kogistate, central senatorial district.

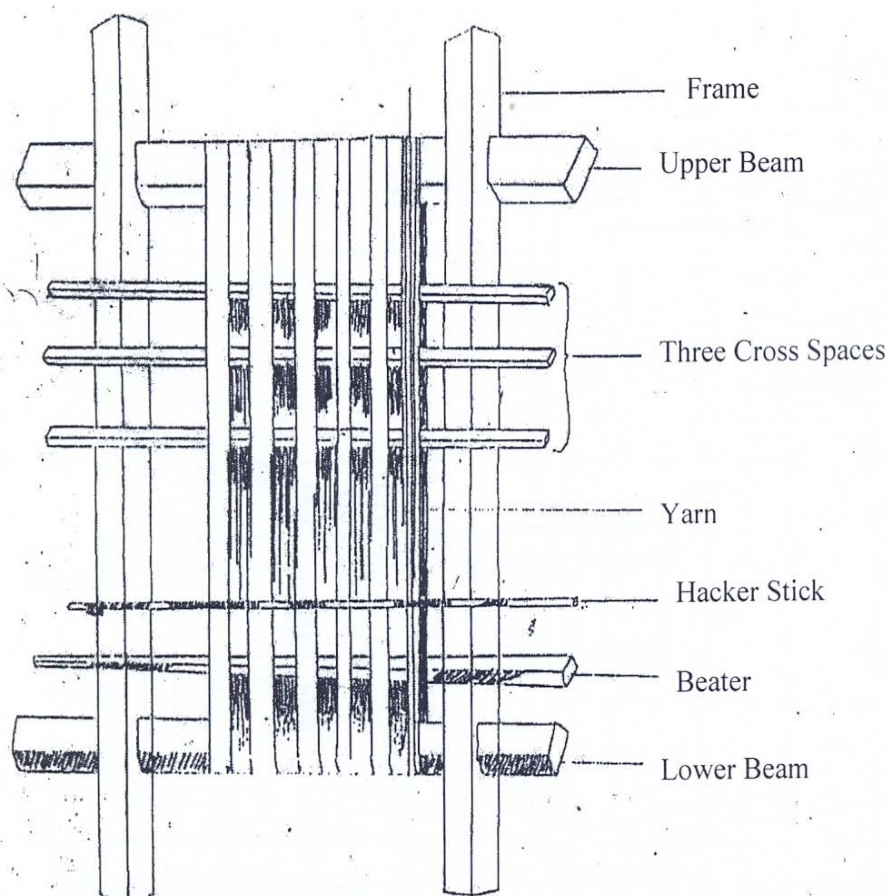
The production technology and development

In the early nineteenth century, the preliminary stage of hand-woven technology in Ebiraland involved the process of ginning. Ruffling 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. Which are now available, as a matter of fact, from the second half of the twentieth century. The common practice for the Ebira weavers was to buy the machine-spun yarns for their weaving (Sani, 1994). 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 (Yakubu, 2005). In Ebiraland two materials are commonly used today in starching, namely *eko* which is prepared from maize and *eba* which is prepared from cassava. However, most hand-wovers 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. The hand-spun threads were mainly three different colours. These are *owu-ovu*, *owu-oji* and *owu-ododo* (white, black and brown threads respectively), (Adinoyi-Ojo, 1996). The black and brown threads were dyed locally by women. With the influx of machine spun threads as from the early 20th century, hand-woven cloths have been in assorted colours and patterns. The Ebira women have been weaving the hand-woven cloth for centuries; these can be found in most Ebira-speaking local government such as Okene, Okehi, Adave and Ajaokuta etc. The rewinding of threads is traditionally called *Ohu*, and then local name for the Okene cloth is Ita-inochi (Saliu, 2010). This woven cloth has been traded in Okene main market from time immemorial, and people travel from far and wide to purchase the beautiful cloth, which varies from a simple weave to more sophisticated patterns. A variety of threads is used to weave the cloth which gives rise to the different names for the cloth woven. For instance the name "*Ache Ohu*" is derived from *Ohu* thread, *Ache* silk derived from silk thread.

Organization of the Ebira weaving

The practice of these craft are done by the women under shed, veranda or front of the house, where the loom is set up, the loom called "*Oguntoro*" which was commonly seen in every home of most Ebira women in Kogi central. There are two main types of manual looms, the vertical and horizontal loom. The weaving trade is still fraught with challenges but has become easier due to the availability of a wide variety of threads. The looms used are predominantly still very traditional and labour intensive. The tools used for weaving consist of the loom that is a wooden instrument made up of seven (7) sticks each with a different purpose. Each stick has its own specific Ebira name that clarifies its use. Some of the names and functions are as follows; the "*Oholor*" is used to divide the thread whilst the weaving takes place. The "*Ohanse*" determines the pattern and design of the cloth to weave. "*Okaha*" is used to hit the fabric whilst weaving which gives it texture required. There is the "*Ochaha*" which separates the back from the front of the fabric. "*Otahand Ogb*" are the names of tools used for measuring the fabric. The "*Korofo*" is used to pass the thread before putting it on the loom and the "*Ipechi*" is used to put the thread onto loom. All these tools work in harmony to create the loom that is used to weave the Okene cloth.



Vertical loom in Ebira land Kogi State, Nigeria

The hand-woven cloth reflected in all aspects of the industry. For instance, the system of apprenticeship in the industry has no clear arrangement. A young girl may start as an apprentice 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 any case the industry lacks a specific training programme. Similarly, those who are in training are usually trained by a master weaver who is independent of other master weavers within the same communities. However, many mothers preferred to teach their young daughters the art of hand-woven cloths rather than allowing them to go through an apprenticeship outside, because they learn better under their mother.

Due to the traditional methods used it can take up to three weeks to produce five yards of fabric, men need about five lengths of the fabric strips for an outfit whilst women need around four lengths for theirs (Abdullah, 2008).

The first things a weaver needs to master is how to roll the thread on the *Ipechi*, once the thread has been rolled, it is then put on the loom using the *Ohanse* in between to ensure that the back and the front is separated before the weaving starts. Once the thread has been appropriately set up, the weaving commences. The women then start to use their two hands to move the loom up and down using the relevant tools. Cloth weaving among the Ebira have long history, art is an ancient tradition along which the people migrated through Idah to their present places. The art has been practiced mainly by women who initially hand spin the thread before weaving it on vertical loom. Among the Ebira, cloths woven with hand spun threads were mainly of three different colours. These are owu-ovu, owu-oji and ododo (white, black and brown threads respectively). The black and brown threads were dyed locally by women. With the influx of machine spun threads as from the early 20th century, hand-woven cloths have been in assorted colours and patterns.



The warping process on the vertical loom (rolling thread on the loom) in Kogi Central

Form of cloth decoration

The general cloth type of Ebira in the past was calico known as *ikitipaor uba*. The only remarkable patterns made on these early cloths were based on colour stripes which were achieved through the warp and weft yarn arrangement. In the modern time, there are variations of the cloths, cloth weaving among the Ebira is done by women. Its decoration is done on vertical looms. However, the Ebira also weave decorated cloths on horizontal looms, but cloth woven on this loom is relatively narrower than those on horizontal loom.

Decorations effected on woven cloths in all cases are either through colour arrangement both horizontally and

vertically, or through incorporation of planned patterns. Further, the cloths-types are in most cases identified by colour combination of the thread used, the motifs used or by historical events.

Motifs used in the decoration of handwoven cloths of the Ebira commonly drawn from representational objects like bird, animal, house-hold items such as stool, comb, and plant. Geometric motif is peculiar to decorated cloth of the Ebira, also in many cases, once a motif is woven into decorative pattern and found to be good, other cloth weavers would adopt the pattern and becomes additional design type in the cloth weaving of the people.



Decoration or design on hand-woven cloths



Decoration or design on the hand woven-cloths in Ebira land.

Functions of Hand-woven Cloth among the Ebira people

The hand-woven cloths of the ebira have different functions with some symbolic meanings, a single panel of the cloth may be used as *ubajo* (a piece of cloth used by Ebira mothers to strap their babies to their back) *ebobo* (head ties) *araka* (cloth rolled into a bun and placed on the head for loads to be set on) in the contemporary period, a single panel of cloth may even be worked into a wooden chair to serve as the backrest as well as the seat. Two or more panels joined together may be used as wrappers by both sexes for different ceremonies such wrappers may also be used as a cover cloth for protection against cold or mosquitoes.

I. Patterns and design on the cloths

The patterns and design made on hand-woven cloths are to enhance the aesthetic appeals of the cloths, however, some of the wording designs on cloths are proverbial sayings which portray certain aspects of the people's philosophy of life. Some of these are "*Isuwameroduwavame*" meaning (think twice before doing anything), "*Enesiha, enyiozaanasihainehe*" meaning (who is free, nobody is free in this world) and also the "*okekereku*" meaning (crown motif) of the Ebira cloth signifies wealth.

II. Ritual cloths by priest

The Ebira white "*uba*" cloth was used in olden days by the priest and his assistants to worship *ori* (god of fertility and protection), observed by only Ihima people and Eganyi people of Okehi and Ajaokuta Local Government Area of Kogi State respectively (Salami,

2011). Nowadays, machine-woven white cloth is used for purpose. As in the case of the use of *uba* for *ori* worship many masquerades in Ebira land are costumed in machine-produced cloths. It is only aged masquerades that have their costumes built with traditional hand-woven cloths like *itaokueta* and *opete* as shrouds for elderly people have changed to machine-produced cloth mostly the white type. *Itaokueta* and *opete* are used as shrouds for non-Muslim and non-Christian Ebira.

III. Burial cloths

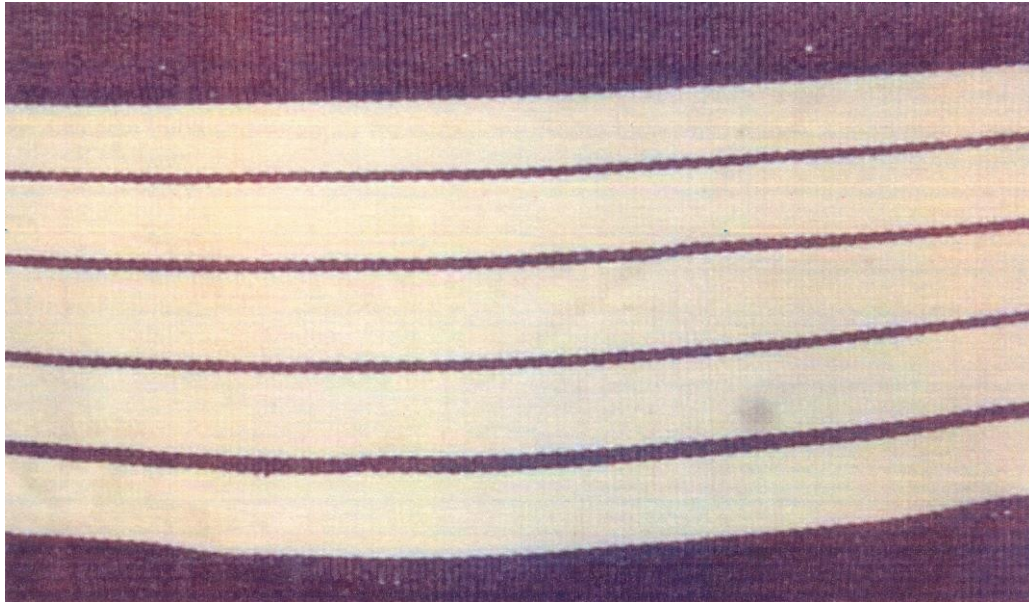
Another function of hand-woven cloth among the Ebira is that, it is used for burial of death people. The white cloth (*Uba*) was used as shroud for the people generally, while the black type was used as shroud for old people burial. Also *uba* was one of the common cloths from hand-woven by Ebira women gotten from hand loom. It served a number of social as well as religious functions in the society. Women use it mainly as wrapper to be worn to various places ranging from the market to religious or festive occasions (Yakubu: 2005). However, with the coming of Islamic religion to the people, the use of black cloth as shroud has since stopped, while the traditional white cloth (*Uba*) has been displaced by white machine woven cloth.

IV. Cloths for Masquerade Costumes

The masquerade costumes are made with handwoven cloth which is black, red or white in colour, depending on the age and particular masquerade concerned. An example is *Ekuboba* (masquerade) who uses mixtures of

white and black coloured cloth (Okene, 1995). The *Ekuohais* tall masquerade similar to the Bida type in Niger state. Two other masquerades-*Owuna* and *Oganje* use other colour- types of costume. Also elderly masquerades can use *itaokueta* and *opete* for costumes, because the original *itaokueta* and *opete* were thick and

heavy, but modernized types are light which is resultant effect of the machine-spun thread being used. There are also masquerades with belief that once they use these cloths as costume they will have an ancestral spirit in them (Sani: 1994).



Cloths use for masquerades costumes

V. Ritual cloths

In Ebiraland, in the olden day's women hand-woven cloths are used for traditional ritual within the society or communities. These cloths may be used in worship, to perform rites, sacrifices or as an object of prayer. Sometime in the villages and communities medicine men or cultist pray on the cloth or add substance and give the cloth to their patients or followers for protection against evil spirits. Also women who are having problems with child conception may be given specially woven cloth to wear on their bellies after prayers or incantation have been said over them (Sani: 1994).

VI. Cloths for general use

This are produced for everyday use. They are made with hand spun thread, as lighter cloth used as casual wrappers to be worn to markets, baby ties, work and play cloths and these cloth serves social and religious function in communities. The uses of handwoven cloth by the Ebira have been on a large scale both within and outside Ebira land. Some old restrictions are placed on the uses of certain handwoven cloths type are relaxed. The restriction is attributed to changes in the weaving procedure which have made such ceremonial cloths like *itaokueta* and *opete* to be fashioned as found among young men and women who use them casual dresses. The original types *itaokueta* and *opete* were used as shrouds for elderly people.



Cloths for general use by both male and female

Changes in the hand-woven cloths

Today, a major change with new innovations in terms of style, colour of cloths and more technical pattern of design in them, all these can be seen in Ebiraokene cloths. These are as a result of various loom types introduced into Ebiraland. Like back then, it was loom made from palm canal trees was then use as loom, today it has been replace with carpenter made loom, which is wooden loom. The wooden loom are been used in Okene, Okehi, Adavi and Ajaokuta as well as Ogorimagogo Local Government Area of Kogi state. Due to the influence of some women who trade in cloths with other states like Edo, Benue, Nasarawa, kaduna, Kano, Ondo, Oyo and even Lagos state. Around the early 1980s, the use of horizontal loom Ebira cloth weavers was noticed. Before this time, the traditional vertical loom, operated by women cloth weavers, had been the only loom in Ebira. In addition, the influence of the Yoruba *asookeon* Ebira cloth weaving extended to the use of /or adoption of Yoruba horizontal loom cloth weaving.

Conclusion

The Ebira hand-weaving clothes among Kogi central possesses an aesthetics quality in production and also be of benefit on the future learning and documentation potentials in these area. This was necessary towards addressing the need to adapt cultural sensitive and identifying the adequacy in weaving procedures in Ebiraland by appreciating not only its aesthetic qualities but its economic and empowerment capabilities.

Hand woven-cloths is unique and beautiful from early weavers generations among the Ebira people was a way to achieve high creative value and the ability to transfer

a culture of cloth making to younger generation as well as safeguard and keep a culture in custody the people's traditions from foreign influence. The identification and documentation of any historical process of development should be seen as a process of enculturation of the younger generation to not only to cherished the cultural essence of clothing culture and tradition of the people but also view it as a way of economically empowering the people within the society especially women. Thus, the need to use the clothing culture as the base to enculturate the old and present generation of society should not be seen as condescension of the ingenious mode of clothing culture of the society but as a way of internalizing and safeguarding the uniqueness in the people's way of life which could be done through songs, dances, foods, festivals, folklore and performance drama capturing the tides and times of the historic development of the society.

There weresome changes and continuity among the Ebira hand-woven cloths like back then, in the past the vertical loom was made from palm canal trees was been use as loom today (innovation of style) it was been replace with carpenter made loom, which is wooden loom. The wooden loom are found in Okene, Okehi, Adavi, and Ajaokuta as well as Ogorimagogo Local Government Area Kogi state. Also there were social change incorporated with modern technology, the traditional hand-woven textiles of Ebira is said to have rapidly changing in terms of designs, motifs, yarns and processes. We also notice that, in the past the original masquerade costumes clothes is thick and heavy, but modernized types are very light resultant effect of the machine-spun thread being used today. There is local consumption among the people drawn their level of

appreciation of the clothing culture as well as the traditional disposition of the people towards the usage and wearing of the weaved clothes as a mark of uniquely differentiating and distinguishing her people from other ethnic nationalities. Another change noticed in hand woven cloth of the Ebira is more technical than pattern designing. Also from early 1900 to late 1980s the Ebira's had been using the vertical loom, not until 1990s that the horizontal loom came to Ebiraland as a result of the influence of Yoruba *asooke* on Ebira cloth weaving extended to the use of /or adoption of Yoruba horizontal loom cloth weaving. The source of this foreign influence from South West (Yoruba's) was first trace to Ihima district in Okehi Local Government Area of Kogi state before it spread to other Local Government in Ebiraland. All these, were the changes that were seen in Ebira hand-woven clothes.

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