

ITA - INOCHI (WOVEN CLOTHES) IN THE TRADITION OF THE EBIRA IN OKENE, KOGI STATE

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Abstract

Dress Code is part of the ways of life defining the identity of a group of people. Human race in all ages always adapt to the environment where they found themselves. This adaptation overtime becomes the culture and tradition of the people. In this instance, Ebira people developed and perfected the art of cloth weaving which they called Ita-Inochi. The cloth woven found relevance in their royalty, social life and day to day existence. Modernity, Christianity and Islam have been unable to affect this practice. This paper looks at the processes involved in this traditional weaving amongst Ebira in Okene, the tools used and sources of raw materials for weaving. The paper examines the relevance of the woven cloth in the lifecycle of the people.

Introduction

The Ebira people are found in some states in central part of Nigeria. Okene has been the administrative centre of the Ebira speaking people of Kogi state, located not far from the Niger-Benue confluence. Since the creation of Kogi State, the Ebira Ta'o are found in four Local Government Areas namely, Adavi, Ajaokuta, Okehi and Okene, each with their administrative headquarters. Ebira Koto are found in Kogi, Kotonkarfe, Bassa Local Government Areas, and Abaji in Federal Capital Territory. Some elements of Ebira Koto are also found in Toto Local Government Area in Nasarawa State. The Ebira Etuno can be found in Igarra Town of Akoko Edo Local Government Area of Edo state.

The focus of this paper is on woven cloth in Okene and the environs covering Ajaokuta, and Okeihi Local Government Areas.

History of the Ebiras

Tradition of origin of the Ebiras as it is common with most ethnic groups in Nigeria is shrouded in myth due largely to lack of documentary evidence on the early history of the people. The origin was those compiled from Attah Omadiri and other Ebira clan heads through oral tradition. Most versions trace the migration from the Jukuns of the Kwararafa empire, north of the Benue River and in the present-day Taraba state. The Ebiras are part of the integral Kwararafa confederacy until about 1680 AD when the Ebiras along with the Idoma and Igala migrated out of Wukari over alleged chieftaincy dispute. The migrating party later split into various groups and settled at different locations between 1680 and 1750 AD. The Ebira Tao first sojourned with the Igalas at Idah but later crossed the river Niger and settled at Ebira

through a pantheon of deities called 'Ori' and spirits. The Ebira in their tradition, believe in the spirit world where dead ancestors live and are very active in the affairs of the living. Therefore, the ancestors are venerated in daily sacrifices to retain their benevolence. If they are neglected, they could be malevolent leading to unpleasant happenings such as strange sicknesses or disasters.

The Ebira have several annual festivals such as *Ech-Ane*, *Eche Ori* and *Ekuechi*. *Eche-Ane* is an annual festival of masquerade celebrated in rotation from one district to the other in Ebira land between April and June. In the past, it was only during this festival that betrothed girls were given out in marriage to their suitors. That is why the festival is called 'Eche-ane' (women festival), *Eche Ori* is new yam festival celebrated only in two districts of Ebira land namely Ihima and Eganyi. Sacrifices are made in the secret grove of *Ori* deity on the mountain to express gratitude for its protection and bountiful harvest. It is only after this festival that one is permitted traditionally to eat or sell the new yams

Woven Clothes in Okene (Ita-Inochi)

The twisting of fiber into thread and the first interlocking of yarn to form fabric were the beginning of one of the most significant land marks in man's history. Weaving has many faces; it is a craft, a medium for working directly with fundamental materials to create joyful mixtures of textures and colours, to feel the accomplishment of mastering the tools and learning the steps, and to explore the discipline of fine craftsmanship. Weaving is functional, intimately related to us through our daily use of fabrics. The major raw material for cloth weaving in Okene as in most parts of traditional Nigeria is cotton wool. The cotton plant belongs to the mallow family, related to hollyhock and hibiscus. It grows only in warm climates. The seeds are planted early in the spring. In about two months, the plants appear and grow into a low bushy plant about four feet in height. In a few weeks buds begin to form, and three weeks later blossoms appear. The flowers open, wither, and fall off, leaving the small pod known as the cotton bowl. When ripe, about two months later, the fluffy white bolls burst open and the cotton inside them is ready to be picked.

The Process of Weaving in Okene

Weaving is generally described as interlacing or intercepting of longitudinal and latitudinal warps fittingly. It as a process of interlacing a set of thread (warp and weft) at right angle to form a web or fabric.



The Vertical Loom

According to Oyelola "Weaving is orderly interlacing of fibres which are pressed together to make cloth. Weavers have the ability to vary the design of the cloth to be woven by combining more than one colour systematically to form a design or by varying the interlacing technique. As stated earlier in this paper, the primary and major raw material for weaving is cotton wool called *owu tutu* in Okene. The climatic condition in Okene is favourably conducive for its cultivation, thus materials for weaving are locally sourced. The matured cotton is burst open on its own accord from the bud which is plucked and gathered. When the cotton wool is harvested, it is spread out on a large mat to dry. The first process is to remove the seed from the fibre which is done by rolling a smooth round tool called *ovolivo*, a rod of about 16mm by 300mm long, over the cotton on a hard flat wood of about 150mm high and 300mm wide called *Oporipo* to remove the black seeds in the cotton wool. This process is called 'ginning'. The next task is to make the cotton wool fluffy and smooth so as to make the wool easy to use. This is done by flicking the string of a small bow called (*Okita*) against them until they look like cotton wool. This is called bowing. The blown cotton wool is made into threads with the aid of hands and a spinner called *oyibene*. This process is referred to as spinning.

A bunch of spin-thread is then rolled into a bundle of thread which goes into the dyeing process. Most often, some of the threads are dyed into different colours from substance gotten from herbs and other natural materials while

some are left as white. The dominant colours in Okene are: White – *Ovovoo*, Black – *Ojoji* and Red – *Ovivi*

Having gotten the desired thread, the weaver then passes the warp of thread over the upper and the lower beam separating and alternating them with the aid of heddles, shed sticks and the tender to a desired width. Thus, the weaving is achieved by passing a thread (weft) alternatively through the warp and fixed firmly with the use of the web stick. The heddle and the shed sticks are then manipulated to alternate the warp so that the shuttle carrying the weft can pass through the warp alternatively. The dyed threads are used to achieve whatever colour of cloth the weaver desires.

The Art of Weaving

In Okene, the traditional vertical loom often referred to as women loom is what is generally used. Findings comprehensively show that only the women folk engaged in cloth weaving. The trade was predominantly the occupation of house wives. It was a skill handed down through generations, and women prided themselves on not only being able to provide beautiful clothing for their families for important cultural occasions (weddings, funerals and festivals) but also being able to generate more income for the family. It was the main trade for most women in the family who wove in the comfort of their homes. It was customary in those days for a house wife to learn an occupation from her mother which she brought to her husband's house to practice as a supportive means of livelihood. Cloth weaving in the time past was not learnt through apprenticeship but young girls stayed at home and learnt by observing their mothers while boys followed their fathers to the farm.

The vertical loom or the upright single heddle loom which is predominant in the cloth weaving occupation in Okene is a creation of sheer ingenuity. The people explored the environment for local resources to construct the loom. Though the vertical loom appears simple, it is a very sophisticated equipment with the capacity of producing clothes with extraordinary complex patterns. The tools used for weaving consist of the loom which is a wooden instrument made up of about six to seven sticks each with a different purpose. Each stick has its own specific Epira name that clarifies its usage. Some of the names and functions are as follows: *Oholor* is used to divide the thread whilst the weaving takes place. The *Ohanse* determines the pattern and design of the cloth to be woven. The *Okaha* (*Apasa* in Yoruba) is used to hit the fabric whilst weaving which gives it the texture required. There is the *Ochaha* which separates the back from the front of the fabric. *Otah* and *Ogbo* are the names of the tools used for measuring the fabric. The *Korofa* is used to

pass the thread before putting it on the loom and the *Ipechi* is used to put the thread onto the loom. All these tools work in harmony to create the loom that is used to weave the Okene cloth.

The first thing a weaver needs to master in the art of weaving 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 front is separated before the weaving commences. Once the thread has been appropriately set up, the weaving commences. The weaver then starts to use her two hands to move the loom up and down using the applicable tools.

Products of Weaving

It was commonly believed in Okene that cloth weaving was generally for subsistence production with less emphasis on commercial purposes. But with time, economic reasons led to production of hand-woven clothes in commercial quantity. This led to a variety of threads used to weave the cloth which also gave rise to the different names for the woven clothes. For instance, the name *Ache Ohu* is derived from *ohu* thread, and *Ache*, silk is derived from silk thread.



Finished Woven Clothes

It is widely held that the major output products of woven cloth derivable in Okene are: *Urba*, *Ita-okuefa*, *Onnekute*, *Akoko* and *Odine*. All these hand-woven products are used for different purposes amongst the people. The qualities and the thickness of the products equally differ. Out of these, basic types can be varied with decorative motifs and addition of silk materials. It must be equally noted that thickness or otherwise of the product is highly dependent on the objective of the weaver.

The Woven Clothes as Materials for the Dress Code Amongst the Ebiras

The woven clothes (*Ita-Inochi*) are fundamentally materials for the various designs for the dress code of the people in the area of study. The woven clothes find expression in the dress code of the royalty, the children and adults. The fusion of other fabrics into the woven indigenous clothes by the people has made the use of the woven clothes continuously adaptable and acceptable to youthful generation amongst the people. Therefore, the woven clothes will continue to be relevant in the life cycle of the people. It should be noted that the Ebara people are not known for the use of outstanding accessories such as beads, bangles etc. According to Momoh Jimoh Isa, their religion (Islam) has taught them to dress moderately.

The Ebiras in their Dress Attires



Prospects

Women in Okene have been weaving cloth from one generation to another. This has served both domestic and commercial purposes for the people. It was a profession that all the women participated in actively. In the time past every household had one of such looms. During the course of this field work very few looms were still in use. Though few women practice the trade, young girls are involved in the art of weaving, which gives hope for the continuity of the trade.

Modernity and western education are one of the factors militating against weaving in Okene. Children are sent to school, and after graduating from elementary grades, they further their education to the university and there after secure white-collar jobs in the cities, which deprived them from living in their community. As a result, there is no time to learn any craft from their parents.

Due to the traditional methods of weaving, 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 about four lengths for theirs. The long time needed to produce the fabric has discouraged weavers especially when western made dresses could easily be procured. Added to this, most people because of westernization prefer modern and European dresses to local fabrics.

Conclusion

Woven clothes in Okene have ancient history of production and usage amongst the people. The popularity has extended beyond the boundary of Okene. The woven clothes have been articles of trade between Ebiras and their neighboring communities such as Kabba, Ikure-Akoko and Owo. Amongst these people, the clothes are referred to as 'Okene cloth'. Though modernization occasioned by western education and Christianity have imparted on this traditional cloth negatively, it is still in use and the woven cloth industry has survived. The clothes still find relevance in traditional marriages, traditional festivals especially during masquerading, and enthronement of traditional rulers to mention a few.

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List of Informants

NAME	AGE	OCCUPATION	DATE	PLACE
Yakubu Ejima (Mr)	52	Civil Servant	3/2/2022	Okene
Adisetu Isa (Mrs)	66	House Wife	3/2/2022	Okene
Momoh Jimoh Isa (Mr)	75	Retired Civil Servant	3/2/2022	Okene
Sadatu Omolori (Mrs)	57	House Wife	4/2/2022	Okene
Esther Diya (Mrs)	51	House Wife	4/2/2022	Okene
John Momoh (Mr)	47	Civil Servant	23/2/2022	Jos
Yakubu Yusuf (Mr)	45	Civil Servant	24/2/2022	Jos