

RETHINKING ON THE PRE-COLONIAL TRADITIONAL INDUSTRIES: A MEANS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE NIGERIAN ECONOMY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Nigeria was the original home of craftsmen who were partly responsible for the socio-economic development of its regional areas in the pre-colonial period. Although agriculture provided a bedrock of economic activities in Nigeria in the past as it still does today, any meaningful study of the pre-colonial domestic economy must therefore take into greater cognisance of the indigenous crafts which formed an important sector of that economy. Therefore, this paper examined some of the pre-colonial industries such as, the traditional fabrics, carving, leather works, metal works, pottery making and fibre crafts among others. The paper also argued that if these industries were revived, they will ultimately create various jobs opportunities among younger generations which will result to economic development. Lastly some recommendations were proffered.

The paper is illustrative of the cultural wealth of Nigeria in terms of craft development. It provided a descriptive picture of some of the major crafts that flourished in Nigeria during the pre-colonial period. It captured how people of Nigeria were able to develop an independent technology using local raw materials without any influence from outside. Thus, it is important to know that during the pre-British time there existed an independent industrial system whose technology, raw materials, labour (including skills), and markets were centred on the local resources and means, and that this industrial system was structurally linked to other productive

activities in the area and formed part of the local and international commercial network to which Nigeria belonged.

The paper attempts to show how this self-regenerating industrial system was systematically destroyed by the British through taxation, competition, legislation and structural changes in the economy. It is important to know that this destruction of the local industrial system was diametrically opposed to the aims of British colonialism which included tapping available raw materials, capturing and monopolising the local market for British goods, creating avenues for investing British capitals etc. We argue in this paper that this process, rather than constituting a process of development, was actually a systematic arrest of the development of the forces of production, and the creation of a dependent economy which increasingly become more dependent on the western capitalist economy. This formed the root of the present predicaments associated with the Nigerian industries.

The paper also examined some of the difficulties faced by the Nigerian traditional industries which was said to have resulted from many factors. Some of these factors include the effect of colonialism and neo-colonialism, government's reckless attitude towards the management of the local industries, lack of capital to develop an industry and change posed by foreign manufactured products among many others. The end of the paper is marked by some suggestions or recommendations with respect to the ways in which these industries will be revived to achieve economic sustainability and development.

Nature of the Nigerian Pre-Colonial Traditional Industries

The manifestation of the precolonial traditional industries in Nigeria reflects the essential features of a highly skilful and diversified society. The aim of this section therefore is to enhance understanding in the nature of some selected traditional industries that flourished in precolonial Nigeria. Some of these industries include the traditional fabrics, carving, leather works, metal work, pottery making and fibre crafts among others.

Traditional Fabrics

Precolonial Nigerian textiles was well known for their rich variety of designs, colours, materials and production techniques. For several years, Kano, Sokoto, Ibadan, Abeokuta, Okene, Oshogbo, Oyo, Bida, Ishan, Akwete, Fulani and Tiv areas have been important centres for textiles of all kinds and designs (Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 1989:12).

The fabrics of most of the cloths produced during the precolonial Nigeria were formed by the weaving process.; fibres used for weaving in Nigeria include

raffia, silk and cotton. Raffia cloth was common in the south in the past, but is now only used for mats and bags. Silk obtained from the cocoons is used for weaving the prestigious Yoruba cloth known as “sanya”. The basic woven fabric (cotton) was extracted from its seeds and processed before they can be used in weaving (Mangut, 2008).

The first step in processing is to remove the seeds from fibres by rolling a rod over the cotton balls. This is called “ginning”. The next step is the ‘bowing’ when cotton fibres are made fluffy by flicking the string of a small bone against them until they look like cotton wool. This is followed by the pulling of the fibre into thread; which is called ‘spinning’. After the spinning, the thread is wound into a skin and sold to weavers.

Weaving was practised throughout Nigeria. The men used a horizontal loom with handles and treadles for weaving narrow strip cloth while the women used vertical loom without treadles for weaving broader width of cloth. The horizontal loom is used by the Gwari, Hausa, Kanuri, Nupe and Yoruba people (Ogunrenmi, 1996:25). The width of the cloth produced by the weaver on this narrow loom varies from two to eleven inches. The Yoruba type is four to five inches wide and that of Nupe is five inches, but in the cloth of the Hausa it varies from two to six inches and that of the Kanuri from six to eleven inches wide. Bida cloth, Aso Oke, Luru cloth, Tukurdi cloth, were woven on the horizontal loom (Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 1989).

The textile produced was sometimes dyed before taking to the market. This was done by the dyest using indigenous dyes. The Hausa and Nupe in Northern States of Nigeria, particularly around Kano, Sokoto, Zaria and Bida as well as the Tiv Middle Belt region and Yoruba in Oshogbo, Oyo, Abeokuta, Ife, Ibadan and Ogbomosho are noted for their rich dyed fabrics.

Indigo was the popular traditional colouring substances used in dyeing materials among various groups in Nigeria. For instance, indigo dyed thread is still used by Hausa, Tiv and Yoruba weavers. The preparation of the ingredients for traditional indigo-dyeing and dyeing itself were long processes demanding much care and hardwork. Among the Yoruba all the processes connected with the design and the dyeing of *Adire* were carried out by women (Mangut, 2008 and Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 1989). Whereas in Kano men were the dyers and prepare their dye in 2.5 – 3 metre deep pits (Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 1989).

Also special indigo dyed clothes known as ‘*Ukara*’ were made in the Arochukwu area of Igboland for the *Ekpe* society which operates in Cross River and

Rivers areas. Some cloths bear designs of lizards, crocodiles and stylised human figures. Moreover, the Tiv of Middle Belt produced indigo-dyed cloths with geometric designed squares.

Wood carving is a craft that represents one of the most striking art forms in Nigeria. The Edo speaking people, Igbo, the Nupe and the Yoruba of Ogun, Oyo, Ondo and Kwara were particularly noted for their craftsmanship in carving. Generally, every cultural group has its own peculiar style of carving but the production techniques follow the same pattern. Four stages of production have been identified among the carvers of southern Nigeria. They are:

1. Carving of the design – which involves the cutting of the main shapes of the wood with a cutlass or an axe.
2. Division of the main shapes – eyes, ears, hands, mouth with the adze.
3. Smoothing – smoothing of the surface of the carving with the blade or a knife, or the rough leaves of the Epen tree.
4. Decoration – cutting the fine details of hair, dreads and facial marks with a knife (NNCU, 1989:17).

After the last stage, the wood was often covered with powdered cam-wood or coated with gum from a tree which would protect it against cracking or attack by termites. Sometimes items produced were painted with colours obtained from plants, animals or minerals e.g. roots, barks, animal droppings, rock and earth. Also in the Northern region, virtually in almost all the societies wood carvers were found who specialised in creating pestle and mortars, bee hives, chairs, load carriers, and spoons among others (Abubakar, 1982:105).

Leather Works

The leather workers in the pre-colonial Nigeria were also widespread. The tanners treated the leather using chemicals and dyes locally produced. In Nigeria, *acacia* and *gabagaba* plants were mixed with the ash in a water bowl and the skin was soaked in to enhance easy removal of the hair. The cobblers used the dyed hides and skins to make water skins, skin clothes, sandals, bags, poufs, shoes, shields, etc. Infact, the famous Morocco leather was found to have originated from the central Sudan, especially Sokoto, Kano and Zaria (Johnson 1967:159). The leather industry in the precolonial Nigeria was based on local resources, technology and skills and the industry was then sufficiently developed to support a lucrative export trade. The craft was widely distributed among many societies in Nigeria especially in Sokoto, Kano, Zaria, Naraguta (along the Jos-Bauchi road), Maiduguri and Oyo (Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 1989:21).

Metal Works

Nigeria has a long history of metal work stretching into antiquity. The earliest known iron working centre in Nigeria is traced to the Nok culture (500 B.C. – 200 A.D.). Subsequently evidence of iron working was found in numerous areas in Nigeria. For instance, archaeological evidence shows that iron working was widespread in Nigeria. Archaeological discovery in places like Samaru west in Zaria, Gongono area of Sokoto, Leija and Nwoffe in south western Nigeria, Taruga and Jos in central Nigeria as well as Olalgabi and Oyo in south western Nigeria provides a solid evidence of the existence of the early iron works in the precolonial Nigeria. In these places iron working was mainly achieved by mining iron from ironstone or lateritic outcrops which was smelted into pig iron (tama in Hausa) in locally made furnaces. The pig iron produced by the smelters were sold to the blacksmiths who finally processed it to hoes, cutlasses, axes, knives, war and hunting equipment or ornaments etc. (Bonat, 1988:7).

Also native copper was worked by using cold working or lost wax methods in the cold working system the crafts makers specialised in hammering to produce the desired object without the use of fire. On the other hand, the lost wax system was associated with the process of smelting the oven in a furnace. Early technologists discovered that they added other elements like tin and zink to make copper alloy for making better implements and sculptures. The precolonial Nigerian artistic use of copper were found in Benin, Ife, Ijebu Ode, Kano, Bida, etc. (Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 1989:23).

Traditional Ceramics

Traditionally, pottery in Nigeria was made locally in many places usually by women (especially in the southern Nigeria) engaged in full-time or part-time production. In some parts of the country, however, men were potters (for example in Northern Nigeria especially the area of Hausland) but they used different techniques to produce different kinds of pottery (Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 1989:27).

A pottery tradition in the pre-colonial period was practised in virtually all the regions of this country. This was possible because the raw material were found in most areas of the country. Although the method and tools for making pots vary from place to place, the basic steps were similar. The next step after clay preparation was forming the vessel's shape. Vessels were shaped from prepared clay which was placed on a patch of ground over the bottom of a broken old pot or a calabash usually powdered with ashes or dried sand to avoid sticking (Ndera 2006: 115). This was further heightened by beating the shape with a wooden object after which it was left to dry to a certain degree in the sun. Lips and rims were formed with a wet leaf.

Once a pot is shaped, the surface is carefully smoothed with a piece of calabash and with water which is again partially sun-dried before it's final polish with a smooth pebble before final drying and fining. Sometimes pots are decorated. The potters in Nigeria usually imprint simple geometric patterns on the pots. Patterns were obtained with simple, indigenous local tools and methods (Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 27). In some areas of southern Nigeria the pot was placed on a raffia mat and pressed from inside so as to create the mat's impression pattern on it. Also line dots etc. were imprinted with towing a dry maize cob, piece of carved wood, beads, seeds knotted string and a comb among others. Among the Igbo people, pots were sometimes decorated in a high relief. These raised decorations were obtained by laying strips of clay over the shaped pot and stuck with the fingers (Okpko, 2006:88). High relief bowls often with symbolic figures, were also found among Yoruba ceremonial vessels (Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, 1989:29). The tradition of pottery sculpture extends back to the Nok culture. The art of pottery and figurines featured prominently in the tradition of Yelwa, Ife, Kano, Sokoto, to mention a few.

A great number of excellent examples of Nigerian pottery can be seen at the National Museum in Lagos, Jos, and State Art Councils in Nigeria. The above industries developed by simple technology (simple in the sense that it had not been power-driven) were the foundation of material production in Nigeria.

Colonialism and the Local Industries in Nigeria

The preceding discussion has shown very clearly that in Nigeria, there was a self-regenerating industrial system which was linked to other sectors of the economy before the British conquest. The survival of this industrial system into a more advanced mode of production was completely out of accord with the object of imperialist dominance over the area. The British colonialists therefore, attacked these local industries through legislations banning the production of certain goods by the local craftsmen. Other crafts were systematically taxed to raise their general cost of production, making them uncompetitive against foreign goods (Gavin and Oyemakinde (1999:496).

The merchants trading in the local crafts products were subjected to various taxes which forced them to abandon dealing in locally manufactured goods. Through advances of cash and credit goods (imports) the local merchants class was incorporated into the imperialist trading network. Some of the artisans abandoned that work and took either agriculture, wage labour or trade. By the 190s, the domestic handcraft producers had been eliminated while professional craftsmen were fast diminishing (Bonat 1988:22). By the 1970s the colonialists reported that these crafts

have been ousted from the local markets, and taxation of such crafts was terminated in 1936 (Bonat, 1988:18).

Other methods of destroying the local industrial system included the disarticulation of the economy in such a way as to make primary production and manufacturing mutually inclusive. Primary production was geared toward producing exports, while manufacturing took place in Europe (Rodney, 1975). Even some of the handcrafts that survived now depended on foreign raw materials and technology (Bonat, 1988).

Both the colonial and the post-colonial period the manufacturing concentrated mainly on the production of raw materials for the western industries. All attempts to develop industries based on local raw materials and technology were vigorously resisted by the state and the imperialist monopolies controlling the economy. For instance, when the World Bank recommended the creation of import substitution industries, and textile industry was established in Kaduna in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the technology, including substantial proportion of raw materials and skilled labour were all imported (Bonat, 1985: 228-243).

It was this industrial development strategy that was pursued in Nigeria. This led to the total dependence on the foreign technology for survival which is a complete reversal from the pre-colonial industrial system. This dependent industrial strategy has not and cannot lead to self regenerating development and can only deepen dependence and generate crises for the Nigerian economy.

Industry in the Economic Structure of Precolonial Nigeria

The foregoing discussion has shown the nature of some local industries in the precolonial Nigeria. To fully understand the integrated nature of the economy, we need to focus sharply on the relationship between the industrial sector and other sectors of the economy. Primary production consisted of agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing and hunting, mining and extraction. The agricultural sector provided raw materials for industries in the form of cotton, indigo etc. These were used for the manufacture of textiles, dyes, calabash and to some extent wood carving. The agricultural sector also provided foodstuffs to the professional craftsmen through payment and sales. Also the pastoralist provided hides and skins to the leather workers, and meat to other members of the society. The miners provided iron, gold and antimony to the smiths for manufacturing tools, weapons, ornaments etc. The industrial system, therefore, had its raw materials base within the area or within the region where it is situated (Bonat, 1985:138).

The craftsmen provided the farmers with the implements. While the potters provided the society with the cooking, storage, ceremonial, and eating utensils. Thus there was a good linkage between both industries and agriculture. The industrial sector also provided substantial parts of trading goods for the local and outside markets. These were exchanged for imported umbrellas, perfumes, and books etc. from across the Sahara and Atlantic sea (Ajayi & Alagoa, 2012:228). Although efforts were made by the several head of states in Nigeria to enhance the industrialization of this country most of which proved abortive as the idea was to transplant the western technology instead of improving from the traditional one. The intervention of the government in establishing import substitution industries has not been able to alter the situation. In spite of the amount of money spent for that, the aim had ended being defeated as they have no access to the appropriate modern technology. This is because the MNCs and their parent countries have the monopoly over the modern technology and to obtain that technology, their influence must be in the country. This is because we did not have the capacity to create our own scientific establishment capable of making technological innovations to compete with the foreign multinationals (Asadie, 1982:7).

Moreover, there were many policies and declarations by the government with regards to protection and the promotion of the local industries in Nigeria which in most cases used to be a mere paper declaration. For instance the present administration made several attempts on the need to promote our local industries. Thus in October 2013 Jonathan was reported to have said that:

We will need to protect the budding industries in Nigeria because we know that every country in the world that wants to grow industrially at some stage, need to put instruments in place to protect the upcoming industries to stimulate and sustain growth and development (Vanguard, October, 2013).

In spite of this, nothing has been done by the present administration in promoting the local industries in Nigeria. Another problem associated with the local industries and Nigeria was the lack of capital by the domestic industrialist to invest in large scale enterprises. As a result of that, a substantial proportion of the Nigerian craftsmen were forced to become farmers, others became traders and yet others became labourers.

Conclusion

This paper examined the history of the Nigerian traditional industries from the precolonial period to the post-colonial era. The paper also shows the way these industries were undermined by the colonial policy and their fragile nature after the attainment of self determination. The paper also ended with some recommendations

on the way these industries will be transformed to provide employment opportunities as well as stimulate economic growth and development. The stand of this paper is that, if these industries are revived, they will ultimately reduce the rate of Nigerian dependence on the western industrial products and thereby promoting a self sustainable economy.

Recommendation

Based on the foregoing discussions, the following recommendations will suffice:

- (i) Government should revive indigenous creativity in crafts and technology and promote their progressive updating to serve modern development needs.
- (ii) The influence of the western industries are still very heavy on the Nigerian industries. Thus, government should introduce a policy which will be fashioned to their own benefit.
- (iii) There is a need for the government and other organisations to engage in public enlightenment to educate the citizenry on the importance of patronizing Nigerian made products. This may generate real appreciation of the indigenous products and skills of Nigerians.
- (iv) Government should provide loans and other incentives to the local craft makers. This will enhance the production of quality products to compete with their counterparts from industrial countries.
- (v) Heavy import duty should be impose on the foreign products so as to protect local industrial goods.
- (vi) Our indigenous crafts and technology are rooted in our history. This should be integrated in our living patterns.

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