Colonialism and the Decline of Indigenous African Industries: The Example of Cloth-Weaving in Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria

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Abstract: The paper examines the boom in the Esan cloth-weaving in colonial Nigeria and its dramatic decline in the last decade of colonialism. Cloth-weaving was the most popular, widespread and perhaps, most important indigenous industry in pre-colonial Esan. It was entirely a female industry, which origin predated the introduction of cotton into the area in the 15th century. In spite of the often over-dramatized influx of cheap European and Asian factory manufactured cloth, the Esan cloth-weaving industry experienced a boom up to 1950. Available evidence suggests that the industry suffered a dramatic decline only in the last decade of colonialism. The paper establishes a nexus between the rational economic behaviour of women and the decline of cloth-weaving in Esan. The Decline of cloth weaving in Esan was, thus, largely due to the rational economic behaviour of the women weavers, who abandoned cloth-weaving for, what they considered, other more modern, more lucrative, more respectable, more adventurous and less stressful economic activities, as colonialism became more encompassing.

Keywords: Colonialism, Cloth-weaving, Indigenous. Decline. Industry.

I. Introduction

A major theme in African historical studies is the impact of colonialism on indigenous African arts, crafts and industries. There is no doubt, whatsoever, that colonialism impacted negatively on indigenous African arts, crafts and industries in terms of reduction of their local production in different African societies within the colonial situation. With regard to cloth-weaving, the decline of the industry in often attributed to mainly the importation of cheap European factory manufactured cloth and discouragement from colonial administrators. With particular regard to cloth weaving, scholars often attribute this negative impact mainly to the importation of cheap European and Asian factory manufactured cloth and deliberate discouragement by colonial administrators. One of the most popular African scholars that held this position is Walter Rodney in his book: How Europe Undeveloped Africa. According to Walter Rodney, when European cloth became dominant on the African market, it meant African producers were cut off from increasing demand of their product. He argued that as a consequence of this situation, crafts producers either abandoned their tasks in the face of cheap available European cloth or they continued on the same small hand work instrument to create styles and pieces in localized markets.

On his part, Bonat, who studied the decline of indigenous industries in Zaria Province of Nigeria, argued that the British Colonial Administration in Nigeria deliberately discouraged the indigenous industries, including cloth weaving, in the area through taxation, competition, legislation, structural changes in the economy as well as a dependent educational system. Bonat argued further that the destruction of the indigenous industries was necessary for the British Colonial Administration because their existence was diametrically opposed to the aims of British colonialism. According to him, the aims of British colonialism included tapping available raw materials, capturing and monopolizing the local market for British goods and creating avenues for British capital. While the attempt in this paper is not to contest the findings of the above-named scholars, Esan experience presents a very peculiar and interesting study. Available evidence suggests that in Esanland the cloth-weaving industry experienced a boom until the last decade of colonialism when the industry suddenly declined. The major focus of this paper is the factors that contributed to the apparent boom in cloth weaving in Esanland up to 1950 and its decline in the last decade of colonialism.

Esan is a cultural/linguistic group. The people, their land and their language are known as Esan. The Esan language is a sub-group of the Edoid language family. The Edoid language is a sub-group of the of the larger Niger-Congo language family. In the pre-colonial period, the area was made of chiefdoms, which paid allegiance to the Oba of Benin. The rulers of the initial sixteen chiefdoms in Esan, Eniije (Singular – Onojie)
were imposed on the people in the 15th century by Oba Esuare of Benin as a power of patronage. Pre-colonial Esan society was strictly divided along sex lines. Sex was the basis of role allocation, opportunities and privileges. In the colonial period, due to the inability of European officials to pronounce Esan correctly, Ishan, Isa and Isan were variously used to refer to the people. Esan was a division of Benin Province and was officially called Ishan Division in the colonial period. In an effort to reduce the power of the existing Eniije, sixteen more chieftdoms were created from the existing ones, making a total of 32 chieftdoms. The area is presently made up of five local government areas in Edo State, Nigeria. These are Esan West, Esan Central, Esan North-east, Esan North-west and Igueben Local Government Areas. The area is a land of 1,858 square kilometers, located to the north east of Benin City, capital of Edo State. Esan land is bounded to the north by Etsako West and Akoko Edo Local Government Areas of Edo State, to the south by Ika and Oshimili Local Government Areas of Delta state and to the west by Orhimwon, Owan and Uhunmwode Local Government Areas of Edo State. The area is separated from the neighbouring Delta and Benue States on the north-east by the River Niger. The population of Esan has grown over time from 143, 069 in 1931 to 194, 891 in 1953 and 372, 122 in 1991. It rose to 591, 534 by 2006.12

II. Colonial Era Up to 1950: The Period of Boom

Colonialism was formally imposed on Esanland in 1900, like most other parts of Southern Nigeria. Records of Esan cloth weaving industry for the period between 1900 and 1926 suggest that it was by far the largest industry. In 1926, it was reported that good cotton was grown throughout the district, known as Esan cotton and cloths were woven from it by women. The report also attested to the fact that these cloths were strong and durable and found ready sale at good prices in every district. It was also reported earlier, in 1923, that “excellent specimens of Ishan cloth were sent to the British empire exhibition where it attracted many admirers”. Indeed, the 1928 “Assessment Report” on Ishan Division shows that women in the area derived their major income from weaving. Uromi women obtained the highest average income of five pounds from weaving. Ubiaja and Ewohimi women received an average of two pounds and three pounds from cloth weaving respectively. Women from Irrua and Ekpoma had an average of two pounds, ten shillings and two pounds respectively from cloth weaving. However, compared to the income derived from the sale of yams, the income of the women weavers was relatively small. Adult male in Irrua and Ewohimi derived an average of twelve pounds from the sale of yams. For Ekpoma district, it was ten pounds. “Ubiaja-East” had an average of seven pounds and “Ubiaja-West” had eight pounds from the sale of yams. Available evidence also suggests that the Esan cloth weaving industry experienced a boom throughout the 1930s. The intelligence report written in 1936 on Uromi by H. L. M. Butcher reported that a “considerable amount of cotton” was grown and that much weaving was done. The report also gave the indication that there was a high demand for the locally manufactured cloth. The report revealed that all the uniforms of the boys in the schools were produced in “toto” with Esan cloth. Indeed, up to the 1940s, some primary schools in Esan were still using Esan cloth for their uniform. In addition, the police, prison inmate and the warders in Ishan Division were using the special Esan Ucele, which has khaki texture, for their uniforms. Cloth weaving still enjoyed a boom in the division in the 1940s. In a memorandum by the education department in Benin province, the Senior Education Officer of the province, Mr. Speer, reported in 1948 that in the province.

The chief local industry at the moment, meaning those in which the largest number of persons are engaged, are logging and rubber tapping in Benin Division and the spinning and weaving of cotton in Ishan and Kukuruku Divisions (emphasis mine).18

Speer also added that indigenous cloth from the province enjoyed a boom during World War I and II. These evidences suggest that up to 1950, cloth weaving in Esan enjoyed a boom.

Writing on local crafts in West Africa, Hopkins, advanced three main reasons for the survival of traditional manufactures in the twentieth century. Firstly, certain products were protected by their proximity to the market and by low over-head at the manufacturing stage. Secondly, some products continued to sell, even though they competed directly with cheaper European imports, because they were highly regarded by customers. Some crafts survived by employing new techniques. Thirdly, and in the case of weaving industry, because they were able to secure a “niche as special lines in a differentiated product market”. Hopkins argued that:

Consumers bought imported and domestic textiles because there were hundreds of varieties of cloth, and not all served the same or suited the same tastes. Indeed, as the colonial period advanced, traditional textiles became increasingly fashionable as an index of status.
and as a symbol of identification with African culture and with the nationalist movement.\textsuperscript{20}

The boom in the cloth weaving industry in Esanland at this point in time could be attributed to many factors. One of the major factors was high demand. In addition to the local demand for utilitarian and ceremonial purposes, Esan cloth was used for school uniform as well as uniform for prison warders and inmates. In addition, the depression of the 1930s, World War I and the consequent rise in prices of factory manufactured imported cloth in the division, increased the demand for Esan cloth. Moreover, after the World War II, the demand for Esan cloth continued to rise up to the end of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{21}

Another factor that contributed to the boom in the local industry within the period under review was the fact that women weavers had no better alternative occupations and better means of earning a living. Available evidence shows that women in Esan were not fully integrated into the colonial cash economy until the last two decades of colonialism.\textsuperscript{22} Women’s economic activities were, thus, carried out, more or less, along traditional lines until towards the end of colonial rule. The 1928 “Assessment Report” for Ishan Division, for instance, did not give any indication that women derived any income from trading or other occupations directly connected with the colonial economy. Apart from weaving, the major income of Esan women was derived from the sale of “women’s crops” such as corn, cotton and what was called “minor crops”.\textsuperscript{23} The implication of this situation was that women continued along the lines of the pre-colonial production process until the 1940s. They relied entirely on their traditional means of earning a living, different from the men who had been fully integrated into the colonial economy and had started to earn income from the new cash crops such as cocoa, rubber and coffee. Closely related to the late integration of women into the colonial economy was the fact that female education was frowned at until the last two decades of colonialism.\textsuperscript{24} In fact, the popular opinion among Esan people when education was first introduced, was that educated females would turn out to become “rascals”.\textsuperscript{25} The belief that an educated woman would become a “rascal” discouraged many parents from sending their female children to school. The import of this situation to the point being made is that womenfolk, both young and old, were readily available to service and sustain the weaving industry within the period under review.

Again, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that contrary to popular opinion, colonial officers in Esan encouraged the cloth weaving industry. In the first instance, teaching of indigenous weaving was encouraged in the schools in the Division.\textsuperscript{26} The teaching of weaving in schools helped to popularize the occupation. As a consequence the interest of young women in the occupation was kindled and sustained. This situation contributed to the boom that the industry experienced within the period under consideration.

\section*{III. The Period of Decline: 1950-1960}

Cloth-weaving suffered a dramatic decline from 1950. From that period, the majority of weavers were merely old women, who had not had formal education or had no access to other opportunities that then abound for women empowerment. Many women weavers abandoned the business of weaving.\textsuperscript{27} Unfortunately, Esan was excluded from the colonial scheme of modernizing traditional cloth weaving in some parts of the country starting from 1947. In 1947 and 1948, territorial development centres were set up at Ado-Ekiti, Oyo, Auchi and Mingibir (Kano Province) for training weavers to use the newly introduced broadlooms.\textsuperscript{28} The exclusion of Esan from this programme could be attributed to the realization by the Colonial Government that Esan weavers were individualistic and would, therefore, not fit into the new scheme.

Indeed, in Benin Province, there is evidence that the Colonial Government put forward a plan to improve the indigenous cloth weaving industry. The government contemplated the introduction of “European and Indian types of spinning wheels and European model of broadlooms” in an effort to promote the weaving industry.\textsuperscript{29} However, it was found out that Esan weavers preferred to go on “in their traditional way to taking trouble on their part, they would not be convinced that the new way was better than the old.”\textsuperscript{30}

When it was obvious that many women were abandoning cloth weaving, Speer explained the idea of promoting weaving among men. He believed that if women could be persuaded to use the new spinning wheels there were distinct possibilities of establishing a “cottage” industry in which men used the thread spun by the women. For obvious reasons, this idea was rejected by the men.\textsuperscript{31} In this area, weaving was traditionally an exclusive occupation of women and men would have nothing to do with it. It was in this regard that at independence in 1960 only a few women in Uromi were still engaged in cloth weaving even on a part-time basis.\textsuperscript{32}

Many fundamental factors than the mere influx of European and Asian factory manufactured cloth could be advanced to account for the dramatic decline of the cloth weaving industry in Esan in the last decade of colonialism. Evidence from weavers points to the fact that the large scale abandonment of cloth weaving in the area was part of the rational economic decision by the weavers. By the 1950s women found other economic activities that were not only more lucrative but more prestigious, more profitable, more modern and more adventurous. According to Madam Ijamewalen Ajayi, a former weaver and the \textit{odion Ik豪 Idumo} (leader of
married women) there were other occupations that became more remunerative than weaving that attracted women weavers in Esan. Such included the processing of palm oil, cassava and rice, trading, teaching, nursing, midwifery and even sewing. Trading, especially long distance trading, was a major competitor with cloth-weaving within the period under consideration. While in the pre-colonial period the women were not involved in long distance trading, the imposition of “pax Britannica”, construction of good roads, abolition of the “custom” of seizing women and the changes that were taking place in the traditional marriage system, made women to enter long distance trading. They started trading to Benin, Warri, Sapele, Agbor and Onitsa. Other occupations that attracted women within the period under consideration were the processing and marketing of agricultural produce such as palm oil and palm kernel. In Esan, the processing and marketing of oil palm produce had always been women’s business prior to the imposition of colonial rule. The only male activity was harvesting the palm punch. From pre-colonial period to the first two decades of colonialism, palm produce was only produced for domestic consumption and for sale in the periodic markets. The Benin Provincial Annual Report of 1924 stated, for instance, that Esan palm oil was of excellent quality but was not produced in sufficient quantities for export.

However, from the 1940s, increased demand coupled with increase in the prices of oil palm produce motivated the men to harvest more and the women to process more palm oil and kernel. In Nigeria, there was an annual average increase of 7.6 and 5.8 percent for palm oil and palm kernels respectively over the period 1949-1954. A noticeable increase was recorded in palm produce purchase from 1949 in Esan. From 4646 tons in 1948, sales of palm kernel increased remarkably to 5627 tons in 1949. Between 1949 and 1956, with the exception of 1951 sales that were as low as 707 tons, palm kernel trade in Esan stood at 5,000 tons and above. A peak was reached in 1956 when the purchases were 5,939 tons. The increase in purchase during this period was due to two major factors. First, the increase in total production was a reflection of rise in the price of produce. Between 1946 and 1947, there was a 50 percent increase in the price of kernel. Another increase took effect from March 12, 1948 when palm kernel price became twenty pounds per ton and that of palm oil thirty-one pounds and five shillings per ton from the 1947 price of sixteen pounds, fifteen shillings per ton. Second, was the re-organization in marketing that resulted in stability of prices of palm produce.

It was in this situation that many women weavers abandoned weaving for the more lucrative oil palm produce processing and marketing. In fact, weavers even discouraged their daughters from taking up the profession. Madam Rachael Imoluamen, for example, was a cloth weaver before the World War II. According to her, she had to abandon weaving for the highly profitable palm oil trade after the war because her mother encouraged her to do so. This situation is hardly surprising considering the fact that not much was earned as cash from weaving compared to the competing occupation.

Closely related to the processing and marketing of oil palm produce was the processing and marketing of garri. The Benin Provincial Annual Report for 1955, noted that:

Today Lorries can be seen in any small market in Asaba division loading up garri for Lagos, Ibadan or the Eastern province. This applies even more to the major markets such as Uromi in Ishan or Jattu in Afemai. The production of foodstuff for external markets is now, perhaps, the most important single source of wealth in the Asaba, Ishan and Afemai divisions.

More important, the revolution that took place in female education in Esan in the 1950s negatively affected the cloth weaving industry. As alluded to earlier, at the beginning of colonial rule, female education was very unpopular in Esan. The first female was enrolled in Ishan Division in 1917, almost twenty years after the introduction of Western education in the division. By 1921, there were only eleven females in primary schools in Esan. However, by 1953, the number of females in primary schools in the area increased to 2,237. By 1955 there was a remarkable increase to 13, 882. At independence in 1960 female enrolment had risen to 22, 507 from a figure of 18, 058 in 1957. This trend was replicated in the enrolment figure in the modern, teacher training colleges and adult schools, popularly known as “night schools” in Esan.

Finally, within the colonial situation and the many new areas opened for women to earn a living in the modern sector of the economy weaving became comparatively outdated and unattractive. Madam, Ajayi who was a former cloth weaver, made a statement that summarized the attraction offered by Western education and the opportunities it offered for securing paid government employment and getting married to the emerging educated elite when she said that “when I come back (reincarnate) I will not do dirty job such as weaving, I will go to school and will work in an office”. The spread of Western education among girls meant that the young women who could have taken over from the older weavers could not learn the art of weaving. This was particularly important in the last decade of colonial rule when adult education programme was launched in the division and free primary education introduced. Many Esan women also became employed as teachers in these schools.
Thus, there is no doubt whatsoever that the last decade of colonialism was a period of significant economic change for Esan women. More than ever before, women became fully integrated into the colonial modern economy. It was in this regard that cloth weaving became unattractive. Many women abandoned cloth weaving for the more modern, more lucrative, more attractive and more prestigious occupations. The few women who remained in the industry were old women who had no access to education and wealth. Indeed, some of these women remained in the industry because they gained aesthetic satisfaction from it, and not necessarily because it was profitable anymore. Madam Omonuwa Okoduwa, an old weaver of Uromi explained in 1988 that she was still doing it not because of money but because it was her only profession and as such, she could not leave it. According to her, she derived pleasure from weaving and felt uncomfortable if she stopped weaving.49

IV. Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in this paper that cloth-weaving industry in Esanland experienced a boom up to 1950. Local and “international” demand, lack of better alternative means of earning a living by women weavers, encouragement by the colonial administrators and the fact that female education was frowned at in Ishan in the first three decades of colonialism, have been identified as factors that were responsible for the boom up to 1950. However, the last decade of colonialism witnessed the dramatic decline in the industry. The paper argues that the most prominent factor in the decline of cloth weaving in Esan within this period was the rational economic behaviour of the women weavers. In the traditional Esan production relation, an industry that was entirely a female business, in which weavers wove cloth free for family members and other relations, could survive. However, with the highly monetized colonial economic system, in which cash was needed by both men and women for payment of children and wards school fees, building of block and zinc houses, acquisition of modern household and beauty items, the industry suffered a devastating set back.

More importantly, women in their great numbers moved into the modern sector that yielded the much-needed cash to survive in a highly monetized economy. Trading, processing and marketing of palm oil, garri and rice became new attractions. The revolution that took place in female education in the last two decades of colonialism also had its toll on the industry. Thus, it is plausible to argue that the decline of the Esan cloth weaving industry in the last decade of colonialism was due, essentially, to the rational economic behaviour of women weavers who abandoned cloth-weaving for other more lucrative, more modern, more “respectable”, more adventurous and less stressful economic activities, as colonialism became more encompassing. The abandonment of cloth weaving was part of the economic change that occurred among Esan women starting from the 1940s. The revolution in female education also meant that female children who could have continued to perpetuate the occupation of cloth weaving were sent to school. The attempts by the Colonial Administration to encourage men to take up weaving failed because in Esan weaving was a traditional occupation of women, which men considered to be beneath them. It is plausible to argue that the non-existence of weavers’ guild, an obvious demonstration of resistance to “state” control from Benin, also led to the inability of the industry to survive when competitions from other “modern” occupation arose. These changes where compounded as colonialism became more pervasive, intricate and more encompassing.

References


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