Cloth Weaving Tradition in Ubulu-Ukwu, C. 1200 -1980

By

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Abstract
This paper is an analysis of the Cloth Weaving Tradition in Ubulu-Ukwu C.1200 to 1980. In Ubulu-Ukwu, historical evidence reveals that there is a lot of literature on the political, cultural heritage, religious and social experiences of the people which have been extensively researched. However, studies on cloth weaving tradition in Ubulu-Ukwu are quite scanty but deserve insignificant attention because the industry is still a largely unexplored terrain of Ubulu-Ukwu history. As such, this work seeks to redress the imbalance by exploring the industrial past of Ubulu-Ukwu people with regards to cloth weaving craft. Also, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted and structured to add depth to the data and *make different perspectives possible. The key conclusion of the given paper is that this period among the Ubulu-Ukwu people featured a viable industry of cloth weaving.*
Keywords: cloth weaving, tradition and Ubulu-Ukwu.

Introduction

One of the flourishing local industries in Ubulu-Ukwu in Delta State is cloth weaving. Maybe it was an art that was invented on its own bearing in mind the rich resource materials available in the surrounding forests. The craft is thus an ancient one and hence cannot be correctly dated. Although there were a few European travelers who had commented to demonstrate that they had been disappointed with the African weaving industry, there were those who had praised African industry. The Ubulu-Ukwu people, as Spencer describes them, are extremely industrious; they weave cloth of every kind in large quantities, some of which is as fine of texture as that of the civilized. The industry of cloth weaving in Ubulu-Ukwu went through phases of dynamism and technological advancement in processes. Whatever they produced was coloured to different colours and designs. Shaw observed that weaving industries is indigenous rather than European in origin as it had been in existence in northern Igbo area, among other areas ever before the 9th Century A.D.2

One of the major towns in Aniocha South Local Government Area of Delta State is Ubulu-Ukwu. It is situated at the junction of Issele-Ukwu, Ogwashi-Ukwu and Umunede roads about thirty kilometers west of the River Niger. It shares its borders with the eastern side with Ogwashi-Ukwu and Ubulu-Okiti; the western side with Obior and Ute-Ogbeje; the northern side with Issele-Uku and Ubulu-Unor all of Delta State3. Ubulu-Ukwu is a member of Igbo culture. The vegetation is extremely conducive to growing yams, cassava, plantain, melon, local beans (Akpaka) and cotton (Olulu) produced by the women5. The simple industry was also part of the economy such as cloth weaving by the women folk6. This paper is thus geared towards discussing the origin of the weaving tradition in Ubulu-Ukwu, source of raw materials, the way cloth weaving is done, the process of dying cloth woven in Ubulu-Ukwu, the socio political and economic values of the weaving cloth tradition in Ubulu-Ukwu and the metamorphosis and continuation of the cloth weaving industry. Such a neglect has led certain scholars on several occasions to be attentive to the implicit danger of excessive concentration of research focus on the history of mega-states. One such instance is that Afigbo proposed that concerted efforts should be made to recover and rebuild the history of the small-scale societies. He came to a conclusion that the history of the minor polities could not be shown as footnote to the history of the mega States.9

This work deals with the years 1200-1980. It has also demonstrated how the Ubulu-Ukwu Cloth weaving tradition was evolved in the pre-colonial period as a feasible indigenous trade to the point of playing an exceedingly exceptional role during the colonial period when the European cloths out-competed them. Therefore, this is an effort to restore the current imbalance of our knowledge of the different Nigerian societies of pre-colonial and post-colonial eras.

The Land and The People of Ubulu-Ukwu.

Ubulu-Ukwu is located in the tropical rainforest area where water supplies in the streams and springs are adequate. The vegetation is in such a way that it is favourable to yams and cassava production. This is the reason why the people are mainly farmers and partially hunters, the people also collect, and extract palm products.

The population of the Asaba division according to census in 1963 was 315, 988. Ubulu-clan consisting of Ubulu-Unor, Ubulu-Okiti Adonta, Anifekide, Ani-Uje, Ani-Ekei and Ani-Ikpu with Ubulu-Ukwu being the head of the clan had 11,000, of this total number Ubulu-Ukwu had approximately 6860. It means that they have been in great demand for locally manufactured crafts hence a lot of people earned a living as weavers and farmers, iron workers, carvers and soap makers.10

Ubulu-Ukwu is made up of thirteen villages namely, Abuedo, Akwu, Agbonta, Onicha-Ukwu, Onicha-Okpe, Ogbe-Ofu, Ogbeani, Enugu-Iyi, Idumu-Osume, Udo, Udumubo, Isho and Ogbe-Ego. The origin traditions of Ubulu-Ukwu explains this by the fact that the economic activities of the early settlers viz. Ezemu was a hunter, Anugwe a farmer and Ekei an iron worker.11 a pointer to the existence of some form of economic specialization amongst the people even in the early days.

However, certain degree of specialization was achieved when it came to the production of extremely skilled products like cloth, soap and carving of mortar and pestle. However, the artisans had small farms. Women were literally engaged in spinning of cloths but they also assisted their husbands in their farms. Nevertheless, these three tools of economy i.e., craft, trading and agriculture were closely connected to each other and there was no strict demarcation as such of other.

Root of cloth weaving tradition in Ubulu-Ukwu.

Weaving is a textile production process that is characterized by two sets of threads or yarns that are weaved at a right angle, to form a piece of cloth or fabric. The Ubulu-Ukwu weaving tradition was divided into some phases. The latter was the stage of the bark cloth or the time of the akwa ufa. The people made cloth at some time, we can hardly tell when, out of the bark of plants which we call ufa. The people made what was rough, but long-lasting, which Basden saw 13. There is no doubt that the industry of producing textiles in this region of interest was very high as attested by the author, Isischei.13, thus, it would be imprudent to call the pre-colonial weaving industry in Nigeria primitive. There is unanimity in how the people were taught the craft in Ubulu-Ukwu. They are reported to have learned it by watching spiders at work weaving nets as snears against insects as food, Ubulu-Ukwu people learnt it critically and know how to weave. The weaving methods of the Ubulu-Ukwu people were similar to those of the other Igbo groups to the west of the Niger, so it may be the case that the concept originated somewhere inside the culture zone. We could infer that the practice of weaving is as old as Ubulu-Ukwu that was founded by Ezemu who established a centralized government among the founding fathers of the town and reigned between 1201 and 1280.14.

However, this industry was given further impetus in the 19th century when cotton seeds locally known as "Mkpulu-olulu" were introduced by the Europeans. Through this innovation, there is no doubt that it enhanced the quality of what they produced as well as what they traded in the market. We have nothing in record where we can judge of the amelioration of the industry, but one may have a fair idea of that in what succeeded, in West Africa in general. In this instance, after the introduction of cotton seeds, it was observed that during the second half of the 19th century raw cotton was being exported to Europe. This was observed in the year 1854 when 347 Ibs of cotton was being exported to England.15

Moreover, the pre-colonial history shows that of all the societies in Aniocha region, which was formerly called Asaba division, Ubulu-Ukwu had a unique cloth weaving. These communities include, Ubulu-Ukwu, Ogwashi-Uku, Nsukwa, Akwukwu, Ezechima, Illah, Okpanam, Odiani, Ibusa (Igbuzor), Idumuje and Asaba.16

As far as the tradition of Ubulu-Ukwu people is concerned, parents played the leading role in the traditional education process starting with the curiosity and observation of children (ages 1-6) of the gestures and the face of their parents. They were trained as early as one year old as being cautions. They were subjected to some traditional norms and values as early as at the age of six. They were trained on the basic meal, hygiene and toilet training, basic etiquette to parents, seniors and guests. The longer relatives were involved in social education of the kids. Children were taught obedience and respect towards the elders sometimes through examples. They venture out on errands, and sometimes with the old and the parents to various destinations such as farms, streams and markets. There were a few stories told by the older children and adults to the younger children. Each story had its own morals from which they learnt about human relations. Through these stories, the adults of the community, impressed on the young ones those virtues cherished by the community and ridiculed vices.17

At the ages of 6-10, the children began to follow the parents (primarily the men) with their stools to the places in the quarters they were having their encounters and observing the adults performing group activities. These might be settlement of feuds, arranging marriage contract between a girl who is a member of an extended family and a family that is prospective husband to name but a few. On such occasions, for instance, the children had the privilege of listening to the elders' discussions and deliberations on issues of importance to the quarters (ogbe). As they advanced in age, they learnt the use of words and other common ways of expressing ideas among the people. The children were believed to grow slowly into men dedicated to the welfare of the society and possessing the talents necessary to serve the community i.e. physical, intellectual talents and attitudes that were valued by the community. Similarly, the girl children are slowly becoming old ladies. The outcome of this trend of informal traditional education was the knowledge, appreciation and preservation of their cultural heritage and craft including cloth-weaving tradition. It equally created group unity and a feeling of security that was needed to promote growth and development of the kingdom.

Besides the involvement of parents in informal education of the child, men gifted with special capabilities had significant impact on the learning processes. Storytellers, musicians and drummers were such people. These semi-professionals made songs full of codes of good conduct or behaviour which they sang in harmony with their local guitar (ubo). Children converged and listened to the songs and stories from which they learnt about certain norms and values, laws, rules and regulations of the community. Such songs included the one related to cloth weaving tradition. It goes like this:

	English Version
"*Nnem zim olulu, zim akwa,*	My mother instructed me in the art of weaving cloth using cotton.
Nnem eji n'obodo zim ife,	I was never taught by my mother how to roam in the streets.
	In case a child strolls too long in the streets, he/she will feed on poison.
	When a child does not respond to calls, he/she will not accept

Na nwata f eke obodo, olie nsi.
Na nwata, ju ka okwu, oju ofe,
O Nnem, O Nnem, O Nnem O,
ije di di olu".

"*Nnem zim olulu, zim akwa,*
Nnem eji n'obodo zim ife,

The repetitiveness of flow of the song and style shows reliance on repetition. The repetition of the vowel / O/ makes the songs appealing to the ear and makes them sound beautiful. Another method of instruction, which influenced knowledge among the young ones, was through repetition and observation. Priests of some of the above deities were some of the storytellers and musicians. Therefore, they also instructed the children on how to do things of the gods. Thus, much of the moral values in the community were the contribution of the priests. Actually, the school system introduced the youths to the social charter of the community that could not have been known without parents. Maybe, this learning process has evolved due to inner needs and situations. The teaching, however, like those in other parts of Africa at the time, was a word-of-mouth teaching of skills, customs, laws, traditions and the like without the medium of writing and reading.

Sources of raw materials.

The raw materials used in weaving the traditional cloth in Ubulu-Ukwu during pre-colonial period was Ufa (bark of a certain plant) which contains fine fabrics, such as the materials used in the production of the thread. This ufa was soaked in water three times, in succession, to ferment and strands were removed to produce a thread that was applied in cloth weaving. Research on raw materials employed in weaving traditional cloth in Ubulu-Ukwu in the pre-colonial times indicates that raw materials mainly used were Ufa; the bark of a specific plant. The bark had been made into a pulp by being steeped in water to loosen the fibers, and beaten or scraped to extract the finer fibrous strands out of it. These were further hand twisted and spinned to make thread that was utilized in weaving of traditional cloth.20

There was also the "olulu akpu" stage or period. The main raw material, used in the manufacturing of the cloth of wild cotton in the 19 th century known as the akwa ocha (traditional textile in Aniocha area) is a product of cotton wool which was introduced by the Europeans and that is why every woman (in Ubulu-Ukwu) wove cloth using this material according to what was written in Emordi.21b. During this period and the dawn of the 20 th century, most people had grown the cotton plants in their farms to be utilized in the traditional form of weaving. But following independence in 1960 and the oil boom periods in Nigeria, the threads utilized in the weaving industry were imported or manufactured by the metropolitan industry in this period not only in different colours and textures but also in different strands.21c

Figure I: Picture showing cotton plants and a woman harvesting cotton which was used before colonial contact and during colonial period in the manufacture of traditional cloth (**akwa ocha**) in **Ubulu-Ukwu**. The cotton seeds are also used for the preparation of a special soup in **Ubulu-Ukwu** known as "**ose ani**"[22].
Source: Obtained during my field work during oral interview with M.O. **Onyebuashi, Agbonta Idumuede** quarters, **Ubulu-Ukwu**, 20/04/17**.**

Method Of Cloth Weaving.

In the aforementioned stage or period of olulu-akpu, the people had to procure the mass of cotton in the form of aka-pu plant/tree that was threshed using a strip of cane that was specially designed to handle this purpose called uta that was then turned on a spindle called ude.

The mass was pulled in this experiment by a pinch of cotton wool and the end attached to the spindle. Next the spindle was given a spin with a sharp twist between finger and thumb. The more cotton was drawn from the mass leaving a thread of fluff about two feet in length, the more thread was obtained until large quantity of thread was available and ready for dying and weaving. The weavers had acquired the necessary amount to make a piece of cloth, thus using vertical loom referred to as nsu. The size of the looms ranged-two to four feet wide. In all the houses the loom was placed in one corner.

Fig. 2: showing typical **Ubulu-Ukwu** woman separating the seeds from the cotton for the traditional cloth weaving.
Source: Obtained during my field work during oral interview with M.O. **Onyebuashi, Agbonta Idumuede** quarters, **Ubulu-Ukwu**, 20/04/17**.**
This procedure is true of the wool from locally grown cotton. The women did most of the weaving with the assistance of the young girls who could not work in the farms and the older girls and women who were in full bloom did the weaving when there was no work in the farms24.

Fig. 3: showing the loom with threads for the commencement of weaving.

Source: Obtained during my field work during oral interview with M.O. **Onyebuashi, Agbonta Idumuede** quarters, **Ubulu-Ukwu**, 20/04/17**.**

After the cotton has been refined into the shape of the thread required, the weaver attaches a bunch of threads to the loom to form the ward and then the weft thread (network of thread) was pulled over and under the warped thread. The weft thread could also be overlaid on several occasions on a warped thread to bring changes in thread colours and patterns on the woven fabric. The piece of work in progress is pushed over the bottom beam and up and back until the piece of cloth is complete. Then, using a weaving stick (apilipa), the weaver separates the odd and even warp thread then she spins the weft thread into a long narrow stick which is pulled over and over.

Fig. 4: Showing the 100m with threads with the commencement of weaving. Source: Obtained during my field work during oral interview with M.O. **Onyebuashi, Agbonta Idumuede** quarters, **Ubulu-Ukwu**, 20/04/17**.**

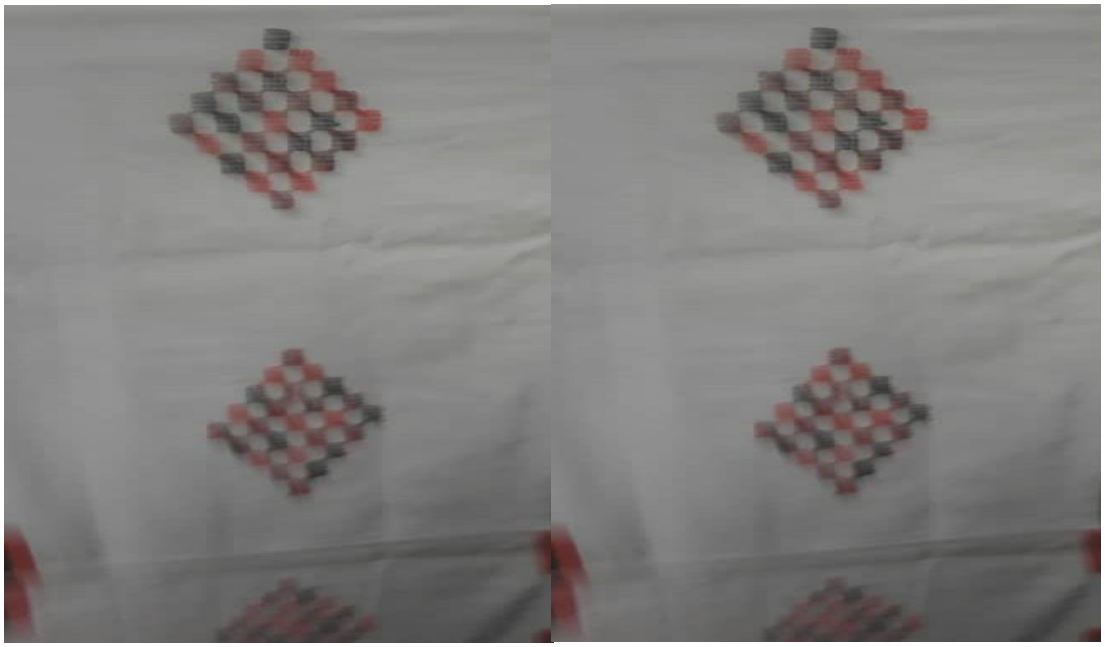
Some of the tools that were used in cloth weaving include: Nsu- cloth beam, Apilipa- weaver sword, Warp space- okpa, Warping stick- affia, Shuttle-, mkpoko Ute- spindle, Lease rod- Ute, Ugba-olulu- calabash where some of the implements were stored.. The implements listed above were in use prior to 1911 to usher in the colonial era and since the close of our period there have been no advancements or any more refined tool in weaving the so-called akwa-ocha as the weaving of traditional cloth is commonly known in Ubulu-Ukwu as well as among the Igbo people on this side of the Niger.

THE DYEING PROCESS: During the colonial rule and prior to the contact between the colonizers, any item that the weavers made was dyed to different colours and patterns of red, blue or black or a combination. They acquired their colours by dipping the thread, or the finished cloth in local dyeing preparations with plant materials such as Uli and a local shrub, ona a type of pterocarpous and bephuda, and ubaba. Indigofera was also in common use by them.

UBULU-UKWU CLOTH Woven: The cloth woven in Ubulu-Ukwu is known as Akwa ocha meaning white cloth and it has three types namely: Oja/mpe: This is a narrow cloth and has miscellaneous purposes such as work- cloth, towel, head-tie, easy chair cloth (Akwa-oche) and as a baby saddling cloth by the nursing mothers. This is similar to that of the people of Aku in the Nsukka of the Enugu state. 26 Ibenabi/Ibeato-; Ibenabo is the usual size of cloth that is typically woven in the loom. It measures about two metres by sixty centimeters and normally used as wrapper by the womenfolk while "Ibeato" measures about three metres by ninety centimeters and this is normally used as wrapper by the men. The above standard size (Ibenabo) requires a full-time weaver one week to make; Akwa nni ukoni- Kitchen Apron- it is the regular standard weaved cloth but was not white in colour and was usually combined with blue and black because it was the cover women wore in the kitchen of both pre-colonial and colonial times. It is mainly used for cooking by married women in Ubulu-Ukwu. Therefore, the Ubulu-Ukwu women are designed to do so.26b In most cases, Ubulu-Ukwu women make different patterns of cloths. They are: Mkpopu: This is a kind of traditional cloth which is usually finished by drawing a Ukoti on the cloths in order to resemble the contemporary lace cloth; Tente: this is a cloth that is designed with three colours namely; black, red and white; Enyi: in the weaving process, the weavers draw an image on the cloth of an elephant. Suggestive of their appearance are some of the decorative motifs which are named after them. Other designs include stars, which they call "kpakpando" and various write ups on the cloths as requested by their respective customers.27 See pictures of some of the Clothes Woven in Ubulu-Ukwu below:

Obo aka (Palms)[28]

Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha-Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.



***Okpulukpu Mbekwu* (Tortoise Shells)**[29]

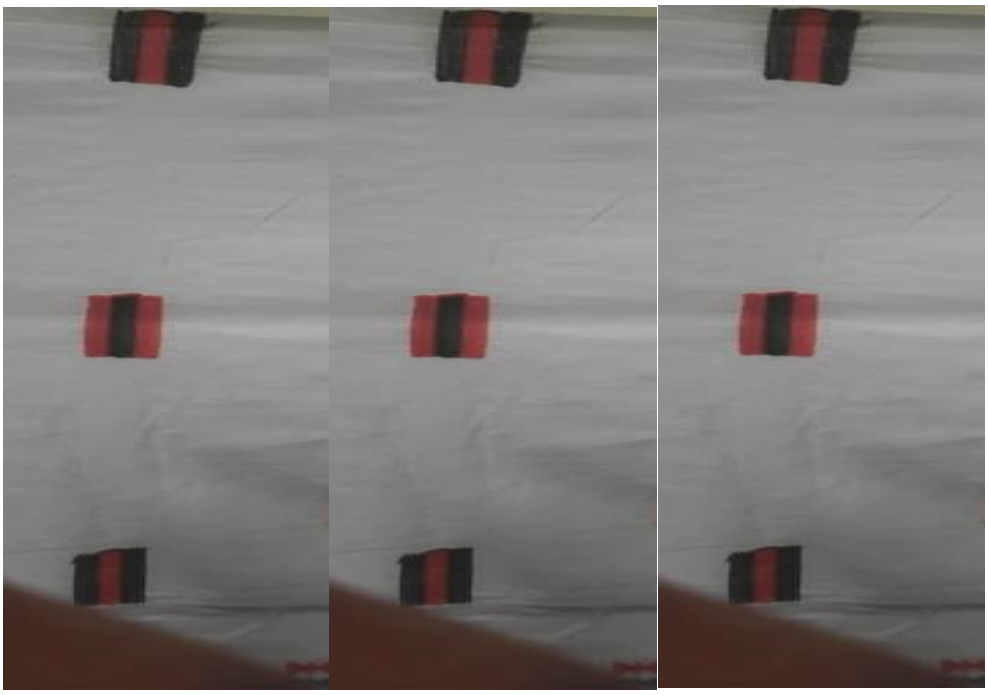
Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.

Write up on woven cloth such as Anioma [29]

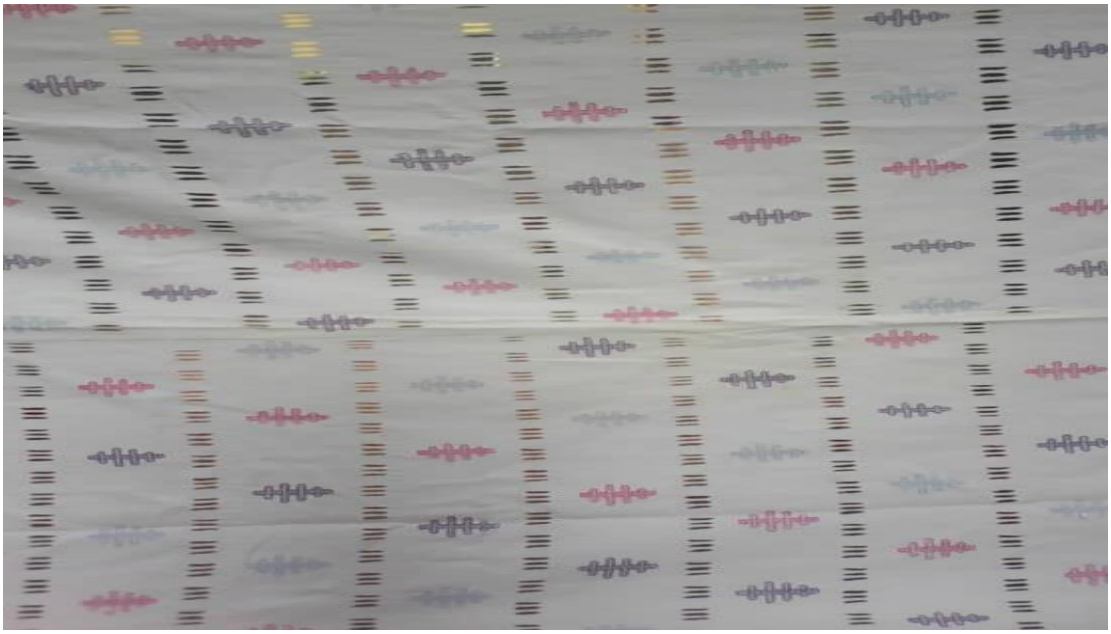
Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.

Akamkpilite (small pestle).[30] Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. **Nzemeke** and J**. Nzemeke**, **Onicha- Ukwu** quarters, **Ubulu-Ukwu**, 02/02/18.

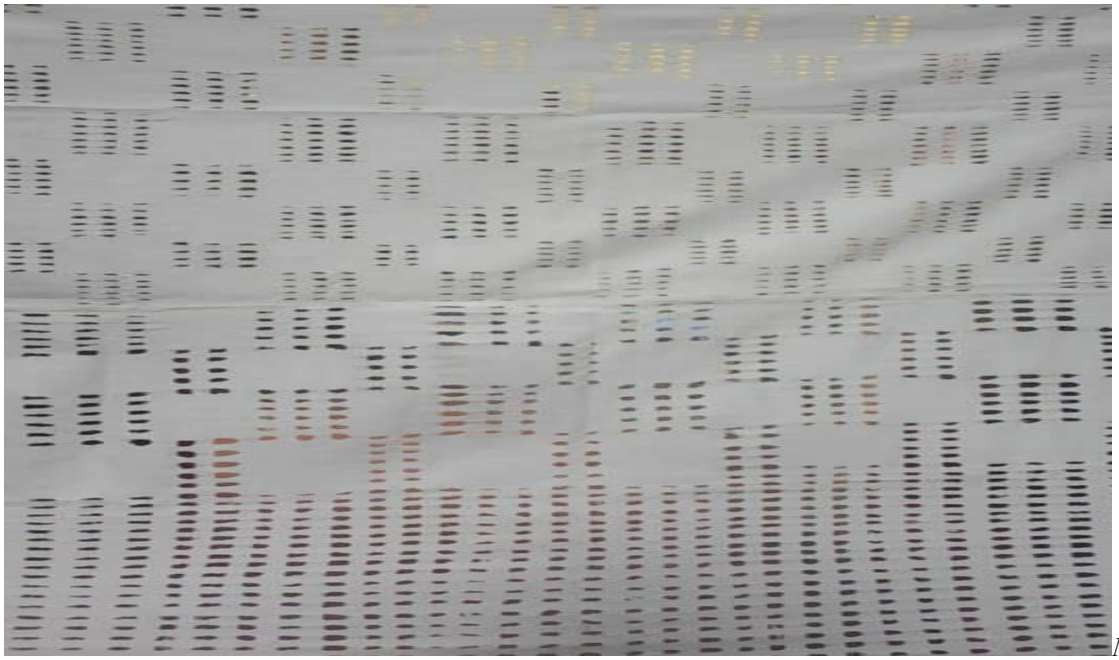
***Enyi* (Elephant).** Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.



Tente means decoration.[32]Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.

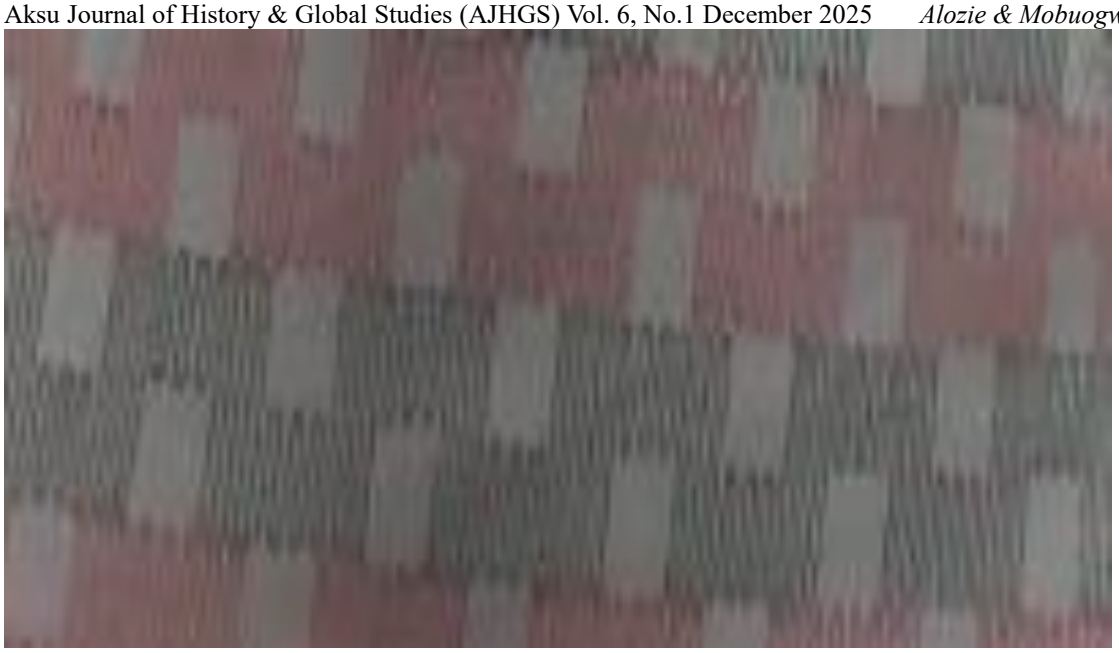


Ibanabi (Nsha) which means comb.[33] Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.



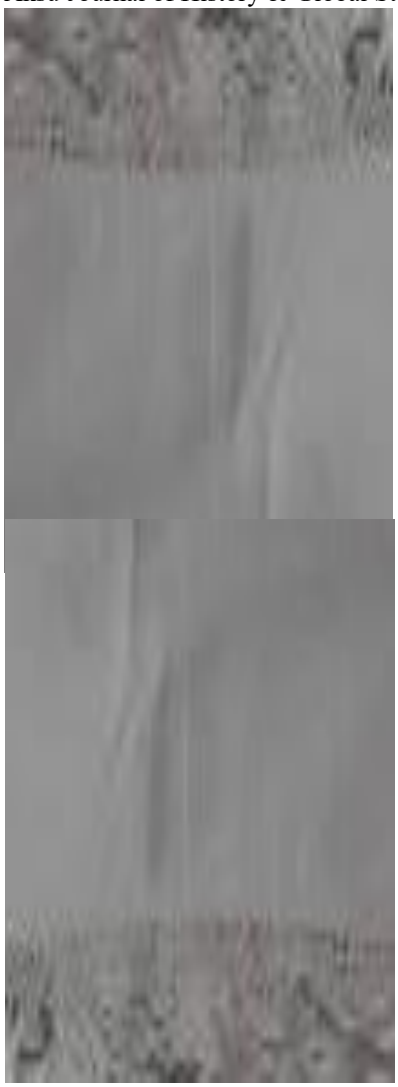
Mkpopu (Lace)[34]

Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.



Boda (boundary)[34]

Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.



Oja/Mpe/Akwa-Ocha (Work Cloth).[35] Source: Cloth displayed during an oral interview with O. Nzemeke and J. Nzemeke, Onicha Ukwu quarters, Ubulu-Ukwu, 02/02/18.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY, 1960-1980

These are just some of the myths which support cloth production in various societies. The information about the Igbo view of the world on the circle of life, social and economic values were coded and decoded using these types of cloths. This is because when cloth or textiles are used either symbolically or metaphorically, a new mode and feeling is created through exchange of ideas.36

Therefore, the traditional cloth is worn in Ubulu-Ukwu during special events like coronation, rituals, festivals, marriage and burial. This is one of how the society has helped to develop the entrepreneurship in cloth weaving and hence upheld its culture of cloth weaving. Besides the socio-political significance of traditional textiles or cloth, it has a certain economic significance. We have no figures of cloth produced during the period of study, but there is no doubt that a good deal of cloth must have been produced to serve the local consumption as well as the amount needed to be exchanged locally between Ubulu-Ukwu and her immediate neighbours.s. Ubulu-Ukwu had people coming in with their neighbors to purchase cloth. Therefore, Isichei noted that: .... trading in cloth among various parts of Nigeria and with other countries was among the key drivers of the Nigeria economic life during the pre-colonial era. 37

In the mid 19 th century though, more textile materials were being imported into West Africa at a cheaper rate by Manchester. With the introduction of Western education and Christianity, new job opportunities were created which changed the dress code of those that got white collar jobs. This growth minimized the dependence of the people on products of the local textile industry. This required that up to this point, the local textile industry was not subjected to revolutionary development as it would otherwise have been had it been kept to meet the local needs during the colonial rule. Moreover, because much patience was required to spin a moderate bald of thread the younger people could not cope with the necessary time for apprenticeship, nor had they the patience required for this enterprise. In addition, a large number of citizens started to wear imported instead of locally produced

clothes. This prompted Basden to comment that the fact that the Igbo people preferred imported textile was one of the examples of the old belief being ousted by the presence of cheap European cotton products38, the textile industry in Ubulu-Ukwu extended into the 20th century and the fact that the Igbo people produced their own textile was quite impressive because of the relevance of such clothes over the European ones; affection towards culture

Some Indigenous ceremonies that require such cloths which would have guaranteed its continuity were discouraged by western civilization. Additionally, the cloth weaving tradition was also facing some challenges at the time when St. Roses Grammar School was established shortly after independence in 1960. The school had a large number of young girls in Ubulu-Ukwu as Ubulu-Ukwu is one of the closest towns to Ubulu-Ukwu. By 1980, the Ubulu-Ukwu based Ezemu Girls Grammar School was established with an added fact that by this time the then governor of the defunct Bendel State, Prof. Ambrose Ali had announced that he had made free education to all. Consequently, the new school was inundated with almost all the young girls of the town and surrounding. It is observed that the new development or western civilization led to the neglecting of cloth weaving tradition held in the hands of few women which had a negative impact on the traditional cloth weaving in Ubulu-Ukwu.

Conclusion

The current paper provided a general perspective of the many un-addressed questions as far as cloth weaving tradition in the Aniocha region of Delta State is concerned, in terms of Ubulu-Ukwu, between C.1200-1980. The craft was discovered to be an ancient one and thus cannot be dated. In this work, we looked at the sources of raw materials as at the pre-colonial era up to the close of the period of study. It further examined the process involved in cloth weaving, and different kinds of cloths that were woven in Ubulu-Ukwu with different designs. Importance of traditional woven cloth and change and continuity in the local industry up to 1980 was also discussed to provide a good understanding of traditional textiles to expand the people's view about the cloths and increase their participation in traditional cloth weaving.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the taste of Ubulu-Ukwu people towards foreign clothes-first used clothes called "okirika" and the absence of training facilities to develop the local industries also led to the underdevelopment and unprogressively character of the craft. Furthermore, the post independent government were unable to improve the industrial sectors in the local areas such as Ubulu-Ukwu.

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