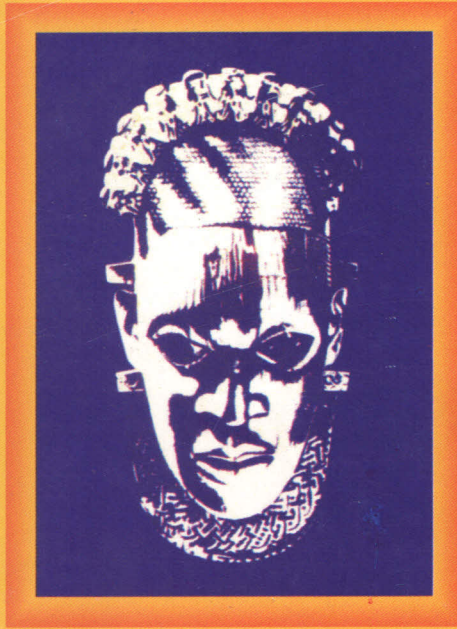


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Editorial Note

This volume of the Journal is extremely behind schedule. But as the cliché goes, it is better late than never. In compliance with our tradition, we bring before you a potpourri of articles from seasoned researchers. We hope that the papers in this volume will advance the frontiers of historical knowledge. We thank you for your sustained interest in Ilorin Journal of History and International Studies (IJOHIS).

Professor S.O. Aghalino
(Editor)

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**DEVELOPMENTS AND FLUCTUATIONS IN ILORIN TEXTILE
INDUSTRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY****Onagun Rasheed*****Abstracts**

The paper discusses the significance and values of Aso-Ofi craft to the development of the Ilorin Emirate in terms of income, revenue, employment, wealth creation, trade and market it had generated. The paper using oral interviews and some secondary sources, asserts that, the industry, which played prominent role in Ilorin economy crumbled in the late 1980s, as a result of the dwindling economic condition of the country that stemmed from the Structural Adjustment Programme and liberalization policy of Nigerian government. The study further states that, the effect of these policies like influx of undercapitalized and inadequately trained newcomers, importation of foreign textiles like Damask and lace, copying, undercutting, positioning of supply higher than demand, and the problem of debt, had downgraded, weakened and undersized the industry towards the close of the century.

Keywords:Textile Industry, Developments, Fluctuations, Twentieth Century, Ilorin

Introduction

Aso-Ofi is the popular hand-loomed clothe woven and produced in Ilorin and other parts of Yorubaland. Its unique historical value was borne-out of the effort of people to device a means to produce covering for their body. From the ancient times, people have used their endowed human and natural resources to make life more comfortable for them. In view of this, the traditional Nigerian communities had developed indigenous technology and ecological conditions of ingenuity.¹ Iron was developed as farm implements, utensil and war equipments. Animal skins were transformed to clothes and regalia. Bamboo tree products and soil were used to make shelter and pottery. Woods from timber were not only used to build canoe, but also to construct drainages to ease transportation. Palm oil has been

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helpful in soap-making, and most importantly, cotton had been planted and processed to weave clothes in several parts of Yorubaland. Before colonial contact, weaving flourished in central and Northern Yorubaland where Ilorin is situated. Scholars asserts that, through efficient use of vertical and horizontal loom, communities such as Ilorin, Iseyin, Oyo, Okene, Kano, Nupe, Kabba, Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, and some other parts of what is now called Nigeria, were famous for their high quality textile products, which were able to satisfy both local and foreign demands.² Ilorin has also been singled out as one of the largest area of textile production in Nigeria.³

In view of this, the paper reflects on the prominence and prosperity of the Ilorin weaving industry. In doing this, the study discusses the historical importance and uniqueness of Aso-Ofi in Ilorin in terms of usage, production, employment opportunities, marketing and distributive network. However, I conclude by discussing and emphasizing the impact of national economic down-turn on indigenous textile industry in Ilorin towards the end of the 20th century.

The Textile Industry in Ilorin

Aso-Ofi has been important because, it has been used by the indigenous and foreigners to satisfy and perform several functions. Different varieties of the indigenous hand-woven cloth had been used for several purposes ranging from ceremonies, rites, basic clothing, social, political and economic prestige. Variety like Sanyan often referred to as Sanyan baba aso (the king of cloth), is a prestigious fabric specially worn by kings and traditional chiefs in Ilorin, and other parts of Yorubaland. Alaari and Etu are worn by title holders in traditional ceremonies and functions.⁴ According to Lamb and Holms, Alaari is used by kings and chiefs to receive visitors into their palace.⁵ They are also specially worn by the groom and bride in marriages, wolimats and naming ceremonies in Ilorin. In ceremonies, they were sown as Ipele, Fila (cap), Gele (women head tie), and as ceremonial or family uniforms called Aso-ebi worn for specific occasions. More so, Etu is extensively used for funeral rite of important personalities throughout the Yorubaland. Itagbe, another important variety of hand-woven clothe is widely known for its ritual significance. Itagbe were commonly utilized by Yoruba chiefs as official attire. It is also very peculiar to the symbol of popular cult or fraternity

groups in Yorubaland, i.e. Ogboni and Osugbo. Oja is known for its religious and ritual functions among the Ogboni fraternity, and in the regalia of the Eyo masquerade. Similarly, Oja is also very useful as a basic cloth used domestically by women to tie babies to their back. Kijipa is another variety that is used for multiple purposes. According to Asakitipi, women used it as wrapper to be worn to various places, ranging from market to religious or festive occasions. It is also used to prevent miscarriages and to cure bareness as well as costume in the regalia of Egungun masquerades. Ifa priests usually prescribed it for childless women and those that experiences miscarriages.⁶

Another important and latest variety of Aso-Ofi called embroidery, is common among the well-to-do in the society. Embroidery is also commonly designed on other textile materials like ankara and kampala. Embroidery is like a stamp of African aesthetics on an outfit. Modern designs are given exotic embroidery patterns in order to marry western and African imprints. Because of the task and design involved in its production, it tagged a high price. Embroidery is used in marriage, wolimat, naming, church thanks giving, opening of new houses, and burial ceremonies among the upper class in Ilorin and other parts of Nigeria. Printing is another latest design worked on Aso-Ofi, which had attracted more fame to it from more users. Through the design, different patterns were printed on woven clothes.

The psychology behind the usage of Aso-Ofi by foreigners was in appreciation of the craft, experience, technology, innovation and fashion from Africa. In view of this, the white man uses Aso-Ofi to sew variety of styles, ranging from caps to shirts and even different African styles. African migrants residing in these foreign countries had also promoted and propagated their culture, by making use of the indigenous textile in naming, wedding ceremonies and other religious festivals. These benefits and uses of the industry had in one way, or the other, facilitated the economic development of Ilorin in the 20th Century.

Fluctuations and Developments in the Textile Industry in Ilorin

The decline of Oyo Empire and its eventual collapse in the 19th Century, diverted the transnational trade routes from old Oyo to Ilorin. This necessitated the emergence of Ilorin as an entrepot, and diverse skilled

people, such as textile artisans relocated from neighbouring town and villages to Ilorin. Most of the migrated Yoruba artisans joined their kinsmen in Okemale ward of the city. This exodus impacted a peculiar economic feature on the striking occupational polarity between Okemale and Aafin people of Ilorin. While the people of Okemale were predominantly cloth weavers, those of Aafin were mainly cattle dealers and traders in general merchandise, with a sprinkle of vizier and courtiers.⁷ Throughout the 19th century, therefore, weaving business was so prosperous to the extent that, some slaves in the North used the proceeds from textile manufacture to purchase their freedom.⁸ Since the 19th century, as well, weavers and other workers involved in Ilorin indigenous industries have contributed to the social, economic and commercial development of the city through payment of taxes to the emirate mostly in kind and later in cowries.⁹

Despite the fact that Ilorin was not a major producer of cotton, she produced surplus textiles and conveniently competed with other Yoruba towns, whose ecology was more favoured huge cotton production in the pre-colonial period. In fact, Ilorin indigenous textile was superior to her rivals in neighbouring communities and foreign textiles. In Macgregor's support of the nonpareil status of Ilorin indigenous textile, he asserted that "the natives of interior will not look at our cottons, preferring their own stronger goods".¹⁰ Similarly, the efforts of the British Cotton Growers Association (B.C.G.A) towards increasing cotton production and export in Ilorin Province also failed, due to an increasing competition from the local textile producers, whose appetite for cotton was almost at par with those of the trading firms.¹¹ Moreover, the increasing prices in foreign cotton goods during the First and Second World War, forced some people to return to the patronage of cotton cloth from the local textile industry, which in turn boosted the craft in Ilorin.¹²

According to Olutayo, colonialism and colonial development policy altered the fundamental liberty of cotton production in Western Nigeria. This alteration led to a massive shift from the production of cotton and indigenous textile, to the production of other cash crops such as cocoa.¹³ Prosperity in cocoa production enticed many cotton farmers and weavers to shift ground. Thus, there was decline of weaving industry in these Yoruba towns of the Western Nigeria. This development favoured

Ilorin, as people in these towns patronized Ilorin textile industry. In 1912, it was reported that a section of Gambari market in Ilorin was occupied entirely by prospective buyers of cotton cloth from Southern Nigeria.¹⁴ Thus, indigenous textile industry in Ilorin continued to prosper, as weavers relied on local raw cotton (Owu Adayeba), and those imported from Northern Nigeria, before the adoption of foreign imported textile materials in 1947. In view of this, most of the Yoruba cities, towns, hamlets and villages and foreigners relied heavily on Ilorin clothe, as a reliable textile market. The level of patronage, however, boosted the Ilorin indigenous industry to the extent that in 1922, apart from special traders, weavers and spinners generated the highest revenue to the tune of 96/- each to the Emirate,¹⁵ and weavers were also an important economic class in the province. In the Ilorin weaving cluster, demand for the traditional cloth has been sustained, not only by conservative local taste, but also by product innovation. Ilorin had distinguished itself from other Yoruba weaving towns, by the introduction in the 20th century, of more complex patterns, rather than traditional stripes and checks associated with Yoruba cloth, an innovation that appears to have come from early contact with Ghanaian weavers.¹⁶ The adoption of factory-made yarns in the early colonial period, facilitated increased production speed, greater innovations in design, and the development of Nigerian-based industrial yarn production with factories springing up in Kano, Lagos, Ibadan and Ilorin during the post-independent period.¹⁷

Before the 1950s, traders in Ilesha, Ede, Ibadan, Lagos, Onitsha, other Nigerian cities including oversea countries trooped in, to Ojude Oba market in Ilorin, where mini and major distributors assembled to transact their businesses. After the 1950s, some of these major local textile sellers discovered and realized that they could make more sales and monopoly by selling the bulk of their products directly in big markets in Lagos (Balogun, Oshodi market and Oke-Arin beside Masalasi alaso-oke), Oje market in Ibadan, Ede, Onitsha, and among the Ijeshas.¹⁸ Major clothe merchants travelled to Oje in Ibadan in eight days and Ede in seventeen days intervals. At a trip, they travelled with many buses, and heavy security back up.¹⁹

Internationally, Ilorin cloth merchants benefited profitably from business transactions with countries like Ghana, Sierra Leone, Dubai,

England, United States and other European nations. There are two means and channel of transactions. The first method was called 'exchange style', a model through which the local merchants used the Aso-Ofi to exchange with other foreign textile products such as Lace, Ankara, Guinea, and other materials. In the second process, business transactions were carried out through the middlemen, who served as intermediary between the local Aso-Ofi merchants and the foreign buyers. In these, Nigerians living abroad usually contacted and assessed the local merchants, whenever there was business opportunity. On many occasions, these middlemen supplied valuable and profitable business information cum innovation to both local Aso-Ofi merchants and their foreign partners.²⁰ With regards to human development, Aso-Ofi craft created employment for different categories of Ilorin people. The elegance and high status of Ilorin cloth led to its rising demand, since the colonial era, thereby making weaving an important source of employment, accumulation of wealth and social advancement.²¹ In Ilorin, weaving was virtually hereditary. Male children saw weaving as family occupation. The industry had since existed as a source of livelihood for the Ilorin people. In conformity with this, the Colonial government attempted to expand and modernize indigenous textile industry in Nigeria in the mid-1940s, under the Textile Development Scheme, incorporated in the Colonial Welfare and Development Act of 1945/46. With this, Textile Training Centers (TTC) was sited in Ilorin in February 1950, at Oke-Ebo Alaso.²²

The indigenous textile industry raised some Ilorin indigenes to the position of merchant class and important wealthy group. Major cloth merchants and master weavers such as Alh. AbdulBaki Baba Elesin Anifowose, Alh. Akanbi Ita, Alh. AbdulRaman Alayeloke, Alh. Saka Oniyan (Alh AbdulBaki Ile Eleyin), Alh. AbdulKareem AbdulMumini Olohunje, Alh. Oloola, Alh. Isiaka Agboji, Alh. Bayo Alaro, Alh. Baba Igbaja and Alh. Baba Alalubosa, who got the contract to weave the whole Aso-Ofi clothes used for Chief Obafemi Awolowo mother's burial.²³

The indigenous textile industry created job opportunities to several minor or part-time weavers called Alagbawun. According to Olaoye, Ilorin indigenous textile industry employed six thousands weavers.²⁴ Similarly, Kate Meagher also estimated that the industry employed ten thousand full-time weavers, with an untold additional number of weavers working in

outlying villages and other Yoruba towns under the employ of Ilorin weaving masters.²⁵ Most of the merchants have up to one hundred Alagbawun, working under them, waiting to be paid according to the level of work done. In this category, some engaged in the craft as supplement to some other jobs. Some engaged in it to gather capital through daily contribution called Ajo either to become independent or to engage in other businesses.

Others in the part-time category engaged in the job to get funds to sponsor their academic and professional carrier in Western and Quranic (Ile kewu) education. Weaving craft has, therefore, helped to increase the number of educated elites in the 1970s and 1980s. They weaved mostly after returning from school on daily basis, or during the school holidays. Many of the important personalities in Ilorin have been at one-time, or the other part-time or full-time weavers. For instance, Barrister Saka Yusau (S.A.N), former Secretary to Kwara State Government in 1999-2003, Barrister Sikiru Sholagberu, former Ilorin West Local Government Chairman, Dr. Ibrahim Gambari, and more notable figures of Ilorin have once weaved to earned a living in the past.²⁶

More so, there existed those that were apprentices, who were meant to learn the craft from their masters (Oga) for some period of time, usually between two to three years, after which they were expected to become free to establish their own businesses. Already, from the 1950s, there was a high decentralization of training and production process in the industry. It became increasingly common for apprentices to be trained by masters, whom they are not related by blood, as masters took on apprentices who are the younger relatives of friends, neighbors, and customers, or may take in apprentices as Koranic students (Koranic teachers who double as masters).²⁷ This development resulted in increasing penetration of weavers from outside the original Oyo migrant lineage, as well as to the incorporation of non-Ilorin, non-Muslim and even non-Yoruba groups into weaving.²⁸ This category of Aso-Ofi specialists, became consistent and successful due to their wealth of experience and knowledge gathered during the training process.

A period of expansion since the 1970s has drawn in labour from surrounding non-Yoruba and non-Muslim communities, as well as incorporating women into the traditionally male activity of narrow loom

weaving.²⁹ At its peak in the early 1990s, the weaving industry was estimated to have a turnover of over US\$12million annually.³⁰

Prospect and Challenges

Structural adjustment reforms have created an economic environment that has been more daunting than enabling, involving rapid devaluation, skyrocketing inflation, and rampant unemployment.³¹ The onset of Nigeria's structural adjustment Programme in 1986, subjected informal producers to intense economic pressure.³² Between 1985 and 1999, the Nigerian currency lost 99% of its value, and urban dwellers faced an average annual inflation rate of more than 200%.³³ Massive public and private sector retrenchment generated catastrophic level of unemployment, leading to high rates of entry into all manner of informal activities, including cloth weaving in Ilorin; more than half of existing weaving enterprises have started up since the onset of structural adjustment.³⁴ Similarly, economic restructuring also triggered a rapid rise in educated and advantaged class and the retrenched and underpaid civil servants as well as formal sector workers and unemployed graduates flooding into the weaving enterprises.

Influx of people such as young, undercapitalized and inadequately trained producers into the craft reduced the standard of training, exploded the problem of copying, undercutting and the production of substandard goods, which have brought the industry precipitously.³⁵ The promising dynamics of the early adjustment period had been squandered in the face of crippling levels of competition, shrinking market, and State neglect of the indigenous textile industry.v Weavers have also maintained that, annulment of the peaceful, legitimate, democratic, free and fair 1992 Presidential poll by the then Military Head of State, Ibrahim Babangida Administration, had warranted stiff economic sanction from the international community, which had depressing and pessimistic consequences, on the indigenous textile industry in Ilorin. Business relations and connections with western nations, as well as regional African States were adversely affected by the boycotts and sanctions against Nigeria.³⁶

According to Leena Koni Hoffman, Structural Adjustment Programme of 1986, and the liberalization of the economy through the

1990s, led to the flooding of Nigeria by cheap Asian textiles and other goods. Local industries in the North were, therefore, thrust into an environment they were ill-equipped to compete with, and this led to their end and collapse.³⁷ The crisis in the Ilorin weaving cluster began to bite harder in 1998, when the liberalization of textile imports was added on deep-rooted problems of over-competition and quality adulteration, which resulted in a dramatic decline in the use of Yoruba weaving cloth, as uniform wear for celebrations, and a shift to the use of imported damask and lace from Asia and Europe.³⁸

According to weavers, this policy was championed by the former Nigerian first lady, Chief Mrs Stella Obasanjo (now late). She was accused of having a damask company abroad, or having a huge business interest of sort in the sector. This assumption was borne-out of her role model philosophy in encouraging public office holders, and the masses to make use of damask and other foreign textile products. The role model philosophy was demonstrated by her excessive use of damask and other foreign textile materials on public functions and occasions. This was copied by Governors wives, female Ministers and other top government functionaries also followed suit.³⁹ Throughout her time, the extreme and excessive use of damask as head tie, otherwise known as Gele, and wrapper, or Ipele, and foreign lace, eroded, corroded and weakened the Aso-Ofi industry in Ilorin. The business was badly affected to the extent that, most weavers and master weavers sought other means of livelihood in unstable and under-employed jobs, such as taxi driving, tokunbo Carriers or smuggling also known as Fayawo, political thugery, hard labourers, illegal migrating and criminality in Saudi Arabia, errand messengers to local politicians also known as Sondore, and so on.⁴⁰ According to Alh Sulyman Oba, a senior member of the Tawakalitu Guild Association, 'as a result of the collapse of the business, a good number of our members died, some fell sick, while several others had stroke'.⁴¹

Split, division and separation of the old patrimonial guild association had a profound and weighty effect on the industry. Tawakalitu Guild Association had been in existence since the pre-colonial period, and has regulated price, market volume, quality, days, and entry requirements. The guild association had also settled disputes, provided security for members travelling on market days, and provided social welfare assistance

in terms of loans and periodic contributions called Ajo to members. Influx and exodus of new people into the informal sector in response to the structural adjustment policy of the government had accommodated inexperienced weavers' merchant class into the industry.⁴²

These newcomers accused and challenged the old Tawakalitu Guild Association of capitalist tendency, marginalizing profits and monopolizing leadership, and therefore solicited for, and in 1990, founded an alternative guild association called Olohunkunmi. The fame and admiration of this alternative guild association had an unpleasant effect on the growth of the indigenous textile industry in Ilorin. According to Kate Meagher, they had disrupted the regulatory capacity of cluster associations, and completely undermined the regulation of prices and quality that had previously obtained. Professionals and experienced members of the Tawakalitu Guild Association often accused them of being amateur, saboteur, and newcomers that had weakened and downbeat the industry. They were referred to as Alarobo, otherwise, known as market saboteur, spoilers and desperados, who are desperate to bend on selling their products at any available price. They were also referred to as fraudsters and criminals that specialized in stealing weaving materials and the finished products, so as to sell them at any available prices. They have drastically reduced the profits and values of Aso-Ofi industry in Ilorin. For instance, a bundle that was formerly sold for N900, N1,200, 1,500 depending on the quality, was reduced to N700, N1,000, and 1,200 respectively.⁴³

The terrible and agonizing activities of these saboteurs generated a situation whereby, the supply of Aso-Ofi was higher than demand in Ilorin, and markets at Ede, Ibadan and Lagos. Even when the weavers and merchants could not sell their products, they proceeded to produce more of other styles, thinking that other styles may attract sales and profits. This circumstance compelled them to reduce their product's price just for it to go out of their presence, so as to avoid decadence and total loss. Higher supply and lower demand often led to the problem of debt and loss in the industry.⁴⁴

Absence of permanent working avenue, or spaces had downbeat the weaving industry in Ilorin. Importance of Ilorin as capital city of Kwara State had engaged her in secondary and tertiary economic activities, including manufacturing, trading, transportation, housing and other

services.⁴⁵ All these activities have not only rapidly occupied the spaces, they also increased the population of the city. As a result of this, Ilorin population had rapidly increased over the years. For instance, in 1911 population of Ilorin was 36,343; 40,994 in 1953, 208,546 in 1964 and 532,008 or 581,929 in 1991.⁴⁷ The factor of population pressure has increased land value, usage and competition. This had an adverse effect on the weaving sites; as most weavers were not land owners, and were often evacuated when such sites were needed for other purposes. For instance, the Oke-Ebo Alaso Textile Training Center that had accommodated more than 1000 weavers, has been acquired by the Kwara State Government to construct Oke-Ebo Public Primary School in 1970.⁴⁸ Similarly, large weaving sites at Ita-Kudimoh and Ode Safura, have been used to erect several residential buildings in 1996. Moreover, several other weaving sites at Pakata, Ita-Ogunbo, Okelele, Abayawo, Isale- Banni, Isale-Aluko, Alanamu, and other places, had since turned to schools, hospital, public roads, and residential buildings.⁴⁹

Another major challenge of the indigenous textile industry was that it lacks assistance, support and backing from the Federal and State governments. The foremost problem with the government is that, it enacted policies, but failed to implement those programmes to develop and revamp the indigenous and small scale industries in Nigeria. Among such bogus and faux efforts was the defunct Nigeria Industrial Development Bank (NIDB), established in 1964, to provide loans to develop small scale and indigenous firms, but it failed in this direction. The indigenization decree of 1972, gave birth to the defunct Nigeria Bank for Commerce and Industry (NBCI) that was later merged with the NIDB to form the new bank of industry, recorded no encyclopedic success in developing, as well as in empowering the local or indigenous textile industry.⁵⁰ Similarly, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) established in the early 1990s, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) and the Small and Medium Equity Investment Scheme (SMEEIS) established by the Olusegun Obasanjo administration in 1999, had also amounted to waste and unproductive, ventures, as most of the indigenous firms (including the Ilorin indigenous textile industry) they were meant to save, crashed, waned and died. According to most weavers, these agencies only organized symposium and seminars on Aso-Ofi, but

never helped to empower and develop the industry.

Conclusion

In Ilorin, Aso-Ofi industry was enormously the largest employer of labour, and had empowered and promoted several people to the wealthy and prominent class in the society. The industry had generated a significant and substantial revenue and income to the people through its wider trade network, both nationally and internationally. The uniqueness and distinctiveness of Ilorin Aso-Ofi industry, had created an enormous reputation for the craft, and its practitioners since the pre-colonial period.

However, the once booming and thriving industry met its Waterloo and decline initially in the face of the nation's economic challenges of the Structural Adjustment Programme in the late 1980s, and the liberalization of foreign textile materials in 1998. These two policies did not only decline, deteriorate and drop the value of the industry, but also motivated other challenges like splitting of guild association that warranted uninhibited entrance of undercapitalized and inadequately trained newcomers. This resulted in the problems of copying and undercutting of the production of substandard goods, positioning of the supply to be higher than demand, and the problem of debt. Consequently, weavers and master weavers resulted in alternative means of livelihood in underemployed, menial and undignified jobs, while many of them fell sick with ailments like stroke, as high death rate were also recorded in their midst.

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