

## Weaving in Ekiti Land, Nigeria: The Gender Perspective

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**Abstract:** Weaving in Nigeria is an ancient craft and the evolution of the weaving industry in the country, like in any part of the world, must have resulted from the effort of the people to devise a means to produce coverings for their naked bodies. The value attached to clothing made weaving one of the earliest basic arts of civilization among the Yoruba people of South West Nigeria. This craft was based on gender and age. Different tasks in craft were undertaken by children, men and women. In Ekiti land, Eastern Yorubaland in Nigeria, there exist a weaving tradition quite different from what obtains in other part of Yorubaland. Basically, both men and women participate in the cloth weaving process in Yorubaland with the exception of Ekiti, where the existence of preponderance of skilled women weavers with their peculiar weaving technology obtains. Cloth weaving in Ekiti land is therefore, distinctly gendered so much that all attempts made even by the Colonial government to encourage the indigenous men to participate proved abortive. The main purpose of this study is to investigate women's role in weaving industry in Ekiti land. In this study, attempts are made to explore other factors that have contributed to the failure of all attempts made particularly by the Colonial government at encouraging Ekiti men to participate in weaving. The study also analysis, the reasons for the continued dominant role of women in weaving in this part of Nigeria. Other data used were collected through interviews with professional weavers and knowledgeable individuals, other supplementary data came from interviews with indigenous men and women. Data were collected from the National Archives, Ibadan, Nigeria.

**Key words:** Cloth weaving, Ekiti land, gender, weaving technology, women weavers, Yorubaland

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### INTRODUCTION

The study area is located in the Eastern part of Yorubaland, Nigeria. Ekiti expands to Kwara State on the North, Ondo State on the South, Osun on the West. It has an area of about 2,100 square miles. Ekiti State was carved out of the former Ondo State in 1996 with its capital city at Ado-Ekiti. It has developed rapidly, economically in an unprecedented height, attracting many dwellers and swelling the population.

It is impossible to quantify the number of people involved in textile production and related activities in this area. Nonetheless, 19th century observers gave valuable impressionistic data about the enormous cross section of people involved directly and indirectly in cloth production, its division of labour and the quantity of output. These descriptions often indicate that tasks were gender-specific and scholars have tended to view specialized professions and crafts as adhering to rigid gendered, social and ideological planes (Oyewumi, 1997; Byfield, 2002). Yet in occupations considered all male or all female, one could find examples of women and men engaging in the jobs.

The narrow loom in Yorubaland for instance is often considered the exclusive purview of male weavers, while the vertical loom is associated with the female weavers, in this study, it has been shown that the correlation between

gender and type of loom is not fixed. The need to explore more income generating activities has encouraged women in Ekiti to begin weaving with narrow looms.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

There are two basic weaving apparatuses used by weavers in Ekiti land, namely vertical and the horizontal looms.

**The vertical loom and its product:** The loom derived its name from the rectangular structure, which made the warp threads go perpendicularly from the ground to the upper point of the loom.

Women in many communities in Nigeria use it for their domestic needs. Spinning cotton into yarn and weaving on this loom are included in the range of accomplishments expected of any married women. The weavers wrap the warp thread around the top cross beam and the lower cross pieces of the frame and the warp threads are manipulated by heddle stick locally called *apasa*. The work is kept at approximately chest level by shifting the cloth down and around the cross beam as it is woven, until the starting point is reached at completion. The length of the cloth is about twice the height of the loom and not wider than the cross beam of the frame. The cloth produced is about 91.44 cm by 182.88 cm.

Cloths made on the vertical loom called Kijipa were thick in texture and heavy, while cloth made from locally hand spin thread is often jokingly referred to as *Iya ta ni sun le mi?* (mother, who is sleeping on me?). Kijipa or Ikale cloths were woven either with indigo-dyed yarns or pure white or creamy-white yarns. Sometimes, these were conveniently combined to form patterns. The blue-black type was commonly used by women, while the creamy white type was preferred by men. The cloth was extensively used in Yorubaland particularly in domestic, religious as well as funerary contexts. In the past, women used it as wrapper, which could be worn at any social function. The kijipa cloth was often prescribed by the *babalawo* (herbalists) and cult priests for childless women and women troubled by *Emere* or *Abiku omo* (the wandering spirits of children given to the prank or entering into pregnant women and being born only to die for the sheer relish of mischief) (Aremu, 1982). The cloth was believed to be an effective cure for this problem. The production of this type of cloth continued to be an important source of income for Ekiti women well into the 1940s.

**Horizontal loom:** The horizontal loom is so called because of the structural arrangement that makes the warped thread to run virtually parallel to the ground in front of the weaver. The horizontal loom was used by men in pre-colonial Yorubaland with the noticeable exception of Eastern Yorubaland. This loom was introduced into Ekiti land in the 19th century from Iseyin, Oyo and Ilorin after the Yoruba civil wars.

Unlike the vertical loom, which was operated in doors, the horizontal loom is an outdoor activity. The weaver sits on a bench under a shelter, outside the house usually in the company of several other weavers. The weaving apparatus is suspended from a rafter of the shelter and connected to 2 ft pedals. A huge ball of carefully arranged threads were placed on a wooden board weighted with a heavy stone, at least, six ft away from the weaver. The warped threads are stretched out parallel to the ground and passed over the cross bar into the weaving apparatus. A boat type shuttle-oko, with a moveable bobbin-eye used which the weaver manipulates by tossing it from one hand to the other, through the deep shed. Like, the shedding sticks-*apasa* used on the vertical loom, the pedals connected to the needles help separate the odd and even threads. In this manner, the thread which passed through the eyelet of the shuttle, interlaced with the warp thread to produce the woven cloth. The cloth, *Aso oke* or *Aso ofi* produced on the horizontal loom is a long continuous strip about 10-13 cm wide and 6.35 cm long, 10 strips of which are sewn together to make a wrapper.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Weaving as gendered profession:** Weaving was regarded as a normal household task by many African societies. The division of labor in the household was based on gender and age. Different tasks were allocated to children, men and women. The children normally perform the task of washing new thread while, the adults are responsible for the skilled task of weaving. In places, where both men and women were involved in weaving, each used different types of loom. Women in Yorubaland and Hausaland, traditionally wove on the vertical loom while, men used the horizontal treadle loom (Picton, 1953).

Textile production started first on a modest scale in the houses for the purpose of satisfying family needs by women who traditionally wove on an upright rectangular frame loom usually referred to as the vertical loom *Egboro*. Weaving was done within the household and it involved normally the women and the children who assisted in the winding of yarn. In the past, weaving was not the full time specialty of many women, but is numbered among the range of domestic skills that women should acquire. As in other parts of Yorubaland, young girls were taught by their mothers to clean, gin and spin cotton and later to weave. This domestic form of spinning and weaving is reflected in the Yoruba proverb, *Owu ti iya ba gbon, oun ni omo yio ran* (it is the cotton which, the mother cards that the child will spin), which implies that mothers are responsible for not only training their daughters to weave but also for inculcating in them proper social comportment as well (Renne, 1993).

With the introduction of treadle loom in the 19th century from the Nupe and Hausa communities men in Yorubaland adopted weaving on the treadle loom. Women dominated the weaving industry in Ekiti land, initially, using largely the vertical looms even though, men in other Yoruba towns joined in the weaving enterprise particularly, when the treadle loom was introduced to Yorubaland in the 19th century from the neighboring Nupe and Hausa communities. Men in Ekiti land and Eastern Yoruba generally did not emulate them. Consequently, when the treadle loom was introduced into the area later in the 19th century, the women folk gradually shifted and adopted this new technology. However, the cloth produced on the vertical loom continued to be in demand in the coastal trade with Europeans and the women in Ekiti land remained important suppliers.

The domination of weaving by women in Ekiti contrasts with the practice in some other communities in Yorubaland such as Oyo, Iseyin and Ilorin, where men dominated the industry. In all these ancient towns, weaving was and still is men's occupation done on the horizontal treadle looms placed in a secluded square or at

the back of their compounds, which provided some space, where the warp can be conveniently stretched. Weaving for the women and girls was done on the vertical looms fixed directly on the wall in a room or the veranda of the house, where they may be seen sitting on the floor or stool.

The few male weavers in Ekiti land during the pre-colonial period were immigrants from Oyo, Iseyin and Ilorin, as noted by Lloyd, in his study of Craft organization in Ado-Ekiti in the early 1950s, that it is women who weave most of the cloth using vertical looms; the men weavers in Ado Ekiti (there were 10) were all migrants from Oyo (Lloyd, 1953).

**Colonial government's attempt at encouraging Ekiti men to take up weaving as a career:** In the mid-1940s, the British colonial government began an organized attempt to introduce European-hand-weaving technology on broad-loom into Nigeria under the Textile Development Scheme incorporated in the Colonial Welfare and Development Act of 1945/46. The modernization of the local textile industry therefore formed a significant part of the government's plan for developing the economy of Nigeria. Part of the rationale for establishing the Textile Training Center was to provide careers for the discharged soldiers (ex-service men) as part of the colonial resettlement policy as remarked by the textile officer, Knibb, in 1948 that so far the policy has been to find a lucrative work for the ex-service men against the local weavers (NAI, 1949).

The framework of the Textile Development Scheme was the establishment of 8 territorial textile centers each in the care of a European textile officer, with the objectives of studying indigenous methods of cloth production; introducing improved equipment (broad loom or floor loom) and new techniques and training spinners, weavers and dyers on how to use them (NNAI, 1946).

The Textile Training Centers (TTC) were set up at sites chosen either because, they were existing weaving centers or because of their access to locally grown cottons. The first center established was sited at Ado-Ekiti in 1946 and Oyo in 1947 and a third in Auchi in 1948; others followed at Aba, Kano, Minjibir and Sokoto in 1949 and at Ilorin in February 1950.

Although, the Ado-Ekiti and Oyo weaving centers were both within the Yoruba-speaking region of Nigeria, the Ado-Ekiti center was set up against the background of a very different local weaving tradition from that of Oyo. Ado-Ekiti was a region where, women using the vertical loom, Egboro and the narrow treadle loom had dominated the weaving industry throughout much of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

It was initially hoped at the inception of the textile training center that there would be equal numbers of

men and women weavers and spinners along with the ex-service men (NNAI, 1946). The 120 trainees who enrolled at the center in 1948, were predominantly male, although several women came to learn spinning for short periods. Thus, the stage was thought to have been set for the appropriation of hand-woven cloth production by men. However, this was not long lasting as the ex-service men proved to be reluctant trainees. Those ex-service men who made good progress, while in training became discouraged as they realized that their success depended on their own handwork. This was partly because, hand weaving at the centre did not fulfill their expectation of promises of government employment after the war. This is the case because, the feeling still prevails among Ekiti young men that weaving is not proper research for them even though, such feelings do not exist in other parts of Yorubaland where men are the principal weavers (Renne, 1993). On this issue, the textile officer observed, that I undertook to engage in Ado Native Authority any service men wanting to research but (when I) explained the terms (they) were turned down (by these men).

Their contention was that they were promised jobs in government employ at standard wages or jobs as instructors in weaving schools (NNAI, 1946). In other words, many of these ex-service men expected they would be weaving-instructors at the centers and not to engage in weaving as an occupation. Weaving was considered to be women's work and as such beneath them.

Indeed, the failure of the textile development scheme to train former service men to weave and to market-hand-woven cloth in Ekiti land may be attributed to local ideas about gender and work. Rather than seeing themselves as weavers, the men who entered the programme saw themselves as employees of the government with their monthly stipends of £2 as inadequate salaries. It was therefore, not surprising that these men stopped weaving on leaving the center. The textile officer in charge indignantly reported their indolence as protest

It is disappointing to note that some men with their equipment are still relying after 12 months, on prestige to earn them a living and have not yet started to do any weaving seriously. A production of a yard or so per month seems insufficient to keep them going (NAI, 1949)

Only ex-service men from Ilorin and Oyo where, a tradition of men's horizontal loom weaving had existed applied themselves to the course in their own region. However, the promise made by the Colonial government in 1949 to give assistance to ex-trainees of the center made some women weavers in Ado-Ekiti and environs to shore aside the view, the European hand looms and spinning wheels used at the center were too expensive.

Ekiti women weavers enrolled in large numbers at the center and by the end of 1949, the center had been responsible for the training of 165 spinners and 80 weavers, all women (NAI, 1949). Thus, the prediction of 1948 came to reality. Textile officer, Knibb:

I .... try to find suitable, difficult and expensive cloths for men to weave, but even on these style I foresee that women will eventually oust them (NAI, 1949)

Whereas, the use of capital-intensive weaving technology in the production of commercial, luxury cloth is often associated with men weavers elsewhere, the Ekiti experience presents a permutation of this pattern. When the British colonial authority introduced European style floor loom (broad looms) to Ekiti, the weavers trainees who were taught at the Textile Center were usually men, setting the stage for the appropriation of hand woven cloth production by men. However, rather than being superseded by men weavers, women appropriated the technology introduced by the British and adopted production methods formerly associated with men.

It is evident from the study that men were not barred by tradition from cloth weaving in Ekiti land as in the Eastern part of Nigeria where it was a taboo for men to engage in weaving. In Akwete for instance, there is the story of a young man who was once hard-up and so took to weaving in order to find the wherewithal to maintain his aged mother. The entire community rose up against him, accused him of having broken a taboo against the earth goddess and ostracized him. When a short, while later, he died, his untimely death was attributed to his having desecrated the land (Ukeje, 1962).

Many Ekiti men however, expressed the belief that since the provision of money to meet the financial obligation of the home is principally undertaken by men, as the primary bread winners and heads of households, men should have the most remunerative and prestigious occupation i.e. farming, especially cash crop like cocoa which is believed to yield more income. The following recommendations regarding weaving by Knibb, the Textile officer in 1948, suggested that both British colonial officials and Ekiti men and women also shared this view to some extent.

I suggest that weaving (in government connection) is not suitable for men in this province but very suitable for women (not in any government connection) as a part-time occupation. Cocoa at £120 is a far better source of remuneration than weaving could ever be and men usually cannot stand the monotony of weaving with no exercise or diversion (NAI, 1949)

The remark by the British colonial official that cocoa is a far better source of remuneration than weaving could ever be is an overstatement. Admittedly, cocoa prices fared well at £17.5s in 1931 per ton, averaged £19.36 throughout 1936. The rise of cocoa price from £120 per ton in 1950/51-£196 per ton in 1955/56 brought increasing affluence to cocoa farmers. On the whole, it is however, difficult to determine the profit margin on a ton of cocoa. Although, women engaged in independent vocations such as weaving and pottery, nevertheless, they still worked on their husbands' farms and also helped in marketing the produce of the farm, thereby generating additional income for the women weavers.

Similar ideas were reflected in the responses given by Ekiti women explaining why women rather than men weave. For example, a female weaver remarked that Ekiti men are too proud and will be feeling shy to stay in a spot and weave. This view was also the general idea of the British colonial officials in Ekiti district that women's work (weaving) is characterized by patience and empathy, whereas, men's work is associated with authority and action (Callaway, 1980). Consequently, upon the predominance of women in weaving industry, it is rare in Ekiti land to have a concentration of weavers in a compound that could be referred to as weaving families comparable to what existed in other weaving towns of Oyo, Iseyin and Ilorin. This was bound to happen in an industry dominated by women. Even when, young girls picked up the art of weaving informally from their mothers and relations, after marriage, the girls left such family compound for their husband's compound who might not necessarily be weavers. This was unlike other parts of Yorubaland where weaving was dominated by the male, who were constant factors in the family compound even after marriage, thus, providing the opportunity of having well organized weaving family compounds. For example, in Ilorin, most children of weavers were born into the industry and it was virtually hereditary, particularly for the male children who saw weaving first and foremost as a family occupation (Olaoye, 2002). In addition, while male weavers in places like Iseyin informally learned the craft as a member of a weaving family (Bray, 1968). Ekiti women usually learnt through apprenticeship. Most of older weavers interviewed, learnt weaving as an apprentice in neighboring towns, housed by the master weaver.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident, in this study that Ekiti land has a weaving tradition that is quite different from other Yoruba towns. In the days of the Textile Training Center, despite the colonial desire to encourage ex-service men to learn

weaving as a source of employment, hand weaving in Ekiti land remains dominated by women. The fact that men continue to dominate the weaving industry in other notable towns in Yorubaland, suggests that this gender-specific notion about bodily component and activities and the ability to withstand the monotony of weaving is no more than a local perspective. The domination of women in weaving industry in Ekiti land could be said to have emanated from the idea of domestication of women; the notion that women's place and preoccupation is at home taking care of the children and household chores. The fact that the vertical loom associated with women is an indoor activity further reinforces this fact. Both in the past and present, weaving in Ekiti land continued to be a female preserve. This is a tradition that has been found too difficult to alter.

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