

ENTREPRENEURSHIP: IMPACT OF AKWETE CLOTH REINVENTION ON CAPACITY BUILDING

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Abstract

Today, the Nigerian labour market is oversubscribed and mostly saturated with paper certificate degree holders without entrepreneurial skills. Nigerian universities, on yearly bases, churn out thousands of graduates with little or no job opportunities in sight. It is in light of the above that the Nigerian University Commission introduced Entrepreneurship in Nigerian universities. Despite this, students pay little attention to the aspect of practical training except for passing their exams hence defeating the actual intended outcome. The importance of entrepreneurial skills in the present global economic situation cannot be overemphasized. This researcher is perturbed by the rising unemployment level in Nigeria and therefore believes that the reinvention of the Akwete cloth weaving, particularly among the Ndoki people, will help cushion the adverse effect of the geometrical increase of unemployment in the country. It is imperative to note that the Akwete weaving industry, which was at its peak in the early 20th century, provided not just skill but served as a major source of sustainable income for families. Unfortunately, this once-thriving industry has become a shadow of itself with little interest and patronage. Methodologically, the research is qualitative and historically contextualised. An oral interview was used to elicit relevant data required for this research. The writer is of the view that the reinvention and modernization of this industry will not only rekindle the interest of its producers but will also attract patronage. It will also enhance capacity building among youths and reduce youth unemployment in Nigeria, specifically in the Southeast.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, reinvention, capacity building

Introduction

Cloth weaving is one of the earliest ingenuities evolved by man in recorded history, which the Ndoki people, who are either found in Abia, Rivers or Akwa Ibom States, are renowned for.

Oral tradition in Akwete and generally in Ndoki is consistent with the claim that the Akwete cloth had become famous during the 1850s. However, Akwete cloth weaving had been in existence before the arrival of the Portuguese traders around the 15th century. Intelligence reports had it that the Potokiris were trading on the Akwete and Ijebu cloths which they sold to Congo, Gold Coast and Brazil during 1500. By implication, therefore, the actual origin of the Akwete weaving predates the arrival of the Portuguese traders in Nigeria.

Cloth weaving is an ancient craft by women in Ndokiland dating to the early new Stone Age and before the arrival of the Portuguese traders when they began to make a rough kind of clothing from the fibres of flax and raffia plants. Weaving is described as the orderly interlacing of fibres and pressing them together to make the cloth.

In Nigeria, cloth weaving is universally practised in most rural areas and some cities like Akwete, Ilorin, Iseyin Abeokuta, Okene, Benin, Sokoto, Borno, Kano, Bida and Iseyin area among others. Raffia and cotton are most widely used in cloth weaving in Nigeria.

The economic, cultural, political and social importance of cloth cannot be ignored or wished away. Before the introduction of coinage currency in Nigeria, cloth was used as a currency item. It is worn for body beautification and decoration, and ceremonies. There are different types of cloth-making among various ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Ndoki people are known for the production of the famous traditional Akwete cloth, and the Yoruba are famous for Aso-Oke traditional fabric weaving.

The Igbo also are known widely for Akwete-cloth weaving which is done by women. Akwete cloth is a special woven fabric made by Igbo women in the Ndoki area near Aba in Abia State. It is originally referred to as "Akwa Miri" (Cloth of the water), meaning towel. Akwete cloth weaving is said to be as old as the Igbo nation. Because of the dexterity of the weavers who demonstrated evincing great mastery of technique and beauty of design, the art of Akwete-cloth weaving has a long history and socio-cultural relevance to the Igbo and the Ndoki people.

However, Akwete cloth comes in different colours and designs. Some are in the patterns of red and black designs, interwoven in geometric patterns on a white background which is favoured by Igbo men. It is mainly used as a towel for bathing. The Akwete cloths, woven from sisal-hemp fibres, are of coarse type, used by masqueraders and by warriors as headgears, while those made from raffia fibres are used on religious occasions like the Ozo title taking and for mourning by women.

But the most popular Akwete cloth is the type of cotton fabric woven from cotton fibres in colourful patterns; the weavers have much preference for bright and strong colours like red and yellow. These modernized cotton woven Akwete cloths of different shapes, sizes and

patterns are used for traditional ceremonies and as uniforms for organizations, especially women's organizations. It is imperative to observe that the Akwete cloths are currently being used for the production of special handbags and shoes. Traditionally, the raw cotton fibres that surround and protect cotton seeds do undergo some processes before use, namely: First, ginning process, by which the cotton seeds are removed from the fibres by rolling a rod over the cotton ball. Second, the bowing process, which involves making cotton fibres by flicking the string of a small bow against them until they look like cotton wool

Scope of the Study

This study covers the reinvention of the Akwete cloth as an imperative for encouraging entrepreneurial skills among youths. This writer is aware of the fact that the Ndoki people are not the only weavers in Nigeria; since this work is not a comparative study, the interest shall be confined to that of the Akwete cloth woven by the Ndoki people. The area of this study is Ndoki in Ukwa East local government of Abia State, and the period to be covered shall be between the periods of colonialism through independence, military and successive civilian administrations.

The area of this study is known as Ndoki, which is located in Ukwa East Local Government Area in the present-day Abia State in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Some of their kits and kins are also found in Rivers State and Akwa-Ibom State. They speak a dialectal variation of the Igbo language. The story of their Igbo origin is not yet very clear. The Ndoki people claim Igbani origin. By this, they claim that they migrated from the Atlantic area. This claim of a riverine origin gives them an air of difference (nay superiority) from the regular Igbo, especially in their attitude to life. This issue of origin will come to the fore again when the researchers try to examine and investigate the reasons for their balkanization between three (3) different states and their actual origin. The Asa people are their neighbours in the east, while the Ikwerre border them in the west. The Opobos are in the southern part. They all are otherwise considered the people of the Niger Delta.

Statement of Problem

Suffice it to categorically state that today, the Nigerian labour market is oversubscribed and mostly saturated with paper certificate degree holders without commensurate entrepreneurial skills. Nigerian universities, on yearly bases, are churning out thousands of graduates with little or no job opportunities in sight. It is in light of the above that the Nigerian University Commission introduced Entrepreneurship as a General Studies in Nigerian universities. Despite this, students pay too little attention to the aspect of practical training except for passing their exams hence defeating the actual intended outcome. The importance of entrepreneurial skills in the present global economic situation cannot be overemphasized.

This researcher is perturbed by the rising unemployment level in Nigeria and therefore believes that the reinvention of the Akwete cloth weaving, particularly among the Ndoki people, will help cushion the adverse effect of the geometrical increase of unemployment in the country. It is imperative to note that the Akwete weaving industry, which was at its peak in the early 20th century, provided not just skill but served as a major source of income for families. Unfortunately, this once-thriving industry has become a shadow of itself with little interest and patronage. Its reinvention and modernization will not only rekindle the interest of its producers but will also attract patronage.

No doubt, the Igbo, widely known for the Akwete-cloth, seem to have lost their grip on the production of this naturally endowed skill for a reason that will be investigated and presented in the body of this text. The interest of this group of researchers is to investigate the various reasons that may have accounted for the weaning of this famous cloth to proffer useful suggestions towards its reinvention. The writers are of the view that its reinvention will enhance capacity building among youth and reduce youth unemployment in Nigeria and specifically in the Southeast.

Objectives Of The Study

The primus inter perez of the objectives of this study is to investigate to establish a relationship between the reinvention of the Akwete weaving industry (Akwete cloth) as an entrepreneurial skill that can enhance job creation among the youths in the southeast. Other objectives will include:

1. To examine how entrepreneurship can create employment and improve economic development.
2. The study will also investigate the reasons that may have accounted for the decline of the weaving industry in Ndokiland.
3. It will also examine and question the rationale for the loss of interest among the owners of this skill.
4. Another important aspect which this research will examine is why there is low patronage of the Akwete cloth.
5. To examine the external influences on cloth weaving in Ndokiland, market accessibility and other issues that may be considered to be impediments to the growth and development of such an important one-time economy of the Ndoki people, Nigeria and indeed the whole of West Africa.
6. We shall attempt a critique of policies towards promoting the growth and development of indigenous crafts in Nigeria with a special focus on Akwete weaving.
7. To examine the importance of cloth weaving to the economy of the Ndoki people, its nature and its characteristics to establish the cloth as a natural gift rather than an

acquired skill. It will also explore the processes of production, thereby establishing the cloth as an ecstatic intermix of beauty and tradition.

8. It will also examine the role as well as the impact of the Akwete Co-operative Society as well as that Abia state government in promoting the weaving of Akwete cloth in Ndokiland. This will lead us to examine the challenges and prospects of this industry.

Significance

It is usual for a community to improve itself socially and economically; hence this research is considered imperative in view of the fact that by looking back on a people's past, surveying the present and using the evidence based on its experiences, it will serve as a springboard for prospecting into the future weaving in Ndokiland. The indigenous cloth produced in Ndokiland requires that the product be not only continued but improved upon. According to Okeke, such innovation takes off better when the ecology and the environment of the people are well understood. This has made this study a worthwhile venture. This study is also considered imperative in view of the fact that it will help in reconstructing the erroneous notion that Dada Nwakata is the founder of Akwete cloth.

Literature Review

Akwete Cloth Weaving in Perspectives

The art of cloth weaving is as ancient as the people of the Ndoki Kingdom and definitely cannot be said to be introduced by the Europeans. The people have been weaving for their use and commercial purposes as most of the cloth woven was sold to their Ijaw neighbours and beyond. Aronson Lisa, one of the foremost researchers in this field, has this to say in relation to a clue that might lead to the actual origin of cloth weaving in Ndoki land:

In the 16th century and later, Portuguese slave traders bought huge numbers of indigo-dyed cloths woven on vertical looms from Ndoki and Ijebu for sale in Congo, Gold Coast and Brazil. The earliest known example of Ikaki cloth in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh dates as early as 1790. The cloths were once traded along the coastal lagoons to the Niger Delta region, where they became known as Ikakabite... and were highly prized in local rituals.³

The above submission of Aronson seems to give a clue to the origin of cloth weaving in the Ndoki area, which dates back to the 16th century. The above statement implies that not only is the legendary craft older than Dada Nwakata, but it is also equally older than the arrival of the Portuguese, who traded in cloth. An attempt to ascribe the origin of this ancient craft to a woman who flourished in cloth weaving around the 1850s will mean a historical

injustice to the origin of this cloth and the people of Ndoki. It would have also succeeded in throwing away a large chunk of the historical past of this cloth.

Corroborating Aronson's view on "... The cloths were once traded along the coastal lagoons to the Niger Delta region where they became known as Ikakabite... and highly prized in local rituals". When the British merchant Captain Hugh Crow visited the town of Bonny in the Eastern Delta region of Nigeria in 1801, he observed that:

...chief's wives have sometimes five, six, or more pieces of different kinds of cloth tied about them, especially when going to any of their festivals, so that the body looks like a roll, or truss of yarn, tied at both ends. On these occasions the ladies always use paint, daubing their faces in a remarkable manner...They are extremely fond of anything gaudy or uncommon amongst them in dress, and if they get hold of a showy article of European clothing, such as a coat or vest, will strut about in it with all imaginable consequence, as if it constituted an entire suit.⁴

Crow's observations no doubt marked the beginning of what would become a dramatic rise in the manufacture of European textiles for importation to Africa, with Manchester, or "Cottonopolis," as the major British centre for cotton production. By implication, therefore, the above observation does not mark the beginning of weaving in the Ndoki ancient kingdom as erroneously opined by some disgruntled Eurocentric scholars, but this paints a vivid picture that the Ndoki people were already weaving even before the arrival of the Europeans. The above submission of Captain Crow clarifies the fact that the Akwete cloth, as ancient as it was, was not a foreign craft and that its know-how was acquired either from the Europeans or from any other group within or outside Nigeria. The Akwete cloth is an art that identifies the Ndoki people. The weavers in Ndoki did not weave only for their local consumption but also for commercial purposes little wonder why the cloth is widely celebrated by her immediate and distant neighbours - Opobo, Bonny and Ijaw, who were among their patrons.

The cloth is woven by women in the villages in Ndoki in Ukwa East Local Government of Abia State, Nigeria. Akwete, Obohia, Ohanso, Obunku and Umuagbai are the five main villages in Ndoki ancient kingdom noted for weaving using a women's vertical loom with a continuous warp. This view may not be wrong because even though almost all the villages in Ndoki weave but not all. Hence, the four villages mentioned above are where one can find the majority of the weavers of Akwete Cloth.

However, the earliest known cloths before the knowledge of cotton are "Mkpuru" and "Aji" weaves. The "Mkpuru" was woven from raffia palm leaves, grasses and bark fabrics and later "Egerebete".⁵ The weaving of cotton cloths have been in existed in pre-colonial Ndokiland. The Igbo-ukwu excavation has revealed craft is long in existence among the Igbo, stretching to the period about the 9th century AD as recorded in the works of Thurstan

Shaw's archaeological finds in 1959. He observed that... "there was evidence that some of the vessels (founded by him) have been wrapped in cloth"...⁶ Isichie also contends that "the nature of the techniques used suggest that craft men passed a high degree of textile skills as also does the quality of the materials".⁷

The implication, therefore, is that cloth weaving in Ndokiland started long before the 9th century AD and must have attained a comparatively high standard. One of the basic questions that may be agitating the minds of many is where did the textile materials used for weaving come from. It is likely, however, that most of the cloths from Akwete might have been part of the textile extracts excavated from Igbo-Ukwu. This may be true because Akwete Cloth happens to be one of the earliest in the Eastern Province and falls into the area described by Shaw east of the Niger and South of Benue. Okeke shares this view. According to him, Akwete is synonymous with Igbo traditional cloth, for it appears to have been prominent both within and outside Igboland. He further opines that it had a longer history than any other hand-woven cloths in Igboland.⁸

Conceptualizing Entrepreneurship

The promotion of gainful employment and reducing the rising rate of rural and urban unemployment are today among the major issues agitating the minds of successive governments in Nigeria. The strategy adopted for ameliorating these problems is entrepreneurship development.

In recent times, many people now regard entrepreneurship as an important aspect of job creation, and government should not be left in an attempt geared toward promoting entrepreneurial culture; this is because today, entrepreneurs can use their innovation and creativity to create wealth from nascent businesses.

The word entrepreneur is in French coinage by Jean Baptiste Say. It comes from the word "entreprendre", meaning undertaker or adventurer. Drucker defined an entrepreneur as a person who starts a new business, has a high level of achievement and is naturally endowed with the business has a high achievement and naturally endowed with the qualities of enthusiasm, idealism, a sense of purpose and independence of thought and action.⁷

An entrepreneur is a person who focuses on finding opportunities instead of accepting security, getting results instead of following routine, earning profit instead of earning interest, and trying new ideas of seeking short-term vision.⁸

Furthermore, the entrepreneur contains resources innovatively, thus creating something new. The entrepreneur does things in a novel fashion. The entrepreneur's decision-making is guided by intuition, not by past models. An entrepreneur is a person who desires to find a

private kingdom. He has the willpower to conquer, the joy of creating, of getting things done, or simply exercising one's energy and ingenuity.⁹

Entrepreneurship as a culture is something that most governments are poised to cultivate, and this they have done by encouraging their teeming population to become more entrepreneurial. It is seen as a fundamental imperative part of modern economic practice necessary for economic growth.

Otaha defines entrepreneurship as "the ability of an individual or firm or group of firms to invent and innovate idea, an opportunity or better way of doing old things. The result of this process is formed under conditions of risk and considerable uncertainty. He went further to explain that entrepreneurship consists of two major aspects; the human aspect and the institutional aspect.¹⁰ The human aspect is the stock of trained skill, procedure, risk-taking and innovative persons capable of creating a business or industrial activity where none existed before. The institutional aspect, on the other hand, refers to the available organizational structures and processes, such as public policies, traditions and culture, as well as the democratic environment of the entrepreneurs, the enabling environment and the commitment of the government to encourage the development of entrepreneurship through the provision of physical infrastructures and appropriate policies both micro and macro.¹¹

Ronstadt went further to define entrepreneurship as "the dynamic process of creating incremental wealth. This wealth is created by individual who assume the major risks in terms of equity, time and/ or carrier by individuals who assume the major risks in terms of equity, time and/ or earlier commitment to providing value for some products or services. The product or services itself may or may not be new or unique, but the value must somehow be made by the entrepreneur by securing and allocating the necessary skills and resources."¹² Entrepreneurship is also seen as the process of creating something different with value by devoting the necessary time and effort, assuming the accompanying financial, psychic and social risk and receiving the resulting rewards of monetary and personal satisfaction and independence.¹³

Methodology

The area of this study is known as Ndoki, which is located in Ukwa East Local Government Area in the present-day Abia State in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Some of their kits and kins are also found in Rivers State and Akwa-Ibom State. They speak a dialectal variation of the Igbo language. The story of their Igbo origin is not yet very clear. The Ndoki people claim Igbani origin. By this, they claim that they migrated from the Atlantic area. This claim of a riverine origin gives them an air of difference (nay superiority) from the regular Igbo, especially in their attitude to life.

The un-balkanized boundary of Ndoki stretches parallel to the Imo River on the East, where the clan is bounded by the villages of Ika and Obong clans. The Imo and Aba rivers roughly correspond to the South and East boundaries of the clan. Apart from the riverside villages, the majority of the villages are connected with either of these rivers by creeks and roads. The area covers approximately 450 square km. With its abundant endowments, which include rich farmland, intersecting rivers, rich creeks and forests, and crude oil deposits, Ndoki had early contacts with the world economy, having acted as major routes for slave trading, purchase food for slave caravans, trade-in rubber (Akwete Rubber Research is the largest rubber plantation southeast of Nigeria), palm oil, etc. but there was little economic progress on account of the coercive economic controls by the colonial imperialists.

The Ndoki are a group of people that have lived together for a long time with a common identity. They speak a dialectical variation of the Igbo language. They have been politically balkanized today and are found in three separate states - Abia, Rivers and Akwa Ibom. It is in the view of this researcher that this balkanization was meant to weaken the Ndoki people so that their neighbouring Akwa Ibom and Ogoni groups would reap the benefits of their oil resources. But the sense of a common identity among these people to date remains strong.

Ndoki ancient kingdom included Ayama, Okoloma, Umuosi and Obeakpu, Egberu, Afam-Ukwu, Afam-Nta down to Umuagbai, Azuogu, Maraihu, Okponton Okwanku, Obunku and Obete, Akwete, Azumini, Mkpuaejekere, Mkpunkpuaja, Nkpunkpule, Ogbuagu, Akirika-Ukwu, Akirika-Nta, Ohambele, Abaki, Akanu, Akirika-Obu, Eti, Obohia, Obozu, Obunku-Ugbor, Ohaobu, Ohandu, Ohanku, Ohanso, Ohuru, and Ubaku.

The research methodology was mainly qualitative and historically contextualised. The oral interview was used to elicit relevant and useful data required for this research. On the whole, I interviewed both men and women, youths, politicians and traditional rulers who were considered germane to arrive at a logical conclusion. The researcher also chatted with many others informally to gather useful information. However, the researcher ensured that respondents cut across different segments of Ndoki land and that they were indigenes but not neglecting some of her immediate neighbours. It is important to note that not all the villages in Ndokiland have the weaving skill, but in the interview, all the villages were taken into consideration to determine why it is so and the extent to which they can also be incorporated in the reinvented Akwete weaving industry.

The researcher painstakingly made sure that sentiments were disregarded and that every piece of information gathered was properly scrutinised by comparing it with the views of other informants.

During the period of the sketchy interviews conducted, many of the respondents kept asking if the attention of the government would be drawn to their plight (with regards to revitalizing the weaving industry). I made no commitments but told them that the project

was purely for academic purposes and hoped that the final report would be published and made available for all to see, including the governments at the local, state and national levels. Many of the respondents expressed optimism that the final work may be the “Messiah” they have been waiting for to rejuvenate the waning Akwete Cloth industry, while others cautioned that they would like to see the outcome of this research change the attitude of the government towards the growth and development of the art of cloth weaving in Ndokiland. The expectation is that the outcome of this research will bring something good to my progenitor Ndokiland and her people.

Expected Outcome of the Research

The expected outcomes of this research are:

1. It will help reinvent the dying weaving skill among the Ndoki people
2. It will help sensitize as well draw government attention towards reviving the weaving skill through promotion and modernization of means of production
3. In the light of the global emphasis on entrepreneurship, it will no doubt create jobs and reduce unemployment as well as youth restiveness
4. It will create alternative means of income generation for the people
5. The imperativeness of small and medium-scale industries in the contemporary global economic structure cannot be overemphasized; hence the reinvention of this entrepreneurial skill of the people will revive the Akwete Weaving Cooperative Society, which will serve as a platform for attracting investors.
6. Cloth weaving in Ndokiland is a cultural heritage which should not be allowed to die for the sake of posterity and cultural identity. Therefore, the outcome of this research will help ensure that it happens.

ENDNOTES

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