TEXTILE WEAVING IN NIGERIA: A LOST DYNAMIC ARTISTRY

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Abstract

While acknowledging the presence of traditions with varied rich art and cultural practices in Nigerian one realizes that one great feature that is common to all is the weaving technology. The weaving practices though seemed undermined by the younger generation of youths has remained in the economic, social and cultural life of very few ethnic groups especially the Yoruba and Ndigbo still with the weaving tradition. The paper identifies the processes and skills needed in weaving and examines the woven structures, its usage and place in the lives of people. It further X-rays the problems of the weaving equipment for the younger generation with a view to creating innovation. The paper is of the view that sustainable textile technology can only be achieved if a cue is taken from Japan’s experience by revolutionalizing the traditional textile weaving from wooden to automated form while taking into consideration the needs of the weaver, environmental and educational level of the people respectively. The paper contends that an innovative combination of traditional fabrics with current fashion will serve as bedrock for solving and maintaining a sustainable industrialized growth that will reduce drastically the massive unemployment problem in Nigeria.

Key words: Textiles, Weaving, Artistry, Nigeria.

Introduction

The craft of weaving is an absorbing one either for a hobby or as an income producing occupation. It is very fundamental to all mankind. It takes varied forms in different parts of the world. In some parts of the world, traditional weaving is still a living occupation craft with comparatively simple tools for an end product which are more superior to any machine woven fabrics.
The weaving process involves special manipulative skills requiring creative mind and attitude for the understanding of the knowledge of the occupation. Although slow, the process of traditional weaving interlaces lengthwise warp yarns (ends), which are usually held taut in a frame or suspended from a tree as of the old tradition, with a crosswise filler or weft yarn (picks) to make the web of the fabric. This paper advocates a discernable move towards a more outcome based approach to weaving, which requires functional technical knowledge and skill of the working of traditional loom.

The fabric weave is the order of intersection of the warp and weft yarns on the loom. Depending on the warp yarns that are lifted, the design is warp faced. In some of the yarn intersection, it could be weft faced or a combination of the two (warp and weft faced fabrics). The consecutive order of fabric intersection is called its repeat. The strip patterns found in most woven fabrics are made by alternating the colours in the warp or weft arrangements. This confirms what Picton (1989) reported that many factors such as: the nature and colour of fabric, relationship between warp and weft, the method of embellishment of the surface of the fabric with extra weft go into the designing of the weave pattern.

In most traditional weaving, the use of colour in the warp direction produces colour strips along the length of the fabric. This process being a plain weave, has the highest number of interlacing as compared with other foundational weaves (Twill or Satin/ sateen), thereby producing the firmest fabric. The way in which the warp yarns are assembled enables the application of a wide range of patterns. Theoretically, it is possible to design a fabric structure to produce the characteristics demanded but in practice this is not as easy as it sounds. The warp and weft may be interlaced in a variety of patterns to produce fabrics which are surprisingly flexible and yet are strong and durable. These characteristics arise from the structure of the fabrics itself and also from the structure of the fibres which are used in the weaving (Lord and Mohammed, 1976). It is also noticed that some of these woven fabrics are narrow while others are wide. One reason for their variation in width is the differences in the size of the reed or the type of loom used in weaving that particular type of fabric.

The final creation of traditional fabric could be appreciated from myriads of perspectives because it is an important component of traditional belief system, cultural impression, history and thoughts process of a people. Indeed, a people’s way of life and mood can be read through
colour impressions as applied in their fabrics. This is why colours communicate differently to people and also have different values and tend to draw out peculiar attributes of people.

**Traditional Weaving Technology:**

The origin of traditional weaving technology is not clearly marked documented. This has been a problem to various researchers, historians and archeologist as some believed that weaving emerged without foreign influence. The Indigenous weaving technology for example, may have existed in most Nigerian cultural areas but their end products were not created as a mere feast for the eyes. In its broadest interpretation, traditional textile weaving is an essential part of development which should be appreciated in order to understand the art and cultural content it manifests as well as its status among textile art forms of the world. For an extensive and thorough discussion of the subject, it became pertinent that a literature review on related concepts visible and implied, explicit and implicit was carried out by Ntagu 2015. This was realized under the following sub-heading:- General weaving Technology- Basic framework of the loom-Indigenous -Traditional weaving in Nigeria (a) Yoruba traditional weaving (b) Igbo traditional weaving (C) Tiv traditional weaving-Concept of Anger indigenous woven fabrics. Consequently, the excellent attributes of the weaving culture of the people of Nigeria, the Igbo (*Akwete*), the Yoruba (*Aso-Oke*), the Hausa (*Fari*), the Tiv (*Anger*) the Ebira land (*Okene cloth*) to mention but a few has been universally acknowledged as being able to cultivate over time the unity of ethnic groups by reinforcing their existence in the grassroots.

No doubt, the use of different kinds of woven structures in Nigeria with special focus on any of the traditional woven fabrics as evidence of a long standing clothing tradition in Africa predates contact with outside influences. Obviously, these textiles vary according to ethnic groups in pattern of production. The hand crafted textiles of Nigeria according to Eicher (1976) are many and exciting and she recognizes that they represent a wide variety of cloth technologies common to Africa. She further stated that the excellence of one type of weaving over another depends on locality and the tradition of the people. This assertion gives us focus and stresses the need to pay due attention to individual culture not only as an expression of aesthetic value and philosophies but also as an entity embodying industrial potentials and entrepreneurial opportunities.
To this effect, much needs to be done towards repositioning the indigenous woven fabrics to face contemporary challenges by analyzing and identifying the changing nature of the demands for traditional woven fabrics through offering variety of products as interior fashion extensions for Nigerian fashion needs.

The shedding mechanism incorporates the heddles, harnesses or heddle frames, treadles and the lamms. The beating mechanism orders the warp yarns, controls their density and packs the weft yarns into position [Reed/ beater] (Held,1978). Most importantly, the loom no matter its simple nature is a sensitive machine that every weaver must learn to use. Only when the weaver understands its full potentials can he/she match its performance to the creative work.

The basic method of weaving has not changed. But in most traditional weaving areas, the primary stages of weaving technology involving the process of ginning, fluffing and spinning thus exerting great deal of human labour on the weaver has most recently been replaced by machine spun cotton, rayon or synthetic yarns Also the process of local dyeing of yarns gradually gave way to industrially dyed yarns. The common practice now is that weavers obtain the working materials from the market. This has definitely reduced the amount of stress undergone by weavers in the production of traditional fabrics, Moreover the number of harnesses affects the complexity of patterns that you can make with your loom. A beginning weaver might have plenty of options with only four harnesses, while an experienced weaver who wants to take on more complex projects will need more than that.

**Characteristics of the Loom Structures**

The art of weaving is one aspect of the prized legacy possessed by the Igbo, the Hausa and the Yoruba speaking area in Nigeria to be precise. Some of the end products of the weaving culture are fabrics such as Akwa-Ocha, Akwete, Farin, Popo, Tsamiya, Atala Anger, Tugudu, Aso-Oke, Okene, Onorupa, Ikente, Onusuga, Alaari, Etu, Sanyan and many more showing wealth of exuberant handcrafted textiles woven across Nigeria. Also as a common practice across Africa, some of the handcrafted textiles like kente, adinkra (Ghana), Marrakesh (Morocco), Bouake (Ivory-Coast) exists and is made with different types of traditional loom structure (Vertical or Horizontal types).

The loom type is a reflection of the local technology which tends to advance ways of interpreting the people’s ideas about their immediate environment. The loom could be a single
heddle or double heddle variety. Fadipe, 1970, observes that the traditional strip loom was constructed in a house manner (rectangular form). The most common among communities in Nigeria, depend on the sex of the weaver. However, men employed the horizontal loom and produced strips of fabrics while women wove on the vertical broad loom.

The men’s loom can be dismantled and moved from place to place because it occupies space while the women’s loom does not occupy much space. The knowledge of the different loom parts is an advantage to the weaver.

The product of the loom whether in panel form or strip form depends on the size of the loom and the sex of the weaver. Fortunately, most of the traditional woven fabrics have undergone changes and the changes were induced by internal as well as external demands. Some of these woven fabrics are not just comfortable and convenient but also multi-purpose and appropriate for the vagaries of the weather and the complex nature of our culture and dynamic life style.

The multi-purpose aspect of the designed fabrics could be classified as expressive or instrumental. The expressive aspect involves the emotional and communicative aspect of dress, while the instrumental aspect involves the rational use of dress in goal directed behavior. Both expressive and instrumental aspects may be exhibited simultaneously by the dress wearer.

**Problems of Traditional Weavers**

The indigenous weaving culture has for long been beset with several modern economic and technological pressure that threatened it with forceful extinction. Happily, there are still in existence some of the woven structures in most ethnic group within the country. Unfortunately, with the machine made fabrics, most ethnic groups have lost interest and almost abandoned the indigenous weaving practices. There seem to be a total collapse the transmission of skills of the indigenous weaving technology as younger generations shy away from participating in it. The introduction of foreign made fabrics has corrupt our traditional culture so much that youths find it difficult to accept locally woven materials. Knowledge about the indigenous traditional woven fabrics of Nigeria reveals the extent the people have advanced in the area of weaving and clothing needs. The importation of machine manufactured fabrics into the country which ran into millions of Naira, made the traditional handcrafted fabrics suffer big setback.
The popularity of the woven fabrics have been on the decline not necessarily due to lack of demand but more due to it unavailability in the market. In comparing the machine made fabrics with the handcrafted ones in the market environment, it becomes obvious that the later is seriously on the decline while the former (for example the Ankara fabrics) is growing in demand and available in the market.

Why the problem with the traditional woven fabrics?

a). Poor financial returns: coupled with high cost of raw materials and transportation cost, poor marketing strategy and monotony in design.

b). Drudgery: conservative technology and culture, some of which are based on superstition which led to lack of innovation, no access to technological information and most unfortunate there is no raw materials research and development council’s in it.


Despite the modern inventions, the traditional weaving looms are still very useful and cannot be totally ignored or replaced. This is because the machine made fabrics falls short of the peculiar cultural and social functions or effects the traditional woven fabrics exhibits on both individuals and the society at large. It is therefore evident from Ntagu’s 1997 findings that most of the traditional woven fabrics are employed in an attempt to preserve, reinforce and maintain the existence of a unique and established cultural behavior of a people. Undoubtedly, traditional ceremonies, annual festivals, weddings and other related cultural occasion are still popular platform for the continuous use of the fabrics within and outside the cultural environment.

The sustainability of the traditional textile technology can only be achieved if: 1). a cue is taken from Japan’s experience by revolutionalizing the traditional textile weaving from wooden to automated form while taking into consideration the needs of the weaver, environmental and educational level of the people respectively. 2). The attention of the younger generation is drawn and encouraged to contribute innovatively by developing modern functional and fashionable applications of traditional woven fabrics other than as cultural wearing attire.

Sustainable Textile Technology:

Challenges to ones cultural heritage become challenges to the integrity of the person and all the values that are closest to him. Cultural norms and values are intimately related to ones sense of identity. Moreover no nation can develop without proper exploitation of her environment and natural resources to the benefit of the people. Therefore changes in taste in textiles, adornment
and hairstyle has affected and almost substantially altered the traditional dress code of many ethnic groups in Nigeria as peoples’ preferences for lighter, brightly coloured machine woven fabrics become more obvious.

Significantly, textiles have relevance in the culture of a people. The major way of improving and sustaining the traditional woven structures and maintaining their degree of observable traits is by its application into contemporary fashion as fashion extensions and accessories rather than completely as fashion wears or attires. The richness and variety of such fashion extensions and accessories would be exciting not only to fashion designers but to everyone who comes in contact with the innovative work.

The innovation will turn around the cultural view of the fabric with the attachment of economic value to the product. It will further enhance economic growth, inculcating entrepreneurial spirit in the individuals thus contributing positively as bedrock of cultural growth.

After many years of neglect, a nurtured and well structured traditional weaving entrepreneurship with the younger generation will contribute to providing an opportunity to achieve the goal of grass-root related development. This will resuscitate, revive and set the traditional textiles on the part to economic recovery as well as bring back the lost glory

**Conclusion**

The attributes of traditional woven textiles are immense. The artistry and craftsmanship that goes into the weaving process have given them their uniqueness far above the machine made fabrics. Though the traditional woven fabric has long been beset with several pressures that threatened it with forceful extinction but their cultural role within the society has sustained them up till now.

There is the desire to recognize the uncompromising need of traditional textiles to become determinants of our cultural fortunes but in the process we should exercise the necessary caution against allowing our traditional weaving culture to become extinct.

It is also viewed that sustainable textile technology can only be achieved if a cue is taken from what Sakichi Toyoda did in Japan by revolutionalising textile weaving from wooden frame to automated form taking into consideration the need of the people as well as their environment. Our cultural heritage can survive only and when we attach proper value to it and further making sure that the culture of weaving does not die off completely in the nation. The challenge of change is continuous and our pride is in our culture. It is worthwhile to make a few fundamental points in defense of the traditional loom as innovation will turn around the cultural view of weaving in many ethnic groups with a weaving culture
References


