

TEXTILE AND FASHION PRODUCTION SKILLS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA

U. EKPE. AND G. NNOCHIRI

(Received 05, October 2008; Revision Accepted 22, November 2010)

ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a country with abundant wealth in human, cultural and natural resources. It is one country noted for its people's penchant for textiles, fashion and style. On the basis of Nigeria's rich, vibrant and viable traditional textile and fashion industry vis-à-vis the need to keep Niger Delta youths out of violence, this paper argues that imparting former militants with skills and techniques in textile design and production is a sustainable way to develop the region by keeping the youths fruitfully and economically engaged.

KEY WORDS: Textiles, fashion, Niger delta, militants.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is tremendously blessed with naturally and cultural resources. The nation's natural resources include crude oil, gas and marine life; agriculture, forestry and allied products; minerals and metal ores; while its rich cultural heritage include traditions, languages, oral history, folk life, religious ceremonies, customs and traditional creative skills like arts, crafts and performances. Among the indigenous arts and crafts of the Nigerian peoples are textiles and fashions that have been with them and passed from generation to generation. According to Afigbo and okeke (1985) indigenous fashion, textile and clothing thrived in this area as early as the ninth century A.D. The same visual cultural manifestations evidenced among the Nigerian people can be said of other cultures in Africa generally. Also, because of its functionality and everyday usage, textile is one of the most visible cultural product among Nigeria's various cultures. In fact, Shea (in Emeagwali 1992) observes that a visitor to Nigeria is ordinarily most impressed at first by the textiles. The tremendous varieties, beauty flamboyance, colours, textures elegance and style are all immediately striking. Women and men sometimes store impressive amount of cloths as well as finished clothing. It is also not unusual for

people to have clothing that belonged to their grandparents or which are even older than that. This national passion for beautiful textiles and clothing is the result of many centuries of development and of considerable investment in time, energy, enterprise, ingenuity and capital. In view of this, Shea concludes that one of the most technical activities in Nigeria is cloth making. Properly harnessed, developed and market to local and global audiences, this technical textile and fashion-related activities can thus translate into job creation, poverty alleviation, international trade and ultimately economic growth. In terms of poverty alleviation, economic and social stability among Nigeria's troubled youth populations – particularly in the Niger Delta – this paper argues that imparting former militants with skills and techniques in textile and fashion design and production is a sustainable way to keep the youths fruitfully engaged and permanently out of violence.

Clothing And Culture/Fashion And Culture

Soyinka (1982) defines culture as a tool of self definition and self development. By this, culture being more than a people's way of life posits as the ingredient of progressive development and cultural articulation. In the sense in Soyinka uses the term, artistic products

U Ekpe, Department of Visual Arts and Technology, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria

G. Nnochiri, Department of Visual Arts and Technology, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar Cross River State, Nigeria

are tools of cultural definition. Therefore, African clothing has always been a medium for cultural expression. The fabrics are known for their colorful and distinctive designs. Horners (1996) avers that African clothing are of cultural significance. In fact, the colorful cloths of Africa first became a sign of wealth around 1000BC during the trans-Saharan trade, when traders used strip cloths as a form of currency. As a result, African textiles became known worldwide.

African clothing convey messages about historical and cultural landmarks, philosophical concepts, political thoughts or religious values of the society. Examples abound in designs and motifs of *adire,aso oke,ekpang* and other Nigerian prints. Clothing traditions vary with each ethnic group and society. Ankoma et al (1995) states that the various clothing have various names peculiar to the people for which the cloths were made. However one finds similarities across cultures. With migrations and interactions over

time, ethnic groups have adapted and shared customs and dresses. Styles of clothing vary from simple plain shirts and wrapper to the intermediate in which there is beginning of design and slight detail; to the complex, more detailed cloths, which include bottoms, tops, gowns, e.t.c.

African fashion has influenced and has been influenced by other cultures. Post renaissance Europe greatly admired the raffia of central Africa and it found its way into European treasuries along with other creations of African arts. According to The Courier (1996), styles of African fashion evolved from a mixture of African and western cultures. African designers create cloths of western designs using traditional African cloths. Hence, one sees kente ties and coats, adire suits, Aso-oke skirts and blouses etc. In contemporary times, cloths of traditional African art are designed using a combination of western and African cloth. Thus, one might see a traditional Nigerian dress made from western designed cloth with accent of African cowries, raffia, adire and other motifs.



Plate 1: Above. *African Drumsticks*, fabric designs by Umana Ekpe.

SOURCE: Kari's Glamour World, 2006

Today, African dress influences fashion throughout the world. According to Bawa (2000), from 125th Street to Harlem, New York to a street in down town London, women are wearing bubas, soras and geles and new events like Dunbar in London and fashion shows in London now celebrate African culture and traditional and non-traditional African dress, further illustrating the dynamic nature of African fashion.

Traditional Textile, Fashion and Development

Africa in general and Nigeria in particular is blessed with a rich diversity of indigenous cultures and this is evident in Nigerian fashion. Accordingly, Bawa (2000) confirms there is a contemporary large market for African fashion and this is why the Tunisian Embassy has embarked on a joint venture to promote African culture and fashion as an economic development project.

Growing the economy of Nigeria is vital to achieving employment for all, and making sure that everyone in every part of the country has good quality life. The textile and fashion industry has a lot to do with development and quality of life. Despite the problems the industry is facing, Nigerian inspired fashion is taking the streets and catwalks of the world by storm. Edwards (2000) and Ankoma (1998) agree that when one walks the streets of New York, Paris and London, chances are that one will see scores of people dressed to the nines in Nigerian and African influenced outfits. Among African Americans particularly, wearing so-called authentic African attire has become a fashion statement. African fashion has been adopted and adapted by Africans and people of Black- dissent all over the world.

Since Nigerian traditional textiles have become viable locally and globally, developing the textile and fashion industry in the country could have positive effects such as launching the establishment of quality, authentic Nigerian brands to compete with international players. Therefore fashion in Nigeria should aim at creating partnerships with other African countries in showcasing, promoting and developing African fashion particularly traditional African designs. In addition, it should incorporate other facets of culture, creating a platform for cross-cultural interaction allowing Africans to share in the other rich cultures of the African continent, the ultimate aim being to stimulate economic growth of individuals through local and international trade in the dynamic textile and fashion industry. From the foregoing, Nigeria is definitely a nation with

vast potentials in terms of the natural, cultural and human resources that exist all around the country. If these resources can be sustainably developed, there are no doubts that Nigeria will become a developed country.

The Niger Delta Youth Question

In very sharp contrast with the potentiality of Nigeria as a country and its rich natural, cultural and human resources, the happenings in the Niger Delta Region in that last 4 decades have marred genuine development. At the crux of the Niger Delta question is petroleum, which is solely derived from but extracted and exploited to provide national wealth. However, this national wealth is unevenly distributed because, while Nigerians from other regions get relatively huge benefits from the oil revenue, those in the Niger Delta pay double price with their degraded environment in terms of waterways pollution, land pollution, air pollution, including health hazards, the loss of species and people's livelihoods (Worika 2002, Ali-Apkajak and Pyke 2003, Roberts 2004). The UNDP's Niger Delta Human Development Report (2006) is one of the most extensive scientific researches into the Niger Delta question. In the report, the social, economic, political and multinational trajectories of the Niger Delta situation are analyzed, including the poverty and hazards that have resulted. The report's major recommendation is that there needs to be a new strategy, a human development agenda that proposes the participatory development and empowerment of individuals within a peaceful, equitable and legal socioeconomic framework (UNDP 147-176). After years of unheeded peaceful agitation, youths in the region took to violence, kidnapping, arson and other forms of social predation to press home their concerns. In 2007, the federal government of Nigeria finally faced-up to its responsibilities and offered amnesty to the youth militants. Part of the amnesty deal was to train them in new life skills to provide them alternative sources of livelihood. In view of this, thousands of ex-militants are now camped at Obubra, Cross River State, where they are freely accommodated, fed and taken care of, paid salaries and protected by state security.

There are no doubts at all that the Nigerian government's amnesty offer to the Niger Delta militant youths is the most positive effort so far for the region. However, keeping them in Camp fed, paid and maintained on tax-payers' money is clearly unsustainable because it does

not develop a true sense of discipline and responsibility in the ex-militants. The young people are neither earning their upkeep nor do they have any employment opportunity in sight for the nearest future. What this means is that Nigerian tax-payers shall be feeding, clothing, housing and providing free health services and security for these otherwise able-bodied youths for a long time to come. This situation is simply a creation of youth dependency and an official fostering of underdevelopment because the youths are not learning any viable skills that can reintegrate them into society. Yet Blackwell, Goodwillie and Webb (1999) have stated that projects that build from local know-how are the only way to generate sustainable change. In that sense, it is clear that the surest way to make the amnesty process sustainable is to provide the ex-militants with skills that boarder on traditional and local knowledge. This is where skills in traditional textile and fashion design and production come in because they are based on local knowledge and the materials are available locally. Besides, as the previous discussion has shown, both local and global markets exist for Nigerian textile and fashion products. And training Niger Delta's ex-militants in skills in the production and marketing of textile and fashion designs is evidently more sustainable that just feeding and paying free salaries perpetually.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Developing the much abandoned Niger Delta is a long term project that requires time, resources and above all a strong and lasting commitment on the part of governments at all levels, oil multinationals and the oil communities themselves, particularly the youths. The amnesty given by Nigerian government to the ex-militants should obviously be sustained. However, what is lacking is an articulated plan that will train these youths in economically viable skills to enable them earn their own money and upkeep and reintegrate back into national life. Among several skills that may be taught to the youths, textile and fashion skills and techniques can be very viable when the youths take to them because the materials are locally available, as well as the market for textile and fashion products. Training the youths in textile and fashion skills will help them discover and develop new talents and ideas in the fashion and textile world.

For genuine and sustainable enterprise development, government need to partner with the private and public sectors in trainings, soft loans, equipment acquisition and cultural

programmes, which will promote Nigerian fashion and cultural heritage. Aside from empowering the Niger Delta youths, this will also bring about a true and meaningful public-private partnership in the area of textile and fashion development.

It might also be worth the while to institute a yearly national programme where textile and fashion designers from various cities will be selected and tasked with designing garments along a specific theme, bringing out specific cultural ideas. This will go along way to help the Niger Delta youths to have a sense of pride in their new trades and to also establish themselves in the industry.

WORKS CITED

- "Adire African Textiles". African Textiles Gallery. Online.
<<http://www.adire.clara.net/afgallery.htm>
> Accessed 21/03/2010.
- Ali-Apkajjak, S. C., and T. Pyke. *Measuring Poverty in Nigeria*. Oxford: Oxfam Publishing, 2003.
- Ankoma, Bafour and Adit, Mike. 'Designer With a Vision'. *New Africa* No 326, March 1995: 38-41.
- Ankoma, Bafour. 'The Day Africa Came To London'. *New Africa* No 368, November 1998: 36-38.
- Bawa, M., Interview. Washington: Kobos: African Clothiers, May 31, 2000.
- Blackwell, J. M., R. N. Goodwillie and R. Webb. *Environment and Development in Africa*. Washington: Environmental Development Institute, World Bank, 1999.
- Edwards, Pamela "Attitude Africa". *Essence*, Volume 30(12), April 2000.
- Meller, Edwin. "Textile Technology in Nigeria: The historical Development in Science and Technology in Nigeria Fashion". *The Courier*, No 157, May/June 1996: 53-55.
- Horner, Simon. "Conversing about Culture". *The Courier*, No 144, March/April 1994: 44-45.
- Roberts, E. O., Federalism, Hegemony and Shea, P. "Textile Technology in Nigeria". *Practical Manifestations in G.T.*

Emeagwali (ed),: *The Historical Development of Science and Technology in Nigeria*. Edwin Mellen 1992.

Soyinka, W., 1982 in B. Ajibade and U. Ekpe "Redefining and Indigenous Environmental Paradigm: African-Art and Culture-in the Context of Sustainability and Development". *Global Journal of Environmental Sciences* Vol. 5, No 1.pp 27-33

UNDP. Niger Delta Human Development Report. Abuja: United Nations Development Programme, 2006.

Worika, Lucky. *Environmental law and Policy of Petroleum Development*. Port Harcourt: Anpez Centre for Environment and Development, 2002.

