

CANE WEAVING IN ONITSHA: PROCESSES, TECHNIQUES AND MARKET POTENTIALITIES

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Abstract

It seems that cane weaving in Nigeria is becoming moribund. Well, this belief may be re-interrogated in light of this research. While one may argue that Africa has a remarkably rich heritage especially in the areas of arts and craft industries, the craft techniques and market potentialities of most of these crafts may not have been adequately explored. In view of this problem this study investigates cane weaving in Nigeria using Onitsha as a case study to understudy the potentialities of this seemingly declining local craft industry. Notable cane weavers in Onitsha were studied and interviewed in order to gain an insight into the production and marketing of cane products. Scholarly texts were also consulted. The study reveals that the local craft industry of cane weaving possesses latent potentialities in terms of skill and market possibilities if creativity and funding accompany its production processes.

What is Cane?

The word ‘cane’ brings to mind a number of things to people. The young ones may immediately conceive it best as an instrument for discipline, especially in the African context, while some individuals may quickly associate it with the sweet sugarcane. The canes generally are “hollow or pith filled and are usually slender and flexible plants which grow mostly in marshy areas” (Dalziel 1937:3). Cane is a term applied to the stems or stalks of a wide variety of plants. Horticulturally, this terms, ‘cane’ refers to the stems of certain bush fruits such as raspberries and blackberries or to the stem of roses. Cane also applies to the woody grasses of the *genus arundinavia* but often used for other forms such as cane reads, giant cane, southern cane, switch cane and bamboo (bambosa).

Canes in Anambra

Canes are found in many parts of Nigeria within the rain forest belt and in swampy areas. Some cane plants grow near the roads in swamps. If one travels between Warri and Lagos and closely observes adjoining spaces around the bridges, one will notice the presence of these plants by the riversides.

In Okomu forest reserves (Edo State) canes are found in the broken high forest where there has been some timber lumbering. In Ologbo (near Benin) one of the four species of the cane found in Nigeria known as the *Eremospatha hooteri* grows in abundance. Plenty of canes grow in Agbanikaka (Ondo State) Nsukka, Enugu-Ngwo, Awka, Nnewi Ozubulu, Atani Onitsha, Akili, Ogbakudu, Odekpe (Anambra State). Canes are more abundant in the last five towns because of their proximity to the banks of the River Niger. Canes as a commodity have not been fully popularized by the public or the Nigeria government, since they still occur in the wild.

Cane Furniture

In recent times, it seems cane furniture has become highly undermined in Nigeria as a result of a new interest in cheaper wood technologies from Asia and elsewhere. From the Norman Conquest (1066) to the civil war as well as today, cane and wood furniture

existed side by side. Successive military governments encouraged Nigerians to make use of local materials to produce things. One of these areas where they emphasized was furniture making. The most recent development in furniture making using cane has featured prominently in homes of Nigerians and many African countries, according to Otedoh (1928: 19) and Ajayi (1990).

Everyone cannot get jobs in government offices so self-employment becomes very necessary in order to survive. This local cane industry provides jobs for the jobless and local furniture for those who cannot afford to buy the expensive wooden furniture. In order to meet the demands of the Nigerian society, and take advantage of the existence of these abundant raw materials in the forest, people are now engaging in this industry. Fortunately, one does not need to be educated before venturing into this field. The only thing one needed was to be equipped with the skill to produce the necessary articles possible with the use of cane. It is interesting to observe the intricacy of patterns that are involved in the production of cane furniture.

Cane techniques and the potential market in Onitsha

Canes exist in the jungles. Their climbing habit, great length, spine and vicious cirri or flagella, armed with viscous hooks aid them in climbing and makes them quite difficult to get at. Great care and efforts are usually taken to collect them from the jungle. A very sharp knife is needed to be able to cut the tough flexible stems covered with spikes, which can easily tear one's skin. The stems are cut close to the base and pulled from their supports. The leaves are removed and the stems cut into sections of desired lengths for easy bonding and transportation out of the jungle. At the workshop, the canes are scraped or cleaned, then cut into strips. These strips are used to weave round the frameworks of tables, chair, baskets, lamp-shades, laundry basket, fruit baskets, flower vase, hungers, pet houses, beds and clothes-hangers. The rattan, which is a specie of cane, can be twisted into a rope or woven into many kinds of ornamental decorative and utilitarian objects.

In one of the workshops this researcher visited in Onitsha, she observed the processes undertaken by the cane weaver. First, the cane weaver made frameworks of the object he wished to work on. The frameworks were done with the stout canes called the "Willow" cane. This cane was very tough and hard to bend so he used a tool to bend it. He also used heat to bend it into desire shapes. After this, he joined the necessary ends with glue and nails, then he weaved on frame and left some bare in their natural colours. Sometimes he applied fire to give texture to the cane works, and at other times he painted them. The polish he used on the almost finished works, according to him, helps to prevent the furniture from being eaten by termites. The inner parts of the cane are used for making coarse brushes for sweeping and foot mats.

This researcher discovered that in certain homes in Onitsha metropolis, cane products did not reflect the fashion of the lower class in the society, rather it was perceived as a kind of fashion to have anything made of cane in one's house, no matter how rich one may be. However, it must be noted that in some homes visited by this researcher, cane was also seen as less fashionable furniture.

In terms of the equipments used in the final process of cane weaving Dalziel (1937:8) says the final production (from collecting of the cane stems to making any object from it) is strictly done by hand. In other words, plenty of manual labour is needed. In Onitsha, Anambra State, I attempted to interview many cane furniture workshop owners, but I only succeeded in getting few to talk. The rest refused to talk and asked me to pay 5 thousand naira (N5,000.00) before they would give me any information, while the 3 others said that I

should forget the interview. Another cane weaver, along Upper Iweka refused an interview on the grounds that I was trying to steal ideas from him in order to open my own workshop.

Cane weaving is an activity involving certain levels of dexterity and special skills. Patterns made depended on the skills of the cane workers. However, if one went around different workshops in Onitsha, one would see different kinds of intricate patterns neatly put together by the Onitsha cane weavers. They often made round rectangular, triangular and oval patterns. If a client chose a pattern, they made efforts to produce those patterns to the best of their skills. In some big workshops, the owners of the workshops designed for their workers or employed a designer. Sometimes they consulted books to make their designs. In some cases, anybody working in that workshop could come up with an idea which was carried out if the design was good. In this case, the person got a credit for making the design.

It is important to emphasize that the local manufacture of cane furniture developed because, as the saying goes, “necessity is the mother of invention.” It is a known fact that all Nigerians may not be a Federal Government employee: some people may opt for private enterprises and as such self employment becomes an inevitable means of survival. In other words, this researcher discovered that cane weaving boomed in the early 1990s during the era of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), when there was a ban on the importation of furnitures from abroad. This necessitated the inward interest in the local craft industry forcing many middle class citizens to resort to the use of cane furniture.

In many countries, cane basketry is still used to produce strong travel cases and saddle packs for horses and donkeys. In Onitsha metropolis, this researcher discovered that natural cane is used to make a hanging basket holder for a plant, shopping basket, chairs, baby cot, tables, and cupboard. This researcher also discovered that cane weaving in Onitsha witnessed a decline, around the last quarter of the twentieth century. This stems from the fact that there was a radical importation of cheaper furniture from other countries, especially China. However, this did not remove the fact that very creative weavers recorded unprecedented sales as a result of the uniqueness of their products.

In a personal interview held by this researcher with Ikenna Okonkwo, a notable cane weaver whose workshop was located on Number 36 Upper Iweka Road Onitsha, she gathered that the weaver had travelled to many countries including Liberia and Coite d’Ivoire as a cane weaving contractor. At the end of the contract he decided to come back to Onitsha to try the craft. According to Ikenna “I learnt that there were not many cane weavers in Onitsha and that cane is available in great quantity here in Anambra. Since I came to Onitsha there has been a lot of commission and we are not meeting the demands. Some customers even come here to quarrel with me because I have not finished their work. I have so many works to do and I am sure of selling them because they pay deposits.” In terms of the durability of these cane products, Ikenna says:

It can last twenty or more years, it depends on how people use them, sometimes customers bring them back for repairs after using it for sometimes. None has been brought back since this year. Just the way they repair wood furniture, so also cane furniture the ones I repaired were not made by me, they have lasted for seven years (Author’s interview, January 2, 2012).

In probing further why it seems that cane has witnessed a sharp decline in the market, Ikenna argues that it has not really witnessed any decline. He said that most individuals are yet to witness the level and extent of dexterity that abound in the industry. He said

When people come here they are shocked at the high level of skill I exhibit. Some of them confess that they never knew that anyone can make these type of chairs in Nigeria. Most of them eventually commission me to make their complete upholstery. Believe you me, if more people come to discover us here then the whole Nigeria might need to invest in cane and then export it to other countries. This is because we may not, and we do not even meet the demands right now.

Cane weaving and the way forward; a conclusion

While weaving as a craft has become beneficial to the economy of Nigeria as a nation (Ogumor, 2007: 151), the importance of the specific area of cane weaving cannot be overemphasized. While the cane craft industry can be found in Onitsha, Lagos, Abeokuta, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Ibadan and other commercial cities, its growing popularity and usefulness, especially in Onitsha, in recent times, has lent it not only as a panacea for self-employment, but also a potential area for niche tourism and cultural revival. It possesses the functional capability needed to serve human needs in the homes, offices and in outdoor social engagements. A cane craftsman uses the methods of twist and weaves to actualize his design, finishing it with skillful reflection of the elements and principles of graphic designs such as line, shape, form, colour, balance and proportion.

This short article has revealed that cane weaving could still be a viable craft industry in Nigeria, as thought otherwise in certain quarters. The information gathered from the interviews suggest that there is a clear indication that many people are not aware of the latent potentialities in the cane industry. It is obvious that many will be attracted to cane products if exposed to the creative possibilities that abound in it. Since cane is a familiar plant, its cultivation should be encouraged by the government so that cane products and raw materials can be exported to other countries to earn the country the much needed foreign exchange.

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