

Case Report

The Art of Blacksmithing in Ile-Oluji, Ondo State

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Of the four elements: air, earth, water, and fire; Man stole only one from the gods. Fire! And with it, man forges. Up till today, blacksmiths are known for forging iron. Blacksmithing, as a very old trade, mystified and inspired the people of Ile-Oluji, for years. With the ability to craft tools from raw metal, blacksmiths gained respect within the community as talented artisans. Though books are written on Ile-Oluji, but little is heard about her cultural activities. As such, this article illustrates, and as well reviews books to bring out the developments of blacksmithing in the ancient town.

Keywords: Blacksmithing, Ile-Oluji, Ondo State

INTRODUCTION

African indigenous technology, folklore and art still viewed by western scholars, only from a cultural version of world system theory. Again, these western scholars have also tended to equate culture with the local and to specialize on the study of small scale societies. Contrary to their expectation, many Western development theorists are now turning to the so called "local" in search of alternative development, and some of these efforts have contributed in no small way to the present theory of globalization. In this study, therefore, effort is directed toward exploring some cultural issues that are connected with the globalization process, and started by suggesting cultural analysis as a new paradigm for the study of development. Therefore this article tries to keep the rhythm of the bellows by maintaining the fire glowing red, never to forget that ancient town called Ile-Oluji, by not letting the coals go dead.

Blacksmithing is an age long occupation, it is found across all tribes. It is mostly practiced by men and the skill transferred from generation to generation. These blacksmiths have been the source of technology

in the direction of making farming and hunting implements in Ile-Oluji, they have also been the source of smelting metals. Blacksmithing has evolved over the years and has been adjusting towards the needs of Ile-Oluji community. In the earliest times, it provides for the farming and hunting implements. In the industrial era, it served as means of supplementing the automotive industries across the community.

In the other hand, Ile-Oluji is the administrative headquarter of Ile-Oluji/Oke-Igbo Local Government Council of Ondo State of Nigeria. The ancient town lies between longitude $04^{\circ} 45' 30''$ and $05^{\circ} 0' 10''$ and latitude $07^{\circ} 25' 00''$ and $07^{\circ} 10' 10''$ and covering an approximate area of 800 (Eight Hundred) square kilometers. Ile-Oluji is bounded on the south by Otasun Hills, Okurughu and Aworivers, and on the South West by Oke-Igbo (in Ile-Oluji/ Oke-Igbo Local Government Council), the North East by Oni River and Ikeji Hills. And on the East, it is bounded partly by River Owena and partly by Ondo (in Ondo Local Government Council), and on the West by the tributary of the Oni

River. Her immediate neighbours are Ondo, Oke-Igbo, Idanre and Ipetu-Ijesha.¹

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

If development is not viewed as an imposition of western standards and Occidentalism, then Ile-Oluji metal art is a great contribution to Yoruba world civilization. Development means causing something to develop while the word 'develop' means to cause something to grow or become large. Development could be physical, material, intellectual and so on. H. Odimegwu defines development thus:

*To develop is to unfold, to control, to open gradually, to uncover, to free from that which conceals, to expose the hidden, to realized the potential or potentialities of, to advance and organized; to evolve; to grow, to avail...*²

From Odimegwu's definition, it becomes obvious that something should actually be existing before it starts to develop. Similarly, African art which has been existing can undergo development process. The development can be achieved through opening and bringing to sight that which has been hidden and critically adopting some new phenomena with open mindedness in order to achieve a new synthesis. Pre-history, geography, demography of early Ile-Oluji culture-history is imprecise and speculative because of scarcity of written records which precedes 10th century AD and archeological data which could help in reconstruction of the available fragments are gotten mostly from oral sources. In spite of these handicaps, the study will rely on facts emerging from anthropological, art historical, field work, and studies of language, oral traditions, and archaeological finds, colonial records, among others, to work towards Ile-Oluji art history and help to explain the life of her people as they are known today.

Before the advent of the British colonial presences in Nigera, Ile-Oluji blacksmiths supplied almost all materials for agriculture, weapons for wars and hunting like spear, machets and so on. A popular Ile-Oluji tradition has it that blacksmithing was introduced into Ile-Oluji by a man called Uja, a warrior, hunter and blacksmiths who led Oduduwa twins out of Ile-Ife to Ile-Oluji. In Ile-Oluji, Uja practiced blacksmithing at Igbojumare, where he set up his own foundry and workshop of smelting and smiting.

The process Uja used in smelting iron was similar to the one at Ola-Igbi, 25km from Oyo, before the introduction of European metal scraps. At the early times, Ile-Oluji people were essentially farmers who also engaged in ancillary craft during the lean period of farming seasons. For example, the people from Ojowo, a village via Ile-Oluji, were mostly native medicine men, while Upoti (another village via Ile-Oluji) people

were hunters and so on. We could go on and infinitum, seeing secondary crafts varying from village to village around Ile-Oluji kingdom.

The theory which identified Uja as the person that introduced blacksmithing into Ile-Oluji also believes that Ogun brought blacksmithing to Yorubaland. Some blacksmiths in the town is of the notion that it was Ogun, and not Uja that introduced blacksmithing to Ile-Oluji. However some indigenes disagreed to the fact that no village or group of village in Ile-Oluji that possessed the craft of metal work before the coming of Uja. They insist that some migrants were already practicing metal smithing before the coming of Uja. Some blacksmiths in Ile-Oluji admitted that the entrance of Uja into the already existing metal industry invigorated and popularized the industry.

Forging of metal object appears uniformed among blacksmiths in Yoruba nation. The blacksmiths are aware that iron should be heated red hot before effective forging could take place. Irons to be forged into required products are inserted into the forge by a steady and gradual operation of the bellows. This results in the growing of the charcoal. The red hot iron is repeatedly taken from the forge to anvil for hammering and back to the forge. The tongs are used to move the iron from and into the forge. These actions are done repeatedly until required shapes are obtained.

In the past, blacksmith workshops were roofed with palm fronds and grasses. These workshops were rectangular huts with the four sides open (without walls) to allow for ventilation. In some places, the workshops were constructed with holes in the walls to ensure adequate ventilation. The floors of the workshops were usually rough, sandy and dusty and characteristically littered with tools (tongs, chisels, hammers and so on), raw materials and products of the blacksmiths. Unlike other professions such as carving where the carvers buy most of their tools, the blacksmiths hardly buy tools; instead, they build their implements to suit their needs.

The blacksmiths are particularly important to the economy, because they design and produce farm tools, weapon and hunting implements, broadcasting or notification objects and so on. Wherever they exist, they do much of the manufacturing and repairing of tools. Nevertheless, there is now a steady decline in blacksmithing when you compare Ile-Oluji of old with the modern times. It started to decline mainly from the early part of the 20th century when most of the tools (cutlass, guns, knives, axes, hammers and chisels) produced by the blacksmiths began to be imported. Although the European imported products have better finishing touches and are more attractive than the locally made blacksmiths products, the (imported

items) are very expensive. Therefore, there will continue to be some demand especially by people of low income group for the locally made products.

It is pertinent to mention, that there are some products that are used to perform some social, religious and ritual functions which must be produced locally, for example, some types of rings for controlling evil spirit; iron gongs for notification and playing music and farming implement like hoes, sickle and knives. These locally manufactured products will continue to be in demand for some time to come.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When people talk of Art, minds usually elude blacksmithing, forgetting that it is an integral part of sculpture. That may have brought about the dearth of materials on this important aspect of Visual Arts. However, the few literatures that exist are enough for this review.

Generally, art historians and researchers in the Occident have carried out extensive and up-to-the-moment research on the exact time and place of Iron working. This however, is not the case in African aesthetic milieu. Apart from a few essays that dwell peripherally on bronze, no comprehensive research may have been dedicated to an extensive study of the phenomenon of metal art.

The Production of Cassiterite and Associated Minerals, a research book by L. Schatzl says: *At the very rise of African Civilization, the essential tools for survival were found through the use of wood and stone. These tools proved to work well for hunting and farming. As times changed and mankind evolved, it became necessary to find another toll for survival*³.

He elaborates by saying that the first known iron working existed in Turkey and the age of metals such as gold, cooper, silver, lead and iron was introduced approximately 400.C. Thereafter, its development slowed down until when furnaces capable of forging iron tools were developed. Consequently, metal working spread rapidly. The period of iron and the art of the blacksmiths spread through Africa. There was a gradual development in the use of iron. The book further reviews, that, during the period, stone gave way to iron development. J. W. Taylor⁴ and John Edward Giles Sutton⁵ also concede that the beginning of iron smelting and working in Africa (as they write in separate books) first spread from North Africa around 500B.C.

The Origin of Iron Smelting in Africa, a book written in 1975 by Ronald Frank Tylecote⁶, a British Archaeologist and metallurgist (generally recognized as the founder of the sub-discipline of archaeology

called Archaeometallurgy), defines metal working as the process of working with metal to fabricate tools, delicate jewelry and precise parts. The book stresses metal working as an art, hobby, industry and trade that span cultures, civilization and millennia. He states that it evolves the discovery of smelting various ores. In a similar vein in 1980, Peter R. Schmidt, an archaeologist and historian, while analyzing working with metal in one of his publications, *Steel Production in Prehistoric Africa* states that:

*Metal working predates history. No one known with any certainty where or when metal working began... The advance that brought metal into focus was the connection of fire and metals. Who accomplished this is also unknown just as the when and where, but the Egyptians are thought to have been one of the first civilizations to work metal*⁷.

After an examination of the relationship between fire and metal, the book moved the emphasis from mere historical findings to a theory of iron production in prehistory days of Africa. It says in a clear terms that not all metal require fire to obtain or work it. It sights gold, which by its chemistry is a nugget found in nature as metal.

The recording of the process of iron smelting by missionaries and colonial officials notwithstanding, G. H. Stanley in 1931 recorded the use of the dome furnace by the Yoruba smelters in 'A West Africa Smelting house' thus:

*Dome furnace was used by Yoruba smelters at Ola-Igbi, about 25km North of Oyo. At Ola-Igbi, iron ore roasted over a fire of green timber was pulverized by pounding in a wooden mortar. The poundings were sieved with openly woven baskets washed in the riverside. These activities were done by both woman and children. The washed ore was conveyed to the smelting house and poured into the furnace in a damp state*⁸.

He further says the smiths considered the locally produced steel to be much stronger than the European imported iron. *Art in Metal: Sources of Yoruba History*⁹ written in 1975 by Anthony D. Williams. (a researcher has argued that the Yoruba produced steel by accident. This is highly debatable bearing in mind the complex process involved in steel production in Ola-Igbi. It required experience accumulated through generations to acquire such skills. On the gradual development of blacksmithing he agrees that the trade dates back to smelting days in Yorubaland.

A person who creates objects from wrought iron or steel by forging the metal using tools to hammer, bend and cut is known as blacksmith. Blacksmithing in West Africa emerges around 1500

says K. T. Odojin through his research paper *Blacksmithing in Yoruba land*¹⁰ written in 1998. He believes the blacksmiths are feared for their awful skills in metal working which is considered a form of magic. Though the trade is hazardous and specialized, blacksmiths are often needed in the towns and villages where there are none.

On the evolution of blacksmithing in Ile-Oluji, scanty literature are depended upon, while personal interview based on authoritarian sources of oral traditions played prominent roles. Meanwhile A. M. Akinfemiwa¹¹ has written extensively on tradition, growth and neighbors of Ile-Oluji, an exercise that presents Ile-Oluji history pieces as a body. But such exploration could not give detailed documentation of visual art. The author could not separate art history from the documentation of culture materials, as a result, produced an anthropological literature instead of a realistically living history of Ile-Oluji. However, the book remains the only literature on Ile-Oluji so far, that has included blacksmithing in a list of traditional professions in the town.

The apparent lack of interest in visual art probably makes Akinfemiwa to confront it glancingly. In the cause of doing her writing, she only remarked that the blacksmiths taught their children how to make implements from metals, especially iron, and how to worship Ogun, the god of iron. This is however in alignment with Ogunmor in his book *Certificate Art for Junior and Senior Secondary Schools* who said "...Ogun, was believed to have introduced iron smelting and smiting to men¹²." In the same vein, the plethora of large, glossy and essentially photographic publication, with authoritative explanation, *Two Thousand Years Nigerian Art Photograph*¹³ by Ekpo Eyo is also in agreement with Ogunmor and Akinfemiwa as he writes that "Ogun is the god of iron that introduced iron smelting and smiting. He was believed to be a great hunter, wager and winner of wars". Consequently, the book says, all those whose occupations rely on the use of iron are his devotees.

From the analysis of the above mentioned books, the writers unanimously conclude that: Ogun is a principal factor in smelting and smiting of iron, and the establishment of blacksmithing industry is strictly followed with the worship of Ogun. Therefore, it will be right to say that the presence of Ogun shrine signifies the use and the production of iron tools by blacksmiths, hence the establishment of Ogun shrines and others.

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