

THE TIME AND WORKS OF ANAKWEZE NWUDE: THE MASTER OF BLACKSMITHING IN AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

The core importance of Blacksmithing in the history of civilization cannot be over-emphasized. The place of blacksmithing in Nigeria, especially in the South-Eastern region, can never be completed without referring to Awka, the very home of blacksmithing itself. Awka is the current Capital city of Anambra State of Nigeria; an Igbo community arguably believed to have been the cradle of the blacksmithing tradition in the region. Owing to the fact that, they produced guns and ammunitions that aided the Nigerian civil war of 1967/70, there was a great turn out of blacksmithing experts in the region, one of them is called Anakweze Nwude is the current Master Smith resident in Awka who is in his early 80s. This paper concisely examines his personality, works and techniques and his contributions to mankind through his art. In the same vein, the paper tries to resuscitate the dying tradition of blacksmithing in Awka and Nigeria as a whole by documenting the life and works of one of its kind. Furthermore, it tries to establish the role and relevance of blacksmithing in Modern Art.

Introduction

Human wants are insatiable. In a quest to satisfy those wants, man has devised various ways to make ends meet. One of such ends being the invention of iron in the Iron Age and since then, there has been no going back. This has resulting in various innovations and inventions glaringly vivid in the world at present. The invention of iron was one of the greatest: inventions of man ever in the history of mankind because it has birthed a billion and one more inventions like the buildings, gadgets and equipment we are enjoying now. These ideas have been spread abroad in different parts of the world through travel, communication and trade, which is so specialized and dangerous. Albeit, it is still very much a wonder to realize that metal tradition is not new to us here in Africa, neither did the Colonial masters bring the idea to us as the discovery of the spectacular Igbo-ukwu bronze by Bernard Shaw dating from the 19th century A.D proves that.

It is assumed that the metalwork technology has given us an upper hand in life to revolutionise the world as the Ironworking made tarming, hunting and war so easy for us. The importance of Blacksmithing to Nigerians is so much so that the Ife and Oyo people of Benin believe that the blacksmith has the power to express the spirit of Ogun (the god of iron), because they create iron, which is the foundation of their survival.

These discoveries, notwithstanding, does not object the fact that the tradition of metal is fast declining in Nigeria, most especially, among the Igbos and in the very heartlands of the blacksmiths itself like Awka, Ezira, Abiriba, Nkwere, Aro and Agulu; including the blacksmithing communities of the Yoruba land like the Benin and Ife, which basically stated with the coming of the Christian mission, the increasing presence of the British colonial masters and the influx of foreign goods in the late nineteenth century. Through early 1920's, Awka was witnessing a flux. It was reacting to social change; Nwanna (2011). Blacksmithing was losing its traditional role as the principal craft of an Awka man. This forced transition continued till today.

Through the voice of Anakweze Nwude, this paper exposes the prevalent situation in the Blacksmithing world, most especially, in Awka. It documents those long-age traditional blacksmithing techniques, while proffering possible solutions to further appreciate and preserve this tradition of metal work, both as an art and as a way of life, most especially, for the Awka people.

Literature Review

It is instructive to note that blacksmithing does not readily come to mind at the mention of Art. However, blacksmithing is a vital part of sculpture. The relegation of blacksmithing to the background could be responsible for the paucity of materials on this vital part of Visual Arts. Suffice it to say that much as outside Africa, extensive works have been done on iron working, within the African aesthetic milieu, there are few essays that focus on bronze. *The Production of Cassiterite and Associated Minerals*, a research book by L. Schatzl says: *At the turn of African Civilization, the basic tools for survival were seen via the utilization of wood and stone. These tools proved to augur well for hunting and farming. With the evolution of time, it became expedient to find another toll for survival.* Schatzl added that 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” Then, its development petered down until the development of furnaces that had the capacity to forge iron tools (Akinwinsola & Osita, 2020). Thus, there was a rapid spread of 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. Further reviews from the book, during the period, stone gave way to iron development. J. W. Taylor and John Edward Giles Sutton further conceded that the turn of iron smelting and working in Africa (in separate books) first spread from North Africa around 500B.C. In 1975, Ronald Frank Tylecote, a British Archaeologist and metallurgist, known the founder of the sub-discipline of archaeology, in a book titled: *The Origin of Iron Smelting in Africa*, defined metal working “as the process of working with metal to fabricate tools, delicate jewelry and precise parts” Ronald Frank Tylecote averred that it evolves the identification of smelting different ores. Similarly, Peter R. Schmidt (1980), an archaeologist and historian, in the course of analysis of working with metal noted that *The advancement that brought metal into view was the association of fire and metals. Who accomplished this is further unknown just as the when and where, however; the Egyptians are thought to have been one of the first civilizations to work metal.* The localization of blacksmithing has been done by Anakweze Nwude.

Biography of Anakweze Nwude

September 11, 1936 heralded the birth of Anakweze Nwude alias Okwuluzukorah, the current Master Smith in Awka. He is the son of Nwude Mgbeke of Umuogbunu in Awka, who is married to Mrs. Nwadiogwa Nwude and the marriage is blessed with three children.

In 1947, almost nearing the adolescent age of eleven, he was sent to Ahaoda near Benin in Nigeria, by his parents as an apprentice to learn the art and craft of blacksmithing as tradition permits. Being dissatisfied with that master, he left for another Master Smith that same year in the same city and trained for a period of four years before finally joining his brother’s forge in a distant Yoruba land where he completed his apprenticeship and became a master of his own.

Afterwards, his love for education got him joining the younger generation to attend primary school regardless of his age, hence combining it with his blacksmithing. He continued this and made it through Fimba Secondary School and Okemesi Technical, all both in Benin.

Finally, he went back to blacksmithing full time due to insufficient fund; and the sudden outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War further sent him back to his hometown in Awka in the year 1967. He ruggedly continued his profession there and participated actively in the making of armaments and household gadgets for the war. He has remained in Awka till date.

The Works and Style of Anakweze Nwude

Anakweze Nwude (2015) asserted that he specializes in basically iron and steel as his raw material to produce religious items like; Traditional Staff of office (Oji), titled men staff (Ngwu Ozo) and domestic/farming implements like hoes, axes, digger and cutlasses as they are highly demanded by the public, and on special cases, guns. He employs the use of traditional equipments and tools in executing his works as he was taught by his masters. Some of these tools are:

1. Oshishiana: The anvil used for shaping metals.
2. Otutu: The hammer for heating metals.
3. Anyunka: The small hammer.
4. Mkpa: The pricers for gripping and pulling metals.
5. Akika Oyigboghi: The iron cutter and pulling metals.
6. Mkpachioku: The long rod for stoking the furnace.
7. Ishi-ka-aruu: The screw driver for turning screws.
8. Eko: The bellows for blowing air into fire.
9. Nna: For making screw driver for turning screws.
10. Vice: Used to hold an object firmly in place while working.
11. Tongs: For picking up holding things, especially.

Anakweze's techniques could be aligned with that of the traditional methods of his forefathers as he opines that, the Awka blacksmiths challenge was the recognition they enjoyed only during the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970, unlike now when the government barely recognize their existence. This is as a result of the massive importation of metal wares and the superiority, imported goods enjoy over homemade ware, thereby leaving them with no choice than to continue with their ancient and more task demanding techniques and processes. The skills they acquired since time immemorial. Now, these ancient techniques which have been improved by time and technology include;

1. Bending: it involves
Marking the portion of the length of the metal to beat
Heating the portion in the fire with the required application of force, the anvil and hammer is used to bend the metal.
2. Drawing Down: This technique makes the metal thinner by reducing its cross-section.
3. Upsetting or Jumping Up: It increases the cross-section of the bar at the expense of its length.
4. Punching and Drifting: it is an alternative to drilling. It is preferable because it does not remove any metal. It involves the use of punches and drifts to make round or square holes in hot metals.
5. Fullering: This is used to produce shoulders before drawing down. Fullers are used for this.
6. Flattering: The flatter with the sledge hammer is used to flatter a fullered piece.
7. Swaging: With the use of a pair swager, a round or hexagonal section of a bar is finished by using this process.
8. Twisting: This involves the heating of the metal before curling.
9. Cutting: This is done using either hot or cold sets.
10. Scrolling: It is the process of using decorative smithing to endorse, authenticate, or give possession to the metal works using alphabet, usually letter 'c' and 's' as seen in some lantern holders.

Anakweze Nwude (2015), further asserts that '----- history has it that the Israelites brought the metal art of blacksmithing to Awka' and taught them the only procedures of Blacksmithing they have been practicing for years now. The procedures are further facilitated by the Blacksmith's skills, and the three major elements which are;

1. Heat from the forge: The forge or furnace is first lit, after it lights properly, a piece of metal is slid horizontally into the fire to be heated.
The metal turns white it has reached its forging temperature.

2. Force from the hammer and resistance from the anvil: Here, the metal is brought out and shaped to desired form and shape through an endless possibilities of hammer techniques.

In a quest to preserve their solemn tradition of blacksmithing, blacksmiths involve in itineration (Ifulje) to disseminate their ideas to their neighbors and to acquire more skills; they have a guild system like a secret cult where blacksmithing ideas are shared and discussed; and the transfer of the knowledge to a protégé. All these and much more has helped in preserving the Awka tradition of blacksmithing.

Pathways to the Revival of Indigenous Technology

The advancement in technology has necessitated the need to revive indigenous technologies. Consequently, government policies, promotion of import substitution and infrastructural development are worthy of consideration.

Government has a key role to play in the promotion of indigenous technology. This is to the extent that art work can hardly come to national or international limelight without the intentional efforts of government towards providing enabling environment and possibly making funds available for indigenous artist to make a mark in the national or even global scene. Thus, a committed government can help in capital formation by adopting an efficient monetary and fiscal policies, providing timely overhead capital facilities, consistent and implementation of formulated policies (Osuala, 2012). Additionally, that government is expected to ensure that cost-effective transportation system as well as constant power supply is provided for the furtherance of art work; blacksmithing inclusive.

The local technology can be encouraged through import substitution. It is expected of government to de-emphasize importation of products that can be locally produced. Over-reliance on imported products has a way of strangulating the initiatives of local producers and worse still, instigating poverty given that opportunity for local employment is exported. Thus, the encouragement of locally produced art materials will, to all intents and purposes, lead to the acquisition of innovative mentality via the process of *learning-by-doing* (Okudiba, 1981). Conscious efforts ought to be made by the government to reverse the trend of colonial order and neo-colonial production that is reliant on foreigners for managerial skills and technical expertise. It is thus, necessary to note that if the process of economic growth is to be sustainable, then, encouragement of import substitution and indigenous technology promotion is key.

Before colonial rule, blacksmithing had a pride of place in the lives of the people. This was not unconnected to the socio-cultural as well as the economic roles of blacksmiths in the lives of indigenes. There was a societal appeal to the smiths so much so that it became the delight of many families. However, the advent of colonialism distorted people's view about blacksmithing. This culminated in the deriding of traditional wares such as the smiths' products as *Okpuru Igbo* (meaning Igbo make) and consequently, less patronized (Osuala, 2012). Worse still, the blacksmiths work was deemed unappealing; culminating in its relegation to the background while the young people migrated to the cities in search of greener pastures. The expectation is that blacksmithing ought to be given its right of place in line with the conscious effort towards indigenous technology for sustainable economic development.



Plate 1: Ngwu Nmanwu (Staff of Masquerade).
It is used to indicate where a masquerade is, so as to scare People from going to the Spot. It is also used by the native doctor.



Plate 2: Nwangwu Ana (Small Digger)
It is used for planting vegetables Seeds of plant



Plate 3: Ngwu Nmanwu (Staff of Masquerade).
It is used to Indicate where a masquerade is, so as to scare People from going to the Spot. It is also used by the native doctor



Plate 4: Ogene Mkpi na-abo (Twin Gong)
Used for Shrine activities, Masquerade dance and Traditional purposes.

Conclusion

According to UNESCO (2002), Africa developed its own iron industry some 5000 years ago. This emergence of Blacksmiths in West Africa around 1500BCE accorded Africans the respect due to them. Because the skill in metal working was considered as magic, they were feared, but they were also universally revered for their technological pioneering, hence, these blacksmiths are highly admired and hold high societal status. The intricate designs and mastered craftsmanship has kept Africans, especially Nigerians at the top of their game as everything created from the iron was for utilitarian purpose in the society and not seen as art at all, because art was not essential for survival before the advent of the colonial masters, whose influence brought a rapid decline in the tradition of blacksmithing. The study of the works and times of Anakweze Nwude has opened up our eyes to the reality that the development of the skills for converting raw minerals, through the alchemy of fire, into objects of artistic and spiritual potency is ancient. And of course, the importance and significance of the blacksmith in the society and why it is very important for the federal government to invest in it again, because, it was a case during the civil war to help get rid of the national financial deficit and if possible, reduce inflation totally.

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