

# Reconsidering the Owe Woven Cloth of Nigeria from a Gendered Perspective

by

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## Abstract

This work explores the history of cloth weaving in the Owe region in Nigeria from a gendered perspective that takes a look at the origin of cloth weaving via its relevance as well as the cultural significance of some Owe woven cloth. The paper acknowledges that both men and women engaged in the production of the needed raw materials for weaving during the pre-colonial and colonial eras. It is argued that the people were self-sufficient in sourcing for raw materials for their weaving industry, and as a result, the weaving industry formed an important part of the economy of Owe region before its decline. The paper utilizes primary and secondary methods for the purpose of data generation and adopts a descriptive method for data analysis.

**Keywords:** Oweland, Owe, Kabba, cloth weaving, gender

## Introduction

The main aim of this work is to assess the Owe woven cloth from a gendered perspective with reference to its existence since the pre-colonial period. The term Owe refers to the people occupying the present day Kabba district of Kabba/Bunu local government area of Kogi state, Nigeria. Owe also refers to the Yoruba dialect that the people speak<sup>1</sup>. Oweland used to be a trade centre during the pre-colonial period for numerous farm produce including cotton<sup>2</sup>. No doubt, cotton production and weaving represented critical economic elements in Oweland before changes began to set in. This is because these sectors were more or less the engines of economic development in Oweland. This work therefore examines cloth weaving which was one of the major occupations of the people from the earliest time. It attempts a reconsideration of the Owe woven cloth from a gendered perspective through data generated from eye witness accounts of Owe woven cloth as well as archival materials.

## **Cloth Weaving in Oweland: Conceptual Issues and Origin**

The origin of cloth weaving in Oweland is not certain, but it is believed to be as ancient as the people<sup>3</sup>. However, cloth weaving has been discussed in a wider scope by various academics; this has made it to attract numerous definitions from scholars of divergent theoretical persuasions. Most writings view cloth not only from the covering and protection of the body perspective but also from the socio-cultural perspectives. According to Olaoye, cloth weaving emerged as a result of the people's needs to cover their nakedness<sup>4</sup>. In another account, he describes cloth as a representation of the magnificent culture of a person, adding that the nature of cloth worn by a person describes the class of the individual<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the type of cloth worn by a person speaks for the person. Similarly, Faleye also noted that cloth is used in the protection of the human body, and cloth also helps in describing the past and tradition of a group of people<sup>6</sup>. However, Rene posits that cloth is the product of social life<sup>7</sup> while Asakitipi further explained that cloth is worn to reveal social class of a person<sup>8</sup>.

In Oweland, just like every other community in the world, cloth was essentially needed, and to satisfy this need, cloth weaving became inevitable, as both men and women needed cloth to cover and protect their body in the pursuance of their daily activities. Both men and women engaged in cloth weaving, but the effort put in by women in Oweland surpassed the role played by their male counterparts. The availability of a favourable climatic condition and fertile land for the growing of cotton greatly enhanced the production of raw cotton in Oweland. The availability of the needed raw materials promoted and sustained cloth weaving in Oweland.<sup>9</sup> As one of the major economic activities of the people, the weaving processes were carried out by both men and women with variations in the looms used. The men used the horizontal loom while the women made use of the vertical loom. Their professional skills as well as aesthetic designs were next to none, and this made the Owe woven cloth very popular and the most sought-after in the area before decline began to set in. There was great demand within and outside the shores of Oweland.<sup>10</sup> The Owe woven cloth expresses the artistic ingenuity of the people.

Before weaving can be possible, the cotton planted must have been harvested and processed. The business of clearing and tilling the soil was done by men while planting and weeding was done by women. Harvesting was done by both men and women while the processing of the harvested produce was done mainly by the women. Because of the people's love for agriculture, the needed cotton for cloth weaving was not an issue, and this was one of the major reasons why cloth weaving thrived even before the coming of the colonialists. The needed raw materials were in excess supply, the reasons being that the people cultivated raw cotton, and it was as a result of the availability of cotton that cloth weaving was taken up by most women. Although the cultivation of cotton before the arrival of the colonialists was locally done, cotton farming was done mainly to meet their immediate needs. Excess produce was sold out to neighboring villages.

The cultivation of cotton for export purposes was encouraged by the colonialists around 1910. It was the activities of the British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA) that triggered the insatiable thirst for cotton in Oweland as well as Nigeria as a whole<sup>11</sup>. Oweland became famous for her supply of cotton to the BCGA. Both men and women began to cultivate cotton not only to satisfy their immediate needs as the case was before colonial rule but also for commercial purposes. The entire process was characterized by a division of labour between the two genders. While the clearing of bushes and making of ridges were done by the men, the planting, weeding and harvesting as well as processing of the cotton were done by the women. The business of selling to the BCGA was done mostly by the men. In order to encourage the farmers to cultivate more cotton, the BCGA distributed high yielding cotton seeds to farmers on constant occasions to improve production<sup>12</sup>. This made the people to widely embrace the encouragement brought by the colonialist in terms of cotton production. As a result of this acceptance by the people, commercial cotton farming became a major occupation of the people. With increment in the quantity produced, the BCGA established a ginnery in Kabba province which could compress bales into half its original size<sup>13</sup>. The people who cultivated cotton for the purpose of supplying the BCGA were also said to have been involved in the supply of cotton to the weaving industries. With the supply of improved varieties of cotton seedlings by the BCGA, the weaving industry was also carried to another level as there was massive supply of cotton for the weaving industries. The weavers took their weaving techniques to an enviable height during the colonial era.

## **Cloth Weaving Procedures**

For weaving to be possible, the harvested cotton had to undergo certain procedures. With the improved production of cotton in Oweland, the people were encouraged to embrace their weaving culture which had been in existence even before the coming of the colonialists. With this new development, the people wove more cloths for both domestic and commercial purposes as all the needed materials for weaving were readily available within the community as sourcing for them was less stressful, their weaving techniques was greatly improved and thus contributing to the sustenance of the industry.

With the development brought by the colonialists, the people of Oweland were ushered into a new phase of cloth weaving as there was an increase in the demand of the Owe woven cloth within and outside Oweland<sup>14</sup>; the quality of the cloths and their distinct aesthetic designs made this possible, and there was the emergence of a new phase of the Owe merchant class as many engaged in the sale of Owe woven materials within and outside Oweland on a large scale. As stated earlier, this development led to the re-emergence of the class of weavers.

Furthermore, the re-emergence of the new class of weavers led to a higher demand of cotton to feed the weaving industries; though there was availability of cotton to be used by the weavers, the harvested cottons had to undergo certain procedures for it to be used for weaving. The first procedure embarked on in weaving is to remove the cotton seeds from its fibres. For this to be possible, a rod is rolled over the balls of the cotton. This process of rolling a rod over the balls of the cotton is known as ginning. In order to achieve these procedures, the following tools were set in place: block of wood, iron rod, bow, spindle, loom, shuttle and a smooth-like piece of wood.

The block of wood and iron rod help in facilitating the removal of the cotton seeds from the wool. The tools served as a ginny for ginning the raw cotton. The bow serves as a fluffer. It is used to fluff the ginned cotton which helps in facilitating spinning. The spindle helps in housing the already fluffed cotton which now comes in form of a thread. The loom serves as a housing tool where the ropes for weaving are set while the sword-like piece of wood also known as shuttle was used for opening the warps through which the shuttle that carries the weft passes. It also served as a tool used for beating down the weft neatly. It is a piece of stick smoothly carved, and it is about two feet long; threads wound round it, the shuttle is passed by the weaver through the warps when weaving, and the systematic passing of the shuttle through the warps releases the thread on it and are then used as the weft. Having fulfilled the above procedures weaving can now be commenced.

## **Categories or varieties of Woven Cloths**

Weavers in Oweland laid bare the various designs they wove through their professional skills. They had to adapt to the available resources in Oweland, and they had tremendous patronage as a result of the quality of woven materials supplied by the merchants<sup>15</sup>. Owe woven cloths were said to be neatly and tightly woven which made it much more durable. In Oweland, cloths are worn for various purposes; there were cloths worn for special ceremonies like the performance of marriage rites, burial rites, procreation rites, and ritual and traditional rites, and there were also some other ones worn for day to day activities to cover their nakedness as well as protecting their bodies from direct exposure to the weather. Cloths were also worn to show affluence and class<sup>16</sup>. To others, cloth was worn for the purpose of beautification. The culture of cloth wearing went beyond the physical as even the dead were clothed in expensive apparel depending on the class of the person.

Clothes were woven to serve domestic, cultural, ceremonial and commercial purposes. Cloth weaving in Oweland was therefore embarked upon for numerous reasons. The type of cloth to be woven by the weaver was determined by what the cloth was to be used for.

*Arigidi, aso oke, kitipa, aki, arikuku* and *Keke* were the most commonly woven materials supplied by Owe people. Some of the woven materials were dyed into red, black, tan or blue and could also be combined: for example, white and blue woven material, red and white, red, etc. depending on the type and use. The threads are produced from locally grown cotton. The blue or very dark blue threads are obtained by dyeing the white threads in *aro* (dye), while the red and tan is dyed with *papamlolo* or *osun*. *Arigidi, kitipa* and *keke* served several purposes. However, the type of woven cloth worn described both the culture and occasion one was going for; each type of woven material represented the occasion the person was going for. For example, *Arigidi, asoke* and *keke*, when they were to be used as special wrapper for wedding or naming ceremony, were decorated with beautiful designs. They were regarded as special ones because they were only used during ceremonies; they therefore served as ceremonial wears. They were always in high request and were sold to people around and even outside Oweland<sup>17</sup>. The *Asopo* and *Aponupoyin* were expensive, and sales was not common<sup>18</sup>. The *Asopo* was the general name for the five types of cloth woven for burial. While the *Aponupoyin* was the highest of them all and was woven by men only because of its traditional importance, it was used only for the highest ranked king<sup>19</sup>.

The size of each woven cloth was determined by the purpose which it served. Materials for wrapper, covering, and male garments were wider and longer, while the ordinary *arigidi* and *keke* woven mainly for sale were shorter in length and not as wide as the special ones. The ones produced for sale in the market were woven purely for commercial purposes and were not used locally. They therefore served purely commercial purposes<sup>20</sup>.

All the raw materials needed in cloth weaving in Oweland during the pre-colonial period were sourced locally from the immediate environment<sup>21</sup>. The skills in weaving were passed from one generation to another. The symbolic nature of cloth weaving in Oweland could be seen in the tradition of the people, as there were various cloths for each ceremony. The cloth woven and worn during burials of a high-ranking chief was different from the woven cloth worn during marriage ceremonies.

Although weaving was done by both men and women, there was a line of demarcation between the male and female weaving. For instance, the types of loom which were used by both weavers differed. While, for example, men wove on horizontal looms, weaving by women was done on vertical looms<sup>22</sup>. The respective looms dictated the width of cloth woven. More so, with the vertical loom, women could weave far more than three times what the men's horizontal loom could weave per day. The vertical loom and the horizontal loom had some similar characteristics but were built differently. The horizontal loom was normally constructed in an open space; this was done in order to give room for the setup of the long warp while the vertical loom was set up indoors because the construction of the vertical loom entailed only little space. Besides, with the set-up of the vertical loom, women were able to combine their domestic assignment with weaving as it was possible for them to leave their weaving for other domestic duties when the need arose and return to it within the shortest period of time.

## **Cultural Values and Transfer of Skills from One Generation to Another**

In most Owe communities where cotton had been grown and manufactured into cloth for many centuries past, the main chunk of the work was vested on the woman. The cultural value placed on weaving in Oweland made it mandatory for all girl children to learn the techniques of weaving. As part of the people's culture, as soon as a would-be husband concludes all the marriage rites, the bride was expected to weave apparel for her husband as her first assignment. So, it became a necessity for a girl to be taught how to weave before getting married. Thus, the culture of weaving was passed from one generation to another through their mothers, sisters or through a skilled weaver who could mentor. In learning how to weave, the girl was taught through four stages, which include ginning, spinning, weaving on a calabash and weaving on the loom. These procedures – through which skills were transferred – are briefly articulated below.

### **Ginning Procedure**

The ginning process was the first stage of learning. For a girl to be allowed to gin, she was made to pass through certain stages. For instance, she was vested with the sole responsibility of picking out all dirt found in her mother's cotton wool. Again, all procedures done to facilitate ginning were done by the little girl. It was only when all the ginning obligations had been satisfied that she was allowed to start her own ginning. To commence her own ginning procedures, a small amount of cotton was given to her, and she ginned along with her mother through the imitation process. The process continued on a daily basis until the technique of ginning was mastered. Once the ginning technique had been perfected, she was allowed to move to the next stage which was spinning.

### **The Spinning Procedure**

The spinning process also continued just like the imitation process of ginning, although in spinning, her first sets of spinning may be too fat to use for weaving but were kept and reused until her spinning skill was perfected. Once the important skills relating to spinning procedures had been interiorised, she was then taught the basic principles of weaving on a calabash.

### **Weaving On A Calabash**

After fulfilling the ginning and spinning obligation, the girl was allowed to commence weaving but not on the loom. Her weaving technique was first tested on a calabash; as a result, she was assisted in setting up her own thread on a calabash. It was the most demanding but of great significance. She was taught the setting of the yarn and how to pass the weft through the warps, having mastered all the required technique on the calabash. Weaving on the loom commenced thereafter.

## **Weaving on the Loom**

Weaving on the loom was the final procedure of leaning. She was taught ways of setting yarns on the loom. The process of weaving learnt on the calabash continued on the loom until her weaving had been perfected. The first weaving on the loom may not be as neat as the ones woven by her mother and others who had perfected the techniques of weaving, but it was, however, not taken to market for sale but served other purposes in the home such as wrapping unripe fruits and foot mats as well as wrapping or covering unsold woven materials. Besides, some mothers took their daughters' first woven materials to cross-roads, with the belief that certain spirits would pick the poorly woven cloths and perfect their children's weaving techniques<sup>23</sup>. Thus, once her weaving was perfected, she was then allowed to weave as much as she could and that would be taken along with other woven materials for sale in the market.

## **The Sales of Owe Woven Cloths**

The sale of the Owe woven cloth was done at the various periodic markets, which were held in Oweland. Such markets included the Owe, Eyere, Agba, Mokahe, Araromi, Obelle, Idi'ose and the Odogi markets, among others. The Odogi market was the most patronized during the period under study as it was well attended by cloth merchants<sup>24</sup>. Owe woven clothes were not sold like other commodities in these markets. There were agents who were vested with the sole responsibility of buying and selling the woven materials from the women. People came massively to Oweland to buy. Prices of woven materials were not fixed as they fluctuated from one market to the other.

However, the Owe woven materials after being sold to the agents by the women were taken to other markets outside Oweland. For instance, these woven materials were taken to places like Nupe land, Ikare, Ijesha, Ogbagi, Lokoja and Onitsha markets<sup>25</sup>. The Onitsha market seemed to be the major market where the Owe woven materials were bought in bulk outside Oweland. Because the Owe woven materials were highly valued by the Onitsha people, they were in a very high demand in Onitsha market.

## **The Economic Importance of Owe Woven Materials**

Even before the coming of the colonialists, the Owe woven cloth had been a lucrative source of income to the people. Proceeds from the sales of these woven materials were used for the welfare of the family. As a result of these proceeds from sales, the standard of living of the people was greatly improved.

With the coming of the colonialists, cotton production was improved and thus the British Cotton Growers Association (BCGA) introduced more varieties of raw cotton. The economic importance of the operations of the BCGA, particularly in Oweland, could also be found in the expansion of the cotton industry and the provision of profitable employment for the people of Oweland. The farmers were able to add cotton to the list of export cash crops from which they could derive income. In other words, the introduction of cotton as a cash crop helped to diversify agricultural production. The industry also provided additional employment for a number of people in Oweland during the period under study. The cultivation of cotton on a large scale supported the weaving culture of the owe people, thereby improving the standard of living of the people. The people wove more and sold more during this period, and there was inflow of people from different geographical areas into Oweland.

## **The Era of Decline**

In the final analysis, the point must be made that there has been a great decline in the Owe cloth weaving industry. The decline could be attributed to several factors. These include Western education, massive importation of foreign prints and the people's insatiable thirst for foreign products. Although some farmers are still involved in the cultivation and production of cotton in Oweland, the values – cultural and economic – attached to it during the pre-colonial and colonial eras have somewhat diminished. As a result of this decline in cotton production, the required cotton needed by the weaving industries is no longer available on a large scale in Oweland. Cotton farmers are very few; even the few farmers do not get the required patronage any more, not because there are no weavers on ground but because most weavers have taken up other more lucrative jobs. Besides, the weaving culture of the people that required a newly wedded bride, as part of her first assignment in her husband's house, to weave a robe for her husband has since gone into extinction.

The decline of hand-woven clothes in the area could also be ascribed to the emergence of Western education. With the gravitation towards Western education, only fewer numbers of boys and girls appear to be interested in acquiring the skills of weaving, as many now prefer to relocate to the cities in search of better jobs that befit their new status<sup>26</sup>. Again, most parents encourage their wards to seek pastures anew on completion of their educational pursuits. As a result, Oweland is beginning to witness an outflow of her citizens to cities and urban centres. Most people after the completion of their primary (and now secondary) education migrate out of Oweland. Those who prefer to further their studies could not also do that in Oweland as there are no available tertiary schools. So, they still have to travel out of Oweland as well; as such, the needed manpower required to stir the engine of the industry is no longer available. Thus, this migration culminates in the decline of cloth weaving in Oweland.



More so, the decline of the Owe weaving industry could be attributed to the massive importation of foreign prints into Oweland. Towards the end of colonial rule, Oweland began to encounter the massive importation of European textile materials into her markets. Consequently, this massive importation led to change in taste of the people and thus led to a sharp decline in the Owe weaving industry as well as the Nigerian weaving industry<sup>27</sup>. One of the reasons often asserted for this is the uneven competition between machine-made clothes and the locally woven materials. Furthermore, the people's insatiable thirst for foreign products as well as the people's preference for these foreign materials also contributed to its decline. The local cotton was abandoned for imported threads, the reasons being that the effort invested into processing the harvested cotton was not commensurate to the price these woven materials were sold, so both the weavers and the buyers prefer the imported threads which come in colourful and attractive patterns after weaving.

Hence, by the end of colonial rule in 1960, it was already evidenced that the European textile had seriously began to destabilize the local weaving industry. Although, as stated earlier, the locally made cloths were of better quality and more durable, the love for innovation and transformation enticed many to the imported textile materials. According to the information gathered from one of my interviewers, it was a prestige for one to put on European textile during this period, and only the elite and well-to-do could afford it<sup>28</sup>. Just like some special woven materials which were worn to show class, the imported textiles became a tool used by the wealthy to display affluence. The owe woven clothes were preferred on account of their uniqueness, thickness and durability by the Europeans, but the people preferred English colourful cottons and were always in a rush to barter the same size of their own hand-woven cloth for the foreign prints<sup>29</sup>. The traditions of weaving and cloth adorning slowly vanished in Oweland.

After independence fewer men and women engaged in cotton production; as such, there are no young weavers again in the area. Those who still engage in weaving are the aged. Weaving culture in the region has disappeared. One would wonder that a region which was famous for its cotton production and supply of woven materials in the 1920s through 1950s could desert or jettison such. The truth still remains that Owe woven materials are still very durable and can stand the test of time. Some even hold the view that, in terms of quality and durability, Owe woven clothes are far better than foreign and imported materials. They are thicker, more durable, and weightier.

The decline faced by the Owe weaving industry notwithstanding, her woven materials are still being used by Owe traditionalists. The *Arigidi*, *Eleboto aponuonyin* and *asoke* amongst others are still being preferred and widely used by traditionalists in Oweland. Modernization has not taken the place of culture as these clothes are still being used in the performance of all cultural rites and could not be substituted with the available imported materials.

## Conclusion

From the studies, activities supporting the cloth weaving industry in Oweland during the pre-colonial era and the early part of the colonial period were characterised by functional division of labour between the male and female genders. The functions of the women even appeared to be more strategic. They did not only assist the men in the cultivation and production of cotton, but they also dominated the cloth weaving industry. The economic role of women was therefore widely acknowledged in Oweland before the surging societal changes. Before the era of decline, the women of Oweland carved out important areas of responsibilities for themselves in the economic development of Oweland. The shift from subsistence production of cotton and woven cloth to commercial production and the slowly increased fluidity of western textiles into the economy of Oweland greatly deprived the women of their critical economic roles as weavers and traders of woven materials as was the case during the pre-colonial era. During the period under study, the weaving industry allowed Owe women to demonstrate their economic ingenuity and participate actively in the economic development of the community.

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