

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL TECHNOLOGY: THE EKITI OF SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Before colonization, the Ekiti people had various indigenous technologies with which they were able to control their environment and give continuity to their existence and socio-cultural experiences. Their technological acquisitions, very evidently, were a manifestation of superb creativity that was entirely unique with the people. Contrary to some Eurocentric stereotyped views that the Europeans brought technological ideas to Africa, the Ekiti experience has proved this assertion wrong. This is because, prior to the coming of the Europeans, the Ekiti people had already developed their technology. For example, smelting, smithing, pottery and weaving technologies were some of the industries the Europeans met before some of these were made to acquire new faces. The aforementioned are what this paper wants to address.

Keywords: Traditional Technology, Ekiti Experience, Superb Creativity, Socio-Cultural Experiences.

I. INTRODUCTION

Like in other places in Africa, Ekiti people of Southwestern Nigeria have demonstrated their skill and creativity in science and technology since antiquity. Technological efforts were not introduced from outside but from inside. Before colonization, iron was used to produce a variety of farming, war and domestic objects. Since any technological achievement is naturally a response to environmental needs, the tools made by the indigenous Ekiti people were also naturally a response to the need of the period.

According to Bade Adeyeye (1984:20), commenting on African technology, the technological development in Africa from the pre-historic to the pre-colonial period was undergoing systematic and natural process or growth when the Europeans abruptly disrupted this process. The disruption began in the 5th century, first with the Arabs, and later with the Atlantic slave trade. Colonialism followed by the total disorganization and well nerved exploitation of Africa. People's ways of life were also polluted (see Oyebola, 1982). The Europeans, thus, imposed their own technological culture, instead of encouraging African traditional technologies they met. For example, Europe flooded African markets with imported plastic and enamel wares, thereby killing the African industrial initiatives, marking the beginning of consumerist culture in Africa. This was also not short of creative laziness.

However, after the Second World War, or in 1946, some nationalist movements and African scholars began to encourage, in the case of Ekiti, people not to abandon their indigenous industries while still patronizing foreign products. They were worried that at the end of the day, even though some of these Europeans had started to show interests in African technology, many students and younger generations might not know the creative achievements or the technological achievements of their forefathers (Oloidi, 2007). Giving continuity to one's heritage was necessary, according to the nationalists, because the knowledge of the past would be a source of cultural pride and identity. Not only that, the present generation will be inspired to build on their technological heritage. According to Ola Oloidi (2007), technology is a way of defining or measuring not only the industrial power but also the personality of a nation. To a very lay extent, to him, "it makes a society culturally proud, socially respected, economically more viable and developmentally more aggressive".

However, three of the traditional, indigenous technologies of the Ekiti people, iron smelting and smithing, pottery and weaving, will be discussed in this paper. Before progressing with this, it is important to define technology in the context of this discussion. Technology is the technical and creative excellence exhibited by people through the production or creation of the materials or objects which were natural responses to environment needs. Various industrial designs, materials or objects, as well as other powerful, creative craft works, were, therefore, what the colonizers met and discouraged in Africa, because of what they considered crude, simple and economically unrealistic.

II. EVIDENCES OF TRADITIONAL TECHNOLOGY

From archaeological, historical and oral evidences, the ancient Ekiti people practised weaving, pottery and iron smelting before the advent of the Europeans. The Okemesi town, for example, was a very popular iron smelting community that produced what the colonial administration considered “very crude war instruments or weapons which the Ekiti used in 1875 when the Ekiti Parapo War began” (Akinyeye, 2006). That there was high technology in Nigeria long before colonization has been proved by Bernard Fagg; that iron was in use by the 5th century B.C. among the Nok. Also, the famous Igbo-Ukwu tradition of the 9th century was already proficient in iron smelting. These evidences are enough to make one accept similar technological tradition in Ekiti. W.H. Clarke in his report in *Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland (1854-1858)* has also clearly attested to the use of various objects that were products of technology. Clarke has also revealed how before 1854 the Yoruba, including Ekiti people had abundant “one of the very best quality” which “was smelted and made ready for the smith” (Clarke, 1972: 217).

However, what made scholars and even the British colonizers easily believe and agree that there was iron technology in Ekiti before colonization was the worship of Ogun, the deity and god of iron, by the people. Iron was the symbol of Ogun all over Ekiti. According to Ojo Okanlawon, whose grandfather was the leader of the Ogun worshippers in their district, “There was no way Ogun could be worshipped without an iron which could be in form of iron rod, hoe blade, cutlass or knife” (Okanlawon, 2009).

What also made iron very integral to Ekiti’s cultural traditions was its popular use in judicial matters; for swearing either before chiefs, district elders, or the kings when offence was committed and during any serious argument or dispute. This was the experience that the colonial administrators met and also adopted for court matters. That is, the colonial local courts discovered that some Ekiti people still refused to tell the truth when given a Bible to swear with in court. This was how crude or other iron objects began to be used, when necessary, in courts, for swearing; to aid the judicial processes. Captain W.G. Ambrose, the District Commissioner for Ekiti, but based in Ilesha, had this to say in 1906 (N.A.I. Ondo Prof. 4/1, 1914).

The Ekiti country has unbelievably acquired technical feat, particularly in the area of agricultural tools which in spite of some relative crudeness and lack of sophistication, have given the peasants very good results. On the way to their farms every morning are seen young boys and their fathers with a variety of what they call *ada* (cutlasses), dangling down their shoulders with ropes... these are produced by smiths at house premises in addition to other iron products for trapping animals

In another report by the District Commissioner for Ekiti, G.E.H. Humphrey in 1913, there was a directive that instructed school teachers to encourage pupils to continue using their traditional woven cloths as uniforms in schools. In the report (N.A.I. Ondo Prof. O. C. 4, 1920):

All District Commissioners have been directed by the Education Secretary in the Education Department to make the children continue to wear their locally woven cloths, known as *pokite* (*pokiti*) as uniform to school. The nature of the weather even makes it more desirable to do this, considering the thickness of the materials. The secretary has in mind the already popularly woven and used *pokite* (*pokiti*) with vertical black and white stripes.

The above account has also made it very clear that the Ekiti had the tradition of weaving before colonization. However, perhaps the most interesting account on the Ekiti traditional technology was that of Mr. A.P. Pullen, the District Officer (DO) for Ekiti in 1923; in his description of how, every early morning, women used their locally made pots to fetch water in nearby streams (N.A.I. Ekiti Div 1/3, 1934):

It is always all activities ... for these women and their children moving to and from streams to fetch water every early morning with well bellied, round pots of almost the same shape but of different sizes. These pots are carried by women on

heads and... always walking very fast under these heavy water pots. It is understood that few newly introduced metal containers are being rejected, believing that they will change the taste of water. Breakage, to these people, seems not to be a problem, since hundreds of these water vessels or pots are being manufactured everyday in various Ekiti communities.

It is now necessary to first discuss iron smelting in Ekiti in the pre-colonial era.

III. TRADITIONAL IRON SMELTING IN EKITI

Though archaeological research on smelting has not been carried out on Ekiti, an anthropological research has shown that many Ekiti towns like Ado, Igede, Okemesi, Ikere, Igbemo, Ire, Ilawe, Ise and Igbara-odo, among others, had been known for iron smelting tradition before colonization, and iron ore abounded in these places (Adelaja, 1999). Without doubt, the discussion so far has shown that the Ekiti's tradition of iron smelting goes back to the ancient period, since generations continued to hold tenaciously to this tradition of their forefathers.

However, it is important to point out here that since no concrete research has been carried out, as above stated, on the smelting technology of the people, it is still difficult to accurately have the knowledge of smelting method, in terms of design used for smelting. There are however some near-descriptions by some knowledgeable Ekiti blacksmiths, belonging to the very old Ekiti craft school. However, definitely, there was iron smelting in Ekiti as very accurately affirmed by the documentation of major W.R. Reeve Tucker, the Travelling Commissioner in Ekiti, in 1899. Though, he was stationed at Ilesha, which at that time was culturally and geographically part of Ekiti, Tucker developed interest in the Ekiti local industries that convinced him that there was "significant evidence of native technology in this Ekitti (Ekiti) territory" (N.A.I. Ekiti Div. 2/4, 1930). Tucker, perhaps, was the first to document the different names given to iron ore in Ekiti. Some of these were *irin okuta* (iron stone), *okuta guruguru* (hard rugged stone), *okuta irin* (iron stone), *irin ebora* (iron of the spirits) and *orogodo okuta* (a mythical stone), among others, depending on each locality's dialect. Iron ore is characteristically very heavy.

One description of smelting method by Reeve Tucker shows how a hole was dug by Ekiti blacksmith on the ground and big broken pot placed inside the pit with the iron ore placed on it. To melt the ore, according to his observation, charcoal from hard wood, large quantity of palm kernel shells, animal bones and grass would be put on the ore and set on fire. Depending on the size of the ore, and the intensity of the fire supplied, the ore could take about ten or more hours to melt into crude iron that would be allowed to cool down and solidify (N.A.I. Ekiti Div. 2/4, 1930). Usually, the iron transformation was not yet complete until the impurities collected were separated by the blacksmiths in their furnaces during the process of refining the iron. It was after this that the blacksmith could use the iron to produce various implements, showing another technological feat of the pre-colonial Ekiti.

Samuel Johnson also in 1919 commented on the richness of iron ore in Ekiti. According to him, "certain districts in Ekiti province are also famous for their iron ores from which good steel was made, such as OKE MESI", Johnson continued (Johnson, 1969:120):

Charcoal from hard wood, and the shells of palm nuts are the materials generally used for generating the great heat required for the furnace (called Ileru) which is kept going all the year round. Iron rods and bars of European commerce being cheaper are fast displacing home-made products, and here and there all over the country the furnaces are being closed and soon will doubts begin to be expressed as to whether Yorubas ever knew the art (technology) of smelting iron from the ores!

IV. BLACKSMITHING IN PRE-COLONIAL EKITI

In the pre-colonial period, the Ekiti smiths produced axes, arrows, knives, cutlasses, hoes, anklets, adzes, cult bells, hair pins, daggers, bracelets and earrings, to mention a few. The blacksmith's workshop was equipped with a bellow called *Ogudu* of various designs made up of animal skin, two long vertical sticks, short wooden pipe and carved wood in form of a mortar. There was also charcoal and large quantity of palm kernel shells used as foil (Oyebode, 1995). With a bellow, all the above implements were produced. The blacksmiths played a major role during various Ekiti's internal and external wars between the 18th and early 20th centuries. During this period, various weapons were locally manufactured for the Ekiti warriors for their field operations, including what they considered protective or medicinal rings and anklets. Still, there is more to say about the pre-colonial smithing tradition of Ekiti. According to W.H. Clarke (1972:272):

Every town has its complement of blacksmith shops (workshop) that may be known by their circular tops where the sound of the hammer and anvil may be heard from day to day. The implements and fixtures in general use are a rock for anvil, a small oblong piece of iron tapering to a handle for a hammer, one or two pairs of tongs similar to those in common use, a pair of bellows made out of raw hide in a circular shape-with handles of wood inserted so as to be raised perpendicularly – (for firing). Coal made from wood is generally used though shells of the palm nut are used in case of necessity.

From the above, it is indeed clear that the Ekiti people were adept blacksmiths who, before colonization, produced a variety of cultic, hunting and domestic objects with local tools for the community. These local tools, which the colonial administration regarded as crude, were *ewu*, *okuta nla*, *olulu*, *emunan* and *agerin*. *Ewu*, in big and small sizes, was used to beat hot iron into the desired shape. Even the small size of *ewu* was so heavy that young boys or some young men, who were not blacksmiths, or relations of blacksmiths, would find it difficult to lift it up easily.

Okuta, meaning stone, but in this case big hard stone, served as a ground or base on which various hot irons were beaten to shape with either small or big *ewu*. *Olulu*, perforator, also called *aluwo*, was used to bore holes on hot iron when the iron was still hot. *Olulu* also had different sizes. *Emunan*, or hot iron holder, had many sizes, all used to hold hot iron before *ewu* could be used to beat or hit the iron to get the required shape or design. *Agerin* which also had about three sizes, depending on the size and thickness of the hot iron to be cut, was used for cutting or slicing a hot iron. With colonization, smithing tradition dwindled because of the large quantity of iron being imported into the country. It is however good to discuss another Ekiti industry, pottery, before colonization.

V. POTTERY

Another important industry which existed before the advent of the Europeans was pottery. Unlike smithery which was controlled by, or exclusive to, man, pottery was predominantly a female preoccupation. The industry was found in several Ekiti towns, especially where there was clay. For example, Ipoti, Ara, Igbara-Odo, Afaro, Obo, Aiyede Isan and Ilafon, among others, were popular pottery centres where clay was also very abundant.

With very simple but effective tools, the pre-colonial Ekiti potters were able to produce various domestic and other utilitarian pots that sufficiently met the needs of the people. These tools were generally used for building, forming and decorating pots and other utensils. The forming tools were a pedestal which could be an old mortar or any wooden, hollow object wooden paddles (*olulu*) pebbles (*okuta*), calabash pieces (*akikaragba*), rough tree barks (*epipo igi*), potsherds and any flat grainy organic object. Particularly for decorating pots or utensils, the tools used included a variety of needle-like very short sticks, flattened wood or bamboo part of tree, called *peripe*, usually used for weaving basket.

The second stage of pot or vessel making was firing, and here, large quantity of dry wood was required. After pots had been formed, they would be left for one day to dry up. After this, the vessels would be left for one day to dry up, before firing in the open for several hours. Firing could take place either in the morning or in the evening, but many potters wares or pots were stacked very cautiously on one another on layers of stones within which were well arranged firewood. However, the duration of firing depended on the number of wares to be fired.

The Ekiti pottery type in the colonial period could be classified as follows: *oru*, *ape*, *isasun*, *age*, *ajere*, *agbada* and *amum*. The *oru*, also called *isa*, has a narrow neck with small mouth and also have several shapes or designs. Some *oru* are bare in decoration while some are profusely ornamented with organic and geometrical motifs or patterns. In the colonial era, there were *oru oba* (water pot for kings), or *oru agbo* (medicine, concoction pot), *oru awo* (special medicine pot for a master herbalist) and *oru omi* (water pot). According to Awosina, *oru*, with its mouth and balanced base, was used in the pre-colonial and colonial Ekiti for keeping water and other herbal ingredients for bathing children suffering from convulsion (Adeyeye, 2008).

Ape, also known as *koko*, has variety, depending on the function each variety performs. *Ape* which was also used with hides as musical instrument could be hemispherical “with or without neck and with wide or small mouth” (Adeyeye, 2008). They were generally used for cooking yam, *amala* (plantain flower) and beans, among others. The *isasun* also had a variety. This type was shaped as a bowl, with shoulder and rim and at times produced with a lid. *Isasun* was used for cooking soup and herbal medicine. *Age* was also commonly used for rituals. A highly decorative vessel with a handle or handles was usually used as a kettle for water. *Ajere*, a variation of *oru*, was perforated and used as a colander for washing the seeds of beans and melon. It was also used for smoking meat, fish and other edible materials. *Agbada* was a big bowl-

shaped vessel with a wide mouth. It was used for frying gari, akara and some other food stuffs. *Amun*, also called *Ikoko*, was usually large with or without big mouth. They were used for water storage (Adeyeye, 2008).

VI. WEAVING

Weaving was another industry of Ekiti before colonization. With the use of vertical and horizontal looms, the Ekiti women were able to produce enough cloths for people to wear. The process of weaving began with ginning or de-seeding, when cotton seeds were removed by an iron rod called *obibo* that served as a roller. After the cotton seeds had been removed, the cotton would undergo a fluffing process; that is, removing the cotton fibres that result from ginning. Fluffing was done with a bow-like instrument called *orun or ofa* in some Ekiti towns. With this technique, the cotton would be beaten into a light form and this form, before being spun into threads or yarn with a spindle called *keke* that had round heavy object at its bottom or lower end. This round or circular object could be well shaped, round wood or dry and hard fruit of either *agbalumo* or *osanwewe* (lemon).

What followed this weaving process was winding and warping of threads after which these threads could be dyed in different colours while others were left undyed in their white colour. In fact, what is important to note here is that the technology of textile production or weaving existed before colonization. That is, the Ekiti people were able to develop their non indigenous equipment and means for all the stages of textile production. For example, there were two types of weaving equipment. One was the narrow loom which was introduced to Ekiti in the 1890s by the Oyo weavers of the present Oyo State. This type of loom, which was exclusively for men, was however, not popular among the Ekiti. The main, and the most popular, loom that was indigenous to Ekiti were the vertical looms that were exclusively used by women. In fact, it was a common experience to see “upright looms of the women standing against the walls of their cottages” (Murray, 1958). In terms of design creativity and methodological processes, the looms were very original to the Ekiti people; like the art of dying, embroidery and other forms of textile technology.

VII. CONCLUSION

Without doubt, as already expressed, the Ekiti people had already acquired the necessary technical competencies in their various industrial activities before the grip of British colonization. They had the basic tools and were proficient in various methods of industrial production; which had been transferred from one generation to another. This was why many early European expatriates acknowledged that fact that the Europeans did not really bring anything new to the people, but just new, modern, innovations on the existing technological culture of the people. It has also been observed by some nationalists that there were ongoing developments on certain indigenous industrial pre-occupations when colonialism derailed these, thereby killing local or traditional technical initiatives. Afterwards, to them, with their highly realistic or functional technical knowledge, the Ekiti people had, for centuries, been able to perpetuate their cultural and industrial activities for meaningful existence.

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