

Repositioning Traditional Crafts and Industries for Tourism Development and Promotion in Ukpok, Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract:

Right from time, man has produced and used many materials and other devices to survive from the precarious environment he found himself. Most of these cultural implements were initially geared towards the procurement of food, shelter and protection. Thus, the gradual movement from the use of wooden objects to the production of stone and finally iron and metal objects. This gradual and evolutionary process has been referred to archaeologically as the stone and the iron/metal ages. Consequently, the production and acquisition of these tools enhanced man's living and gave him an added advantage over the lower primates.

This process continued till date and has been professionally referred to as Arts and Crafts. This entails the production of cultural materials through wood work, ceramics/clay, textile, stone, metals, etc. Presently, workshops both locally and mechanized are set up for this purpose and this arts, which was formally meant for the production of mainly domestic tools and hence, serving domestic purposes is having a dramatic and enthusiastic dimension.

Local crafts and traditional industries apart from playing its initial roles as earlier mentioned now play both aesthetic and tourism roles as they today form part of the tourist potentials, which can be harnessed for tourism development and promotion within the area of study.

It was therefore based on the above issues that the researchers decided to look into the various arts, crafts and traditional industries in Ukpok, Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State,

Nigeria; with the aim of deciphering how the above mentioned can be harnessed for tourism development and promotion in our study area taking into cognizance the place/position of tourism as the second source of the nation"s economic, socio-cultural and political base.

Introduction:

Man from the earliest time, is in constant interaction with both his social and physical environments. He makes use of what the environment in which he finds himself provides to tackle the problem(s) posed by the same environment. In a bid to overcome the adverse effects of man's physical environment, he sees himself making numerous inventions and discoveries among which are the traditional crafts and industries.

Arts are the manifestation or expression of external and internal realities, feelings and experiences of the people (Onwudufor 1987). Arts is also associated with religion and as a result highly revered. These ideas and beliefs fall in line with those of Ukpok people with regards to their arts. Although, the Igbo traditional arts seem to be abstract along side with the rest of African art forms, nevertheless, they serve aesthetic functions especially in the area of carving. As rightly argued by Mbagwu (1978) –traditional industries and crafts are founded upon the use of natural local resources in the home to produce articles of socio-psychological, aesthetic, religious or economic values to the people. It is apt to note here that these art objects take mostly natural forms and/or shapes to please the eye of tourist as well as bestowing beauty on the object. In addition, one cannot overlook the tourism functions of these crafts especially in the area under study. Ukpok is a town in the present Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State. Her geographical location and scenery is endowed with natural resources, which provide the raw materials for these crafts.

Previous works on traditional crafts and industries tend to particularize on blacksmithing and wood carving. Not much work has been done in other areas of crafts and industries such as basketting, weaving, etc in Igbo land and more regrettably, none on Ukpok town, which forms a crucial part of the core Igbo area. Among the traditional crafts and industries being practiced by Ukpok people are basketry, weaving of raffia thatch, blacksmithing, carving, raffia palm tapping, among others. The study of these traditional industries and crafts is an interesting one as it highlights the relationship existing between man and his environment as well as its potentials for tourism development and promotion. Regardless of the significant roles and contributions of

these crafts and industries in the past, one cannot overlook the adverse impacts of colonialism and changed value systems on the local crafts and industries. It would be important to observe, however, that some of these local industries have demonstrated adequate resilience and withstood the colonial onslaught on traditional technology. This paper therefore highlight the dynamic relationship between the local crafts and modern values among the Ukpok people; thus, repositioning Ukpok traditional crafts and industries for tourism development and promotion will certainly bring Ukpok town into the national tourism map in particular and the world at large.

This study, which was conducted on traditional crafts and industries in Ukpok will enable us determine their contributory roles to tourism development and promotion. The ultimate aim is to assess their tourism potentials and values.

Background Information:

Ukpok is a northern Igbo town located east of the River Niger in Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State of Nigeria. It is about twenty-five kilometers from Onitsha and plays host to the administrative headquarter of Nnewi South local government area. Ukpok lies approximately between latitude 5° and 6° north of the equator and on longitude 7° east of the Greenwich meridian (Adindu 1983).

The town has common boundaries with Nnewi center and Utu on the north, with Ozubulu and Ihemposi on the west, with Okija, Azia and Orsumogbu on the South and with Ebenator and Lilu on the East. These boundaries with other towns are marked by rivers, except perhaps, the boundaries with Utu and Ihemposi in the north and south respectively. The Ulasi river demarcates Ukpok from all her southern neighbours –Okija, Azia and Orsumogbu; the Ofala river separates her from Ebenator and Lilu, while the Ubu river marks the boundaries with Ozubulu and Nnewi centre in the West. It has an annual rainfall of 1,500mm and the rain is usually heaviest in the months of July and September.

Ukpok town consists of thirteen villages and is about five square kilometers in area. The town is broadly divided for convenience into three quarters –Durumaduru, Ana-Ohia and Amaka. Prominent geographical features in Ukpok include the raised upland, valleys, and plains all of which combine to give it a scenic beauty. Viewed from Uhuori on the north, one faces the escarpment of the Uguw ekwensu (Devil's hill), Uguw Ohaba (Ohaba hills), Uguw Amadim (Amadim

hills), among others. It is appropriate to say that every village in Ukpok has hills and valleys which contains springs which serve as source of water supply to Ukpok people. The notable springs are Ulasi, Ukwaka, Nwankasi and Mmiri-nwoma, among others. Economic trees found in abundance include Oil bean *Pentaclethra macrophylla*, Oil palm *Elaeis guineensis*, Raphia palm *Raphia vinifera*, 'Udara' (native apple) *Chrysophyllum albidum*, Native mango *Irvingia gabonensis*, among others. Thick forests still exist virtually in all the villages and are locally referred to as „Agbo“. The high degree of superstition attached to these forests has led to their preservation till date. It is pertinent to note that these forests provide the raw materials for traditional crafts and industries in Ukpok. The Ukpok people are predominantly farmers and artisans/crafts men. With the influence of modernization, many of them have taken to white-cola jobs and intenerate trading activities.

Local Crafts and Traditional Industries in Ukpok and Their Mode of Production

Blacksmithing:

There had been many controversies with regards to the origin of blacksmithing in Ukpok. Oral tradition holds that blacksmithing is synonymous with early farming practices in Ukpok. Blacksmiths in Ukpok are of the view that Ukpok people had the art as early as their origin. They later concluded by saying that the main source of blacksmithing in Ukpok could be sought in Nnewi town. This implies that blacksmithing in Ukpok diffused from Nnewi, an act Nnewi people believed to have learnt from Awka. However, the two views are not contradictory if one considers the propinquity of Ukpok to Nnewi town which proves that the knowledge could have been learnt by Ukpok people as soon as the Otolu people settled at Nnewi. Also Awka and Nnewi people were said to have taught Ukpok people the art. They took Ukpok people as apprentice when they had mastered the skills, they (Ukpok people) could continue with the craft. This later view was the view of mainly Ukpok youths. It was also observed that each blacksmith claims that his father told him that their forefathers practiced blacksmith. These early blacksmiths were known to have secured iron (bloom) for smithing from the local smelting area which Basden (1966) argued to be in Agulu-Umana (old Udi Division), a town very close to Awka. However, the present day blacksmiths secure iron scraps from either Onitsha or Awka markets.

In Ukpok, blacksmithing can be practiced by any person; however, there are people whom the skill is believed to run in their family lines. Most blacksmiths in our area of study form guilds and they are highly regarded in the community as they are the main source of the tools for agricultural and other domestic activities. Among the raw materials and tools used by the blacksmiths in the production of their products are: charcoal, various sizes of hammering tools known as „*Otutu*“, small axe „*Anyu nka*“, a big tong – *Mkpa*, an anvil – *Oshiana*, a chisel – *Akuko oyighoyi*, drilling nails – *Arala*, a pair of bellows – *eko* and the tuyere clay nuzzle – „*Ulo eko*“ through which air is blown into the smithing chamber.

Among the product of the blacksmith prior to the coming of the white man in our study area are: tools for agricultural, domestic and defensive purposes. Some of these tools according to Okpoko (1987) served also social, religious and ritual functions. Agricultural implements such as hoes of different sizes, dibble – *ngwu ana* and machet – *Mma-oge*, axe – *Anyu ike*, kitchen knives – *Mma ekwu* etc. Socio-religious implements include iron staff – „*Ngwu ozo*“, charming hook – „*Aba*“, metal gong – *Ogene*, cannons – *mpo na-ala* and various rings – *Ola*, *mgba aka* or *ona akpa*. A sharp instrument (*Aguba*) used for facial scarification – *Igbu ichi* are also produced by the blacksmiths. The hunting tools and defensive tools include the raffle gun – *Egbe ntu*, traps – *Onya igwe* and iron hapons.

Carvers and Carved Objects:

The art of wood carving in Ukpok is an old tradition whose origin cannot be clearly traced now by the present generation. The living people believed that the art is usually transferred from father to son in succession. Ukpok just like Nnewi and Awka people had two levels of carving activities. These are individual carvers and a guild of wood carvers. According to an informant – Sunday Oragwa, the guild of wood carvers in Nnewi and Awka which Ukpok indigenous carvers belonged to has since ceased to exist following the Nigerian Civil War when fire razed this institution. Since after that period, the craft of carving has reduced to carpentry work as some of the members of the former guild now resorted to merging their artistic ingenuity with carpentry. Nevertheless, the individual carvers, especially those carving for ritual functions still retain their craft since there has not been any alternative for the work they produced unlike the guild of wood carvers whose works have been overtaken by the carpenters.

The guild of wood carvers at that period, produced objects which served socio-political, domestic and aesthetic functions. Among the products of these carvers were the titled men's stools – *Oche ozo*, the wooden staff – *Mpo* which is usually profusely decorated; different types of wooden bowls named according to the functions which they served; thus, we have food bowl – *Okwa nni*, meat bowl – *Okwa anu*, kolanut bowl – *Okwa oji*; they also carved different doors and panels used in adorning the compounds of titled men. These doors, panels and stools used exclusively by the titled men served as ways of exhibiting their affluence. The carvers in turn were very important at the said period because without them, no other person is allowed to execute their work. Other items carved by the carvers are giant drum – *Nnukwu ekwe*, ritual objects etc. The individual carvers unlike the guild, focused on producing purely ritual objects. These ritual objects could be divided into two types for the sake of clarity. They include: ancestral figures and *agwu* figures. Ancestral figures included three-dimensional pieces whose heights, from personal observations, range from a meter to two meters. They are predominantly slim except for a few. These objects have names attached to them and they are *Ukuke ichie*, *Okpensi ichie*, *Ikenga ichie*, among others. These objects are kept in a family's homestead – *Obi* and they are believed to be representatives of the dead male members of the family and their *Ikenga* – symbol of strength and achievement.

The second type is *Agwu* figures which are usually miniature in size. Their sizes range from 3 inches to 6 inches in height and as others, they are 3 dimensional. Among them are *Oke agwu*, *Okpensi*, *Ezumezu agwu* – four headed, *Udene agwu* (made to resemble a vulture), *Iru agwu*, *Ulili agwu* – this particular one is the errand spirit. The above named symbols generally are divination figures. In addition to these objects, the carvers also produced few utility and status symbol objects. Among them are *Okwa nni* – food bowl used in serving food to the ancestral figures (*Ndi ichie*) and also used by the oldest man who maintains the *Ndi ichie* shrine. *Okwa anu* – meat bowl are also produced. Other ancestral figures like *Agwu* are carved with a special plant – *Ogilisi* plant (*New-bouldia laevis*). This plant according to the ritual carver is the only plant that proves active in the functions, which these objects are meant to perform. Apart from the afore-mentioned objects from Ukpok, other items like carved doors, carved stools, carved panels and doors, tools, wooden adze heads are also produced.

The guild of carvers, unlike the individual early carvers had wider range of tools which were mostly carpenter's tools; examples are

chisels, gouges and saws which served different functions. Among the guild, eminence was achieved through organized team work. This was made possible due to respect for age and achievement, which the Igbo people were known for. Thus, the elderly members of the guild performed selected tasks such as the main carving of patterns on already worked materials and in addition they gave expert advice. This shows that there was division of labour among them.

Basketry and Weaving:

The traditional Ukpok craftsmen and women engage in the art of basketry and weaving of raffia palm thatch which was the only roofing material available to them in the ancient times. The above mentioned crafts especially basketry gives them the avenue to express their individual creativity.

Uruabia Okafor, our informant, pointed out that these crafts are indigenous to the people. She claimed that the people have been familiar with the craft ever since they were known and have never secured their local roofing thatch or baskets from outside. The people of Ukpok produce local roofing sheet called *‘Akirika’* or *‘Akanye’*, and baskets generally known as *‘Nkata/Nkita/Akpara’*, *Ngiga*, *Ukpa* and *Nkata ukwa*.

Harnessing the Potentials of Local Crafts and Traditional Industries for Tourism Development and Promotion:

It is a truism that Ukpok local crafts and traditional industries rest solely on the abundance of natural resources within the town. It is also true that local crafts and traditional industries are an important element of the people’s economy; it is a clear cut fact that traditional crafts are already a strong factor in local economies and that these activities can and should be strengthened as they hold the potential to develop tourism and create jobs for Ukpok people. It is therefore one of the aims of this paper to advance a cross-cultural understanding in a diverse society through the identification, documentation, preservation, and presentation of the local crafts and traditional industries as an aspect of the cultural heritage of Ukpok people.

Local crafts and traditional industries are integral part of Ukpok culture depicting the town’s indigenous customs and traditions in a meaningful and colourful way. The range and number of local crafts and traditional industries reflect the rich diversity that exists within the town and can provide tourists with a unique opportunity to sample and flavour Ukpok culture in some of its purest forms. However, in spite of

possessing a variety of tourist attractions such as wildlife, scenic beauty, exotic local crafts, traditional industries and festivals, the town has not been able to accelerate the pace of tourism in comparison to other towns within the state. While other local governments made successful efforts in developing tourism within their areas of jurisdiction, the relative inability of the Nnewi South local government area to harness and develop full tourist potentials of Ukpok people may be attributed to a combination of factors such as lack of effective policies, inadequate infrastructure, ineffective marketing and lack of decent facilities for the tourists.

It is our contention therefore that for the local crafts and traditional industries of our study area to be properly harnessed for tourism development and promotion, the following measures should be undertaken: firstly, the government in its three tier levels should give priority attention to the development of local crafts and traditional industries by creating the enabling environment for the growth of such; for instance, the training of artisans and provision of funds for the procurement of certain tools and equipment necessary for that. Secondly, through the conservation of Ukpok environment for sustainable tourism development. This could be done by providing free, conducive and enabling environment as no tourist would like to visit a dirty, poorly organized, insecure and unsafe environment. The environmental impact of tourism such as the conservation of the physical environment of historical areas, safety and security of tourists and properly conducted environmental impact assessment/carrying capacity of destination area must be carried out. By conducting the environmental impact assessment of tourism on the environment, it would help in minimizing the negative impact of tourism on the physical and social environment. Thus, it is our contention here too, that the development of local crafts and traditional industries should be preceded by an assessment of its associated and potential impact on the environment (pollution, deforestation etc). There should be a master plan incorporating appropriate mitigation measures for the identified negative impacts.

Other cultural activities that can be harnessed along side with local crafts and traditional industries in Ukpok are entertainment activities. Entertainment on its own is one of the key tourism products and it plays a strategic role in defining the overall tourism offer to international, regional, and domestic tourists. Among these entertainments that can enriched tourism in Ukpok when harnessed are traditional dancing with its distinctive style, colour and vitality which

reflects the diversity and depth of Ukpok culture with many villages having their own individual dances. Such dances include *Akwunehenyi* (in Agwuria village), *Egwu-agu* (in Umudara village) and *Odejimjim* (in Mputu village). Cultural troupes from their performances have a high level of international suitability. Other entertainment unit of the culture of Ukpok people is masquerades' dance. Such masquerades include *Ayaka* in Uboma village, *Odogwu* in Umuohama, *Okpata* in Ndakwu etc. Furthermore, traditional Ukpok festivals which are very enjoyable and entertaining can also be harnessed alongside with local crafts and traditional industries. Ukpok day (29th December), *Emenahi* day (30th December) etc are among the Ukpok traditional festivals.

Recommendations:

Having gone through the above discuss, we therefore recommend that:

1. Governments at all levels should recognize the economic and cultural roles of local crafts and traditional industries in local, state and national development and should provide adequate resources for their identification, preservation, development and promotion.
2. The Ukpok people, local and state governments should recognize the fact that crafts are valuable material heritages, which form a tangible part of historical and contemporary culture.
3. The State Tourism Board should foster the preservation and development of craft skills and document the indigenous technologies responsible for the creation.
4. That Nigeria legislative arm of government should strengthen existing laws on and/or create legislation and regulation guiding craft villages, craft shops and develop crafts as small scale industries and make appropriate laws for ensuring the protection of traditional industries.
5. And finally, that tourism stakeholders should promote meaningful collaboration of the different sectors (culture, industry, commerce and education) for most advantageous results.

Conclusion:

In Ukpok, traditional crafts, whether for utilitarian or artistic purposes represent a very valuable form of cultural expression a –capital of self confidence ||, which is especially important for the town

in particular, the state and the nation at large. It is also very important

for a developing country like Nigeria to re-emphasize the values of local crafts and traditional industries where the quality of life is often threatened by excessive industrial standardization. According to Kreidi (2006) –crafts people do not simply conserve the cultural heritage, but also enrich and adapt this patrimony for contemporary needs of the society||.

This paper therefore argues that for local crafts and traditional industries to form part of sustainable development, it must be harnessed in such a way that it meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future; thus, sustainable tourism is really an issue of how best to encourage tourism while minimizing its costs. When achieved, Ukpor tourism will then lead to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be filled while maintaining cultural integrity, essentials of ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems. Above all, preserving cultural and natural heritage making cultures and civilizations better known, improving daily living conditions and reducing poverty is what gives meaning to the sustainability of tourism development.

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