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Precolonial Guild System in Igboland: The Example of Awka Blacksmith Guilds

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Abstract

The activities of blacksmiths in Southeast Nigeria predate the establishment of British colonial rule in Nigeria. Of all the Igbo communities engaged in blacksmithing in the precolonial era, the prominent ones were the Awka, Nkwerre and Abiriba. However, the most famed was the Awka. The Awka smiths organised themselves into guilds, but such organisations and arrangements were non-existent among the people of Nkwerre and Abiriba. In spite of being part of a historical reality of Igboland and within the precolonial period, the phenomenon appears to have been minimally considered in scholarship, and even such consideration has been limited to infrequent passing allusions. This paper, therefore, examines the blacksmith guilds in Awka. It highlights the origins and basic features of the guild system. It posits that the guild system reinforced the monopoly of the trade by Awka blacksmiths in Igboland and beyond. It also introduced a new meaning to the concept of craft guild in pre-colonial Africa.

Introduction

The term guild has been defined 'as an association of merchants or craftsmen who exercise either by some specific delegation of authority to them or certain officially recognised powers of control over the occupation they follow' (Chambers Encyclopaedia 555). The guild system was a major characteristic product of pre-capitalist exchange societies, a period when men hardly conceded to the view that free competition is the best regulation of economic life. Hence, they have tended to accept the view that to avoid chaos in economic affairs, control is essential. This holds true of pre-colonial Igbo society. Occupational diversity was a common characteristic of Igbo economy. Various communities were celebrated for farming, fishing, hunting and some for their artisan skills, such as pottery making, woodcarving, textile weaving as well as blacksmithing or metalwork. Apart from blacksmithing, which run at the community level, the other crafts were organised in individual families.

Blacksmithing, however, was adjudged the most useful and valuable craft in pre-colonial Igboland. As Basden aptly noted:

It is very remunerative, the more so because it is practiced by natives of certain towns only and these are able to control affairs almost as effectively as a Trade Union; and yet leave every man independent (175)

It was, therefore, not surprising that as the premier industry in pre-colonial Igboland, its interests were jealously guarded. To this end, blacksmithing, as an economic activity in Awka, flourished as a protective device and a regulatory instrument through the guild system and, as such, was confined to Awka people. Several scholars have acknowledged this peculiar organisational pattern in the blacksmithing industry in Awka through passing references. G.T. Basden wrote in 1921 that:

In the blacksmiths' profession, there is an intensely rigid system of 'Trade Unionism' and any attempt to usurp the privileges of the Awka men was obstinately resisted even unto war. Our early days at Awka were spent amidst scenes of constant strife, and numbers lost their lives in the struggle to maintain the supremacy of the Union (176)

Similarly, Adiele Afigbo in discussing the economic foundations of pre-colonial Igbo society, noted that:

The Awka smiths organised themselves into a guild, one-half only of whose members were allowed to travel in any one year, while the other stayed back in[sic] guard the home. Among the Nkwerre and the Abiriba, there does not appear to have been any such organisation and arrangement (146)

Among the major blacksmithing centres in Igboland, Abiriba, Nkwerre and Agbaja-Udi, there were indications that this outstanding feature of organising its members into guilds was non-existent. This peculiar organisational pattern in the blacksmithing industry in Awka is an indication that they were the leading blacksmiths in Igboland if not much of southern Nigeria. It is certain that Awka smiths were renowned for their metalworking trademark, suggesting that they were successful in keeping

their skills to themselves. Although the guild system existed among other blacksmithing communities in West Africa, the Awka profile deviates from other guild precedents in one significant way – the lack of an overriding political authority, which served as the primary, if not an exclusive patron of the craft (Neaher 359). A close examination of the sedentary craft organisation in West Africa would reveal a pattern of royal control and patronage. There are two possible reasons why rulers kept smiths under their control. First, the pre-colonial African states depended largely on smiths for the supply, repair and servicing of their military weapon. For instance, in some West African legends, there are symbolisms associating the evolution and political authority with the knowledge of iron and the control of ironworkers. A popular Yoruba legend, says that at the beginning of creation, only one deity, *Ogun*, possessed the secret of iron technology. The other *Orisa* offered to make him their king if he revealed the secret to them (Neaher. 46 - 49).

The second reason stemmed from the fact that the smiths produced items, which formed an important part of the paraphernalia of rulers and their courtiers. Some of their products such as spears and gong were made of iron; others such as anklets, rings and pendants were made of brass and bronze. The Benin, Igala, Nupe and Yoruba smiths functioned as retainers to the king (Awe 60 – 67, Dark 20, Jaggar 11 - 25).

However, the Awka smiths operated in the absence of centralized leadership institutions typical among the Igbo. The guild system reinforced the monopoly of the trade by Awka smiths in different places they traversed. It served to perpetuate knowledge among a select group, thereby maintaining the occupational distinction of its members and their concomitant rights and responsibilities. Against this background, this paper examines the guild system in the metalworking industry in Awka to analyse how organised and developed the industry was before it began to decline with the advent of British rule in Awka in 1903.

The Origin of Iron Working Technology in Igboland

The origin of iron working technology in Nigeria has been polemical. Initially, there was the attempt to trace the iron working in Nigeria to Meroe, the later capital of the ancient kingdom of Kush in the Republic of Sudan, through a wave of displaced refugees following the destruction of the kingdom in the 4th century A.D (Shaw 37). However, this view is no longer tenable given the archaeological discovery at Taruga about 35 km, southeast of Abuja in Central Nigeria of several iron smelting furnaces, which produced radio Carbon dates from 5th to 3rd centuries BC.

Apparently, this was an earlier date about the time Meroe was being founded.

It has also been argued that the knowledge of the craft reached Nigeria from Carthage (Shaw 37). This is based on the evidence that the use of iron was common among the Phoenicians, the founders of Carthage. Others opined that the knowledge of iron working in Nigeria was an independent invention (Isichei. 9). Available evidence shows that by the 1st millennium A.D. iron working technology has been widespread among the numerous communities in Nigeria. The Nok complex is an ancient centre of iron working craft. The Nok culture flourished between 500 B.C. and A.D. 200 (Falola 15). Excavations in the area now flooded by the Kanji Dam on the River Niger indicated the presence of iron in this area by the second century B.C. (Shaw 37). It has been suggested that the knowledge of iron working spread from the area of the Nok culture in central Nigeria. At present, we cannot presume that iron technology spread to different parts of Nigeria only from Nok, but the possibility that Nok was the most important single source of this diffusion could not be lightly dismissed.

According to Elizabeth Isichei, the knowledge of iron working undoubtedly reached Igboland by the beginning of the Christian era (9). The iron swords and razors found at Igboukwu dates back to the 9th century. From those above, it would then appear that there had been a definite use of iron in Igboland by the 9th century A.D. It is generally believed by the people of Awka that blacksmithing was of considerable antiquity. Tradition attributes the introduction of blacksmithing in Awka to Nnebuza, an itinerant smith from Agulu-umana in Udi, north of Awka. Nnebuza had a son, Agulu, who later became the parent of seven children, who, according to tradition, were the forbears of the seven quarters in Agulu Awka. In Awka, Agulu village was the home of metal technology. The seven descendent lineages of Agulu were Umuogbu, Umubele, Umuike, Umanaga, Umuenechi, Umuoruka and Umuajagwo. These lineages attempted to confine the technology to themselves and would not allow people from other sections of Awka to learn the craft. The only exceptions were probably Isiagu and Umuzuocho lineages in Amikwo and Achalla villages, respectively. These two lineages were related to Agulu village by marriage, a situation that entitled the Isiagu and Umuzuocho male offspring of the marriages to be apprenticed by Agulu smiths.

The claim of outside influence of blacksmithing technology would appear to have some truth; it seems to be buttressed by Basden in 1938 when he asserted that iron most probably was smelted in Udi Division, of which Agulu Umana is a part (Basden 321). The claim is further supported by the fact that Agulu village in Awka would seem to have borrowed its name from Agulu Umana. Traces of blacksmithing still exist in that village today. Besides, the people of Agulu Umana went on occupational tours just like the Awka smiths did. Whether the claim of diffusion from Agulu-umana is true or false, an aspect of it which interests the historian is the insight it gives into the nature of an indigenous civilization and what effort has been made over the centuries to preserve it.

The exact period of the formation of blacksmith guilds in Awka is still uncertain. However, two factors informed the establishment of the guild system. According to oral tradition, the emergence can be traced to the development of blacksmithing in the area and the subsequent rise in the demands for their products, especially for their economic value. Consequently, some of the smiths had to travel outside Awka to practice the craft, as it became increasingly impossible for all of them to station in Awka. The formation of guilds was necessary to control the output and entry of their product into local markets effectively. Second, there was the need to keep intact their trade secrets. The special skills and experience involved in production technique forced the smiths not only to associate but also to maintain their jealously guarded secrets. Since the origin of the guilds can be traced to the entry of many Awka people into the blacksmithing trade, it is logical to conclude that the formation of the guilds was almost as old as the metalworking industry itself.

Awka smiths evolved with some measure of success, kindred guilds. Each blacksmith guild corresponds largely to a sub-village group in Awka (Onwuemelié 10). These guilds developed a rigid system of trade unionism, which jealously guarded their secrets and persistently resisted any attempt to usurp their privileges. This form of organisation conferred on Awka metalworking industry a controlled apprenticeship system, a uniform standard of artisanship, uniform prices, trade secrecy, intolerance and intimidation of interlopers and codes governing the trade itself.

General Features

The blacksmith guilds in Awka had certain basic features. These include; the development of a secret language, itineration on a rotational basis by

members of each guild, sacrifice to the Awka god of iron (*Akputakpu*) and the apprenticeship system.

Secret Language Ivuaba

The blacksmith guilds developed into a kind of secret societies. They adopted the secret language (*Ivuaba*) with which it communicated with its members (*Ezewude*). The apprentice learnt this secret language during the period of apprenticeship. This ensured that potential interlopers did not gain any knowledge of the trade during itineration (*Ifu Ije*).

Itineration

Itineration (*Ifu Ije*) on a rotational basis by members of each guild was another basic feature of the blacksmith guilds in Awka. The nature of the traditional Awka society, which was susceptible to sudden invasion and internecine feuds, made it unwise for all the master smiths (*Nne-Uzu*) of each guild to proceed on itineration at the same time. Itineration on rotational basis may have developed due to the instability of Igbo politics during the two centuries before the colonial rule (Neaher 356). The rise of the Aro as powerful traders and custodians of the great Arochuchwu Oracle during this period resulted in incessant conflict as they forcible extended their base of operations in search of vital goods and trade. To achieve their imperialistic motive, the Aro employed mercenaries to subjugate obstinate northern Igbo communities. Awka and its neighbours formed a confederacy to forestall Aro domination.

Moreover, this division evolved as a reaction to hard experiences, which Agulu-Awka had suffered in the hands of its non-Awka neighbours, notably the village of Nawfia (Njoku 5). Before the 19th century, Agulu smiths had been going on their tours *en masse* leaving behind at home mainly aged men and women and children. Some of their neighbours, according to oral tradition, took advantage of the smiths' absence to raid their homes and loot their property.

Itinerancy had profound root in Igbo blacksmithing traditions. However, Awka smiths travel organisation differed from that of other Igbo groups in one significant way. Each guild divided its smiths into two groups. When one group was on occupational tour, the other stayed back at home as home guards *Iche-Uno*. The land beyond Awka was divided into trade zones. A trade zone was assigned to each blacksmith guild and

her members. The respective blacksmithing territories were arbitrarily fixed and respected by all the sub-villages in Agulu. Agulu villages maintained the following zones:

<i>Umuogbu:</i>	Benin, Urhobo, Itsekiri and some Yoruba areas; Western Ijaw Isoko.
<i>Umubele:</i>	Igala and Lokoja (communities in the confluence of the Niger Rivers)
<i>Umuike :</i>	Igbo communities to the southeast of Ngwa, and Ikwerre
<i>Umanaga:</i>	Imolu – Niger Delta (Ijoland)
<i>Umujagwo:</i>	Akpofia and areas beyond Calabar
<i>Umuoruka:</i>	Calabar areas (Efik and Ibibio)
<i>Umuenechi:</i>	Isoko and Kwale divisions
<i>Umudioka:</i>	Nkanu and other Northern Igbo areas
<i>Amikwo:</i>	Shared the Delta areas with Umanaga and controlled most of the Delta areas

Territorial influences were so important in the past that violation of the above division could lead to skirmishes. A case in point was the conflict between Agulu and Amikwo from c.1898 – 1904. Originally, Amikwo were medicine specialist and used to tour various parts of Igboland and beyond. Through marriage with Agulu women, some Amikwo people acquired the knowledge of the craft but had not been assigned any operational zone. Amikwo smiths proceeded to poach on the territory of Umanaga lineage. The ensuing confrontation led to an internecine war. According to Awka oral traditions, the war was fought with great venom and left a trail of destruction in its wake (Tagbo).

All itinerant smiths must return to Awka to serve as home guards (*Iche-Uno*) at a specified time namely *Onwasa* – the seventh month. This was the month of the festival of *Otite*. This festival has been identified as a compelling motive for the return of Awka citizens during the seventh Igbo month. *Otite* served as a festival of reunion, of itinerant smiths and the home people, both of whom are separated from one another for several months (Neaher 356). There was a consensus among Awka people that every smith must return in the seventh month for a head count of the living and the dead. Any itinerant smith who failed to return

on the second of *Otite* was subject to a fine (*Opalu Nra*). To enforce the regulation, each kindred guild applied a fine of *ogu ego ise* (Ten naira) for the first offence and refusal to pay the fine was followed by a more stringent punishment of ostracism. All itinerant smith who had not paid their fine would not be permitted to enter *Awka Onaralu Ije* until he settled the fine *Opafu nra*. However, in a case where abject poverty was at the root of not returning, the kindred guild might wave off the fine and even pay his way home. The *Awka* interlude was characterized as a period of relaxation. The smiths took a rest from the forge, helped their *Awka* wives with the yam gardens and participated in collective work projects.

The home guards (*iche-uno*) performed some primary duties, while other smiths were on iteration. These included serving as security guards, performing important errands for elders, assisting the elders in the areas of administration and adjudication of justice. They were also engaged in recreational and cultural activities such as *ike-ikpo*. This was the process of *ime okolobia* – an occasion where a young adult male demonstrated and displayed his wrestling ability. Usually, the returnee smiths would spend a month in *Awka* before the other home guard took their turn.

This regulation has social, religious and economic significance. It served as a uniting medium, which made it pertinent that they still, kept in touch with their homeland and so reminding them of their common obligation to *Awka*. As Neaher puts it, 'centrifugal orientation did not alienate the smiths from *Awka* roots nor foster some new form of ethnic identity. To outsiders, a smith was an *Awka* and at home, he was an 'Awka who travels' ever identified with his place of birth (Neaher 356). In addition, it was their custom to bring back their earnings in the form of goods and money. The itinerant smiths were warmly received by their host communities partly because of the utilitarian and social value of their products and the potent esoteric powers attributed to iron and ironworker. Equally significant was the fact that the smiths conducted themselves with decorum, integrity and diplomacy. They were invariably law abiding wherever they went. A possible explanation for the adoption of this peculiar organisational pattern by the blacksmith guild was that it constituted a check and control on the ever-increasing population of *Awka*. The system of iteration was necessary to avoid trade jealousies that might arise out of the concentration of all smiths in *Awka*. It also helped to serve their monopolistic interest by keeping intact their trade

secrets. By effectively controlling their members, the order was maintained within the industry.

Sacrifice to Akputakpu (the Awka god of Iron).

Every blacksmithing community had a deity associated with the craft industry. The Awka had *Akputakpu* (the Awka god of iron). The smiths made offerings to the deity before undertaking occupation tours for safe conduct, protection from the hazards of the forge and for a rewarding journey. Two feasts were held in honour of *Akputakpu*, one during the rainy season while the other came in the dry season. These feasts were celebrated after the *Otite* festival. Itineration began after the feast of *Akputakpu*, which was held in the dry season. It was traditional for every smith to collect from the shrine of the *Akputakpu*, *nzu Akputakpu* (a chip of iron slag). This was wrapped with *Ogirisi* leaves (New boulder leaves) and carried to the itinerant area. He kept the item in his *Uno Uzu* – smith's workshop and was expected to perform all the rituals and sacrifice to the representation of *Akputakpu* (Tagbo).

Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship was an integral part of the blacksmith guild. The continuation of blacksmithing trade in Awka was sustained through the apprenticeship system recruited largely from Awka and sparingly from non-Awka people. However, differences occur in the process of recruiting, training and passing out of the apprentice. In taking an apprentice from outside Awka, it was the parent of the apprentice that would approach the master smith *Nne Uzu* with certain items (palm wine, goat, yam and kolanuts) to make a formal request on behalf of their son. The *Nne Uzu* would then summon members of his extended family for they have to sanction such contract. Some rituals and sacrifices were performed to the *Ndi Ichie Uzu* (dead smiths in the extended family). This sacrifice to *Ndi Ichie Uzu* was symbolic because it served as a covenant by which the parents of the apprentice were assured that their son would neither be sold into slavery nor killed during itineration. It was also believed that *Ndi Ichie Uzu*, through this sacrifice would facilitate the mastery of the craft by the apprentice and guarantee his good health. In addition, it was also a form of protection for the apprentice from accidents, which were prevalent in smiting. However, the non-Awka apprentice was not allowed the same degree of participation in the trade. He was contracted with the clear understanding that the trade remains within the confines of Awka.

On the other hand, in recruiting an apprentice from Awka, the *Nne Uzu* was expected to take some items (goat, yam, kolanuts, and palm wine) to the parents of the boy. A sacrifice would then be made to the boy's *Chi* (personal ancestral god or spiritual protector). The idea was to implore the boy's *Chi* for protection and good health throughout his sojourn. Such a master smith never paid anything. In some cases, parents usually pleaded with a smith to recruit their son as an apprentice. Because the parents asking for such a favour were either relatives or friends of the smiths no payments were made in such a situation. However, in the case of an apprentice from outside Awka, the *Nwa-Uzu* (apprentice) made payment to the master smith. The two parties to the contract agreed on the training fee. Payment of such a fee usually commences after graduation. In some cases, the master smith received one-third of the products of a newly qualified tradesman. Payment in this latter arrangement terminates after a period of seven years (Tagbo).

New apprentices varied in age, but all had to be old enough to make the long trek to their master's work destination. Apprentice duties were both mercantile and domestic in nature. He prepared the charcoal as well as sold the finished products. The master's relationship with the apprentice was a combination of sternness and tenderness. Every apprentice underwent the graduation ceremony of *Mmaotutu*. It was the responsibility of the *Nne Uzu* to invite all Awka Smiths, within the locality to a graduation party. During such occasion, the *Nwa - Uzu* was offered a new *Otutu* (hammer) and *Osiama* (anvil). The new *Otutu* symbolizes graduation and maturity. The Awka regarded it as '*Imalu Nwa Uzu Otutu* (formal recognition of a newly qualified smith). It marked the end of adolescence. It was acknowledged as the beginning of manhood for the apprentice. As a tradesman, he was now subject to fines and punishment for any violation of the code of the trade. These basic features of the blacksmith guilds urged on the smithing industry in Awka for several years. It also sustained Awka and publicised its name.

Colonial Legacies: Of Destruction and Innovation

The blacksmith guilds in Awka began to decline at the beginning of the 20th century following the establishment of British rule in Igboland, particularly Awka. The period 1902–1904 was a turning point in the history of Awka. It marked the meeting point of two distinct cultures – the traditional and indigenous culture of Awka on the one hand, and the alien culture of the West on the other. In a way, the juxtaposition of the

two civilizations greatly undermined a long established civilization of Awka-Igbo. The British penetration of Awka followed the Agulu-Amikwo war of 1902-1904; although before that period, there had been contacts between the Awka and the missionaries of Christ Missionary Society. In 1903, a serious dispute between Agulu and Amikwo quarters over the trade zone of Ijawland had been responsible for that war (Onwuemelie pg no). The conflict was brought to an end through the intervention of a British military force led by Colonel Moorhouse (Jeffreys NAE CSE 1/85/4596). After stopping the war in 1904, the colonial government established its presence in Awka.

With the establishment of British rule in Awka, the entire structure of the traditional Awka metalworking industry witnessed several changes. The relative monopoly of the craft, which was maintained through the rigid guild system, was broken as blacksmithing diffused to other areas. During the trial at Asaba after the Agulu - Amikwo war, the judge made it clear that under the crown everybody had complete freedom to practice any craft of his choice without any obstruction or hindrance (Onwuemelie 5). The result was a mad rush to blacksmithing, which was the most lucrative trade at the time. Consequently, the hitherto blacksmith guilds which were formed to effectively maintain their jealously guarded secrets were broken as many joined the trade with total disregard to the rules governing the craft in Awka.

With the introduction of British rule, local metalworking gave way to the use of scraps, which were imported from Europe. Large quantities of cheap hardware goods such as bolts, hinges, locks and other useful articles were purchased locally to the detriment of the local smiths whom they hitherto depended on for their supplies. This inevitably resulted in the decline of the blacksmith guilds as ornaments from Awka smiths have been denounced as archaic, cumbersome and unwieldy by the new civilization (Nzekwu 151).

The activities of the missionaries and traders in places like Onitsha and in the Delta region also affected the blacksmith guilds. Some Awka smiths took up salaried jobs while others resorted to trading. Consequently, the number of apprentices and that of the Awka smiths in the industry reduced significantly. The Aro expedition of 1901-1902, and the proscribing of the activities of Nri in 1911 also affected the guild system. It follows as a corollary that the Awka smiths lost some of the roles they played in Igbo society and elsewhere in pre-colonial times.

On the contrary, the extent to which the decline can be attributed to the advent of the British rule is contentious. At best, the British penetration of Awka was a double-edged sword possessing a creative and a destructive face. Although the British had something to do with the decline, it would appear that those factors, which sustained the craft for several years, were fast deserting it. It is important to point out that the demands of traditional society differ markedly from those of modern society. For instance, the blacksmiths in earlier times were primarily concerned with satisfying the needs of rituals priest's diviners, age grade associations, titled societies among others, but with the advent of the British, Awka became a semi modern society.

Consequently, it became increasingly imperative for her to cater not only for ritual needs but also for the requirements of modern society. To be sure, the advent of British rule enhanced the ingenuity of Awka smiths. The preponderance of scrap and all sorts of metal, charcoal and in some cases, coal constituted a ready source of supply of raw materials and fuel. The availability of modern tools like anvil stocks, large bellows and soldering iron eased the hardship that characterized traditional methods.

Moreover, the previous prevalent fire accidents were reduced. Improvement in road transport since 1900 was also an added advantage. The products of Awka smiths had to compete with a large quantity of imported manufactured metal goods. Nevertheless, in most cases, they were unable to meet with the challenges of this competition. Nevertheless, the missionary activities, education and colonial government policy pushed the age long traditional iron works to the backwoods of history.

The Role of the Awka Blacksmith in Igboland and Beyond

The Awka smiths played a significant social, political, economic and religious role in Igboland and beyond in the period preceding 1900. The Awka smiths were instrumental in propagating Nri culture. The Nri enjoyed a pride of place as *Ozo* title conferrers in Igboland. It is important to note that the *Ozo* title association emanated from the priest kingship of Nri. As Onwuka Njoku aptly observed, the Nri diviners and priests in conjunction with Awka smiths were responsible for spreading the association (Njoku pg no). The place of Awka smiths in Igbo culture is informed by the fact that ritual and ceremonial objects regarded as Nri cultural traits were made by them. Some of these objects, such as *Otonsi*

(staff of peace) assumed certain ritual significance, once the Nri priest had consecrated them.

The smiths also made instruments, which contributed to the social development of various communities. The Awka smith manufactured the *Nja* (*leg band made of copper*). The *Nja* was a sign of wealth and social prominence. Also, the smiths produced musical instruments such as metal gongs, *mbo* (local guitar) and whistles. It is true that singing and dancing played an important part in the social life of the Igbo, Efik, Igala and Urhobo. It added variance to their lives and offered an avenue for relaxation, especially during their various festivities. The smiths undoubtedly served as arbiters of taste in their host communities. Although we cannot isolate their contribution with great specificity in this area, it is evident that Awka smiths constantly sought ways to enrich sources of profits. Thus, they might introduce new types of implement, weaponry or styles of ceremonial paraphernalia.

The Awka smith assumed certain priestly duties in conjunction with their profession. Several observers noted earlier in the 20th century that the smiths engaged in healing, proselytizing on behalf of Awka's many cults and other practices usually associated with the *dibia* priest doctor (Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* 247, (Talbot 563 - 564). In virtually all the places the Awka smiths sojourned, they advertised the *Akputakpu* (Awka god of iron) as a supreme arbiter in disputes, capable of appearing in a war arena and setting every place on fire by a mysterious blowing of the bellows (Talbot 27).

Although the veracity of this assertion could not be ascertained, the *Akputakpu* won great fame among various people that it was regarded with great fear. The annual visit of non Awka people to the shrine of *Akputakpu* in Agulu-Awka to make propitiatory offerings for an alleged crime committed against an Awka smith were indicative of the power of the deity. The Awka smiths were ritual agents in Igboland and beyond. As Basden aptly pointed out "the Awka blacksmiths made it as much their business to advertise their oracle as to carrying on their normal trade" (Basden 77). The smiths conducted strangers from all parts of Igboland and beyond to the shrine of *Agbala* for consultation. The *Agbala* deity, according to oral tradition, could secure blessings of fertility to barren women. The deity could also settle disputes between litigants. The Awka smith played a significant judicial function through the *Agbala* deity.

The Awka smith played a considerable role in the establishment of trade and development of new markets. Like itinerant smiths

elsewhere, the Awka smiths were traders as well (Northrup 217 - 236). They made special items of utility, luxury and prestige. In fact, they became ideal purveyors of goods such as ivory, coral beads, common necessities such as salt and the iron and brass bars needed for their work. They were also engaged in regional trade in the pre-colonial era. The Awkas were not directly responsible for the establishment of entirely new markets, "but did establish regular lines of communication between existing markets" (Northrup 226). Their presence enhanced the significance of local markets.

The itinerant smith facilitated trade through the minting of a native currency known as *omumu*. The *omumu* was used for procuring slaves (Basden 203). However, the Awka undoubtedly eased the problems encountered in trade by barter in most traditional societies. David Northrup expresses the view that *omumu* had an exchange value in the interior before the development of the coastal trade with the Europeans (Northrup 229).

The Awka smiths also promoted economic activities among the Igbo and their neighbours. In Warri, Ijawland, and others coastal areas, they made tools for boat construction, fishing implement, large hooks, Ube (spear) and metal cages for catching or trapping fish. Perhaps the greatest contribution was in the area of agriculture. Most of their host communities were engaged in farming. Consequently, they found the presence of the smiths useful. The smiths made farming implements such as hoes, sickles, machete and diggers. The smiths are aware of their indispensable role to the Igbo and their neighbours. In this connection, they proudly claim that '*Awka adughi Igbo ata aja*' (but for Awka, the Igbo would suffer). Hunting tools like spears, machetes, metal traps and local guns were made by Awka smith. Other implements such as knives for palm processing, tapping palm wine and machete for cutting palm fronds emerged out of the Awka blacksmith ingenuity. Apart from manufacturing, the Awka smiths were also engaged in repairs in various places they traversed.

As regards politics, Awka smiths were an integral part of the political set up of their host communities both in Igboland and beyond. The explanation for this is that these communities relied on the Awka smith for the supply, repair and servicing of their military weapon. It would be recalled that the possession of these weapons constituted a powerful instrument in determining political influence during the pre-colonial period. The Awka were appointed as advisers in the councils and

royal courts of their host communities. The Awka smiths were responsible for the establishment of new settlements. As Elizabeth Isichei observed, 'the travels of Awka blacksmiths ... led to the foundation of new towns or quarters of town' (Isichei 43 - 45).

A typical example is Awka Nkakwu, the present Awka Etit. Although the tradition is silent on the particular Awka smiths that founded these areas, the claim would seem to be supported by the fact that there are some cultural and ritual ties between Awka and the people of these various areas. Good evidence is the frequent visit by these communities to Agulu-Awka to sacrifice to *Akputakpu*.

The Awka smith assumed a new role in the modern period. Their greatest achievement was their creativity and ability to move with time to satisfy the changing needs of the society. They diverted their production to such items that could hardly be imported such as iron gates, burglary proof, among others. Some of their products will continue to endure like the hoes, diggers, and tripod stand. The Awka smiths are capable of producing iron beds, metal seats, hinges and staples for building construction. Today, little itineration is done. Customers from different parts of Nigeria travel to Awka to buy blacksmiths' products.

Conclusion

We have shown that iron working technology have been in existence in Awka before the arrival of the Europeans. In fact, of all the Igbo communities engaged in smithing, the Awka smiths were the only people organised into guilds. Among the Nkwerre and Abiriba, there does not appear to have been any such arrangement and organisation. This explains why the Awka smiths enjoyed the monopoly of the craft for several centuries until it was finally broken after the establishment of British rule. In spite of the difficulties of the trade, the Awka smiths have tried to preserve their culture and civilization. This paper has revealed the significant feature of change and continuity which has characterized iron working in Awka. The receptiveness of the Awka smiths to new ideas was demonstrated in their ability to modify not only their tools and techniques but also in their capability to manufacture such metal products that cannot be imported from abroad. Some of their products have stood the test of competition and it is yet to be shown when and how imported hoes, for instance, would replace the local hoes made by the Awka smith.

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