AGBAJA UDI: UNSUNG PIONEERS OF TRADITIONAL IRON WORKING IN IGBOLAND

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Staking the Land Scape

The traditional Igbo metal working industry has attracted little or no scholarly attention. Consequently, the literature is very scanty. This neglect is disappointing at least on three accounts. Firstly, iron technology was far and away "the most useful and most valuable" of traditional Igbo crafts, wrote Rev. G.T. Basden.[1] P.A. Talbot shared this view, affirming that "from the native point of view, the most important craft is blacksmithing".[2]

These are no frivolous assertions: Igbo blacksmiths in precolonial times serviced virtually all the spectrum of traditional Igbo economy and society. Farmers depended on the forge for their tools - hoes, matchets, diggers and axes. The blacksmiths supplied wood workers such as carvers and boat builders with their tools, for example, axes, scrapers and carving knives. To teeth filers and body scarificators, the blacksmiths supplied razors and specialised chisels while to hunters, matchets, spears, traps, guns and hunting bells (ikpo). Domestic iron articles common in traditional Igbo homes included spoons, tripods and kitchen knives. The blacksmiths also produced honorific regalia such as jingle bells, staffs, anklets and pendants as well as items of personal adornment for males and females. Metal wares formed an important item supporting long distance trade in the Igbo area. Thus, hyperbolical as it may sound, there is logic in the proverb of the Awka people which says *agulu a noro, Igbo ataa ajo* - without the smith the Igbo would starve.

Secondly, many Europeans who visited Igboland from the latter half of the 19th century well into the 20th were impressed by Igbo metal working. Among them were G.T. Basden, A.G. Leonard, Charles Patridge, Charles K. Meek, T.J. Dennis and R.S. Smith.[3] These early visitors were surprised not only at the neat and efficient organization of the industry, the high quality of the products but also at the ubiquity of Igbo smiths in parts of southern Nigeria. The pioneering interest of these early visitors and writers, sad to say, was not sustained by more recent student of Igbo studies. Finally, this industry has exhibited remarkable resilience and a

capacity

to innovate to meet changing times and circumstances. Thus, iron working remains perhaps the most flourishing of native crafts.

The scanty literature available is uneven. Not without justification, predominant attention has been on Awka, a town many scholars describe as the cradle of Igbo iron technology.[4] Other iron production centres which have also received some measure of attention are Abiriba and Nkwerre. Emphasis or even over-emphasis on these three centres had had the unwholesome effect of other less known centres being ignored and forgotten. Yet recent micro studies such as by A.E. Afigbo, J.N. Ezike, Anthony Udueze and Alozie Osuagwu indicate that the canvas was less monolithic than popular literature pretends.[5] There were other centres which occupy not insignificant niches in the landscape.

Agbaja Udi smithing communities are probably the most neglected and even misrepresented in the existing literature. These communities include Agulu Umana, Agulu Uwani, Umuaga, and Oghe. Our primary focus will be on Agulu Umana and Agulu Uwani, easily the two most prominent of Udi smithing communities. The literature mentions Agbaja Udi as basically iron smelters (and no smiths) who supplied the more enterprising Awka smiths with the bloom they needed for their production. Northcote Thomas, followed by Rev. Basden, first put forward this idea.[6] M.D.W. Jeffreys, one of the early colonial administrators in Igboland, followed suit:

The Agbaja town from which the Awka blacksmiths obtained their pig iron (igwe aga) were Uvukwe, Okwe and Umuaga in Udi Division. The smelters were not blacksmiths though Umuaga made iron money in the form of small thin iron heads called *umumu*.[7]

It is fair to say that Chapter 15 of Jeffreys' Ph.D. thesis follows closely after pages 172-176 of Basden's *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. More recent students of Igbo studies have merely echoed the popular tune with no attempt to verify its validity.

This paper dissents from the conventional posture and advocates its revision. It is intended to rehabilitate the forgotten and unsung Agbaja Udi metalcraftsmen by according them their fair place in the development of Igbo metal technology. It will be argued, first, that contrary to the popular refrain, Agbaja Udi metal workers occupy a central position in the

historical development of iron technology in the Igbo area. Second, the smiths demonstrated no less enterprising spirit than their better publicised counterparts. Finally, Agbaja Udi metal industry has demonstrated considerable resilience even, as we shall see presently, in the face of mounting odds consequent upon the imposition of colonial rule on the Igbo.

Issue of Origin

The origin of iron technology in Igboland is unclear. But, as hinted earlier, popular literature points to Awka for reasons which have been examined elsewhere.[8] Popularity is not evidence of the fact, however. Careful field investigation along with close analysis of available archaeological and ethnographic evidence would suggest Nsukka area as the cradle of iron technology in Igboland.[9] Inexplicit evidence seems to indicate that from Nsukka area the technology diffused southwards, Udi being apparently the first port of call.

But if the provenience of the technology in Udi is inexplicit, the position is different in the case of Awka or precisely Agulu village in Awka. Awka has a vibrant and articulate tradition narrating the provenience of the technology in their community. Unlike in most other Igbo communities, discordant traditions are not encountered. According to the tradition, the technology was introduced in Awka by one Nnebuzo, an itinerant blacksmith of Agulu Umana origin in old Udi division; now in Ezeagu Local Government Area.[10]

The tradition has it that Nnebuzo used to undertake regular professional tours of the Awka area. Eventually, he settled at the village of Nofia near Awka and married an Amikwo Awka lady, Ikwodiaku. Ikwodiaku had a son for Nnebuzo, Agulu. Nnebuzo attempted to take Amanwulu title for his son but his Nofia hosts rebuffed him. This title would have conferred full citizenship on Agulu. Nnebuzo turned to his Amikwo in-laws. They not only permitted him to take the Amanwulu title for his son, Agulu, they also gave him a piece of land to settle. Agulu thereafter became a citizen of Awka. Nnebuzo died in the new abode; his son relocated to a new site occupied today by Umubele lineage.

While he was alive, Nnebuzo had brought up his son in the best tradition of the smithing profession. Agulu became a very proficient smith. He had seven sons, namely Ogbu, Belu, Ike, Anaga, Oruka, Enechi and Jagwo. Each of these sons founded a lineage named after him: Umuogbu, Umubelu, Umuike, Umuanaga, Umuoruka, Umuenechi and Umujagwo.

These lineages constitute the Agulu village in Awka. The seven sons became proficient blacksmiths, like their father and grand father. For a long time, blacksmithing remained the special preserve of Agulu Awka; thanks to the stringent measures they adopted to ensure that the technology was confined within their ranks. Basden's assertion that Awka men were blacksmiths almost to a man is misinforming.[11] Attempts by some other villages or lineages in Awka to go into the profession were fiercely resisted by Agulu Awka even to the extent of war. One of such attempts led to a war between Agulu and Amikwo village, c. 1899-1904. It was British military intervention that ended the fratricidal conflict.[12] While the Nnebuzo tradition is vibrant and commonly known in Awka, it is virtually absent in Agulu Umana. The reasons for this are not far to seek. First of all, it was at Awka, not at Agulu Umana, that the import of Nnebuzo's activity was felt. Naturally, it is there that the tradition is kept alive. Second, from the Agulu Umana end, Nnebuzo's itineration and eventual emigration to Awka was normative; others before him had done so. The tradition of the people points to lineages and settlements elsewhere founded by itinerant Agulu Umana blacksmiths. Agulu Awka people even till date look to Agulu Umana as their ancestral home and the people as their kinsmen.

There are other considerations which would support the precedence of Agulu Umana over Awka in the origins hierarchy of iron technology in Igboland. One is the Agulu Umana tradition which says that Agulu Awka people used to come to Agulu Umana annually for the celebration of *otiri agulu*, the smiths' festival. This festival was conducted at the village square of Amaji lineage where *onu ani iwhuzu*, the shrine of the iron deity, is still located. The tradition asserts that this practice continued till the year of the influenza.[13] Awka traditions do not support this claim, though.

The second point of interest is that Igboland's first and perhaps the only indigenous metal currency was fabricated in Agbaja Udi. The literature refers to this as *Umumu*; but Agbaja Udi people talk of *ayu* and *Ayu* were the same currency. The discrepancy in nomenclature is intriguing. Oral tradition describes *ayu* as shaped like an arrow head. Basden described *umumu* as "tiny pieces of iron resembling small squashed tin-tacks, half an inch in length with arrow-shaped heads and the stem about the thickness of a large pin".[14] These descriptions fit Olaudah Equiano's which refers to a local currency in the form of "small pieces of coin ... made something like an anchor".[15]

The spatial influence of this currency is yet to be established. There is no question, however, that it enjoyed wide circulation in Agbaja Udi and Awka districts. In the former, it seems to have been the only currency in circulation. Describing a journey he made from his Awka base, Basden had this to say:

In one particular district to the northeast, we met with a currency which appeared unique. What was stranger was that the natives would not accept [the colonial administration's] coins apparently not considering them as currency at all.[16]

Needless to say that Agbaja Udi lies northeast of Awka.

But in Awka district, *Umumu* was not a sole currency: cowries were also in circulation. They were exchanged at two to one *umumu*. But the latter, apart from being a medium of exchange, enjoyed unique cultural significance. In the Awka area, it was a special purpose currency for acquiring slaves. Basden noted that an *ozo* title holder in precolonial times would "never be without a small supply. They formed part of a special offering for the purification of a house or anything that needed to be ceremonially cleansed".[17] Such observances and practices must have had their roots deep in the culture of the people. That the supply of this unique currency was the preserve of Udi smiths seems to be suggestive of their primacy in iron technology in the general area. It was the relentless assault of colonialism which resulted in the demise of the currency.

The unanimity of the Nnebuzo tradition is striking but dating the event is the problematic. Commoner genealogies obtained from various families in Agulu Awka would place the Nnebuzo event in the early 17th century, a time frame too shallow to be credible. But this should not be surprising, given what we know about some of the short-comings of oral tradition.

It is significant, however, that among the seven villages of Awka comprising thirty-three lineages, only two - Umudioka and Agulu - have origins traditions from elsewhere. Significantly, both were non-agricultural specialists. According to the tradition, the ancestors of Umudioka people came from the village of Neni a few kilometres from Awka. They were specialist wood carvers, teeth filers and body scarificators. Like the smith of Agulu Awka, they toured various parts of Igboland in the practice of their craft.[18]

The absence of migration traditions among the other five villages

of Awka is noteworthy. This may merely indicate that the people had been settled where they are today from such remote antiquity that they have lost all memories of their migration. In this regard, it is to be noted that Awka lies in the area generally thought to be the primordial nucleus of the Igbo from where they fanned out in time to occupy their present abode. On the other hand, the existence of the migration traditions of Agulu and Umudioka villages seem to suggest their less ancient origins. According to Awka genealogical charter, Umudioka was the second to the last village to be founded in Awka while Agulu was the last.

From the discussion thus far, it is germane to draw two conclusions. First, iron technology was less ancient in Awka than in some of the less well known iron working centres in northern Igboland, notably Agbaja Udi and Nsukka. Second, Awka seems to owe its own working tradition to Agbaja Udi.

A logical question to our analysis is this: if iron technology is less ancient in Awka than in Udi, could Awka smiths have been the fabricators of the Igbo Ukwu artefacts? This question has been discussed at some length elsewhere and it is redundant to repeat it in detail here.[19] But a quick rehearsal is necessary. The artefacts are dated to 850 ± 120 AD.[20] That they have Igbo cultural roots and inspiration, as their motifs suggest, is not in doubt. What is in doubt is their provenience, though many scholars incline to favour Awka. The reasons for this line of thought are inviting. There is the undeniable pre-eminence of Awka in the iron working industry of Igboland even to this day; the close symbiotic relationship between Awka iron workers and Nri ritual specialists; the proximity of Awka to Igbo Ukwu and the Umueri creation legend which assigns a crucial role to Awka blacksmiths.[21]

A counter argument against Awka can be made. If Awka smiths were the fabricators of the Igbo Ukwu artefacts, it would be logical to expect that blacksmithing must have been practised at Awka at least a century or more before 850 AD, the terminus post quem of metal technology in the area. The time-lag would be necessary to allow the technology to take roots and attain the level of artistic excellence demonstrated by the fabricators of the artefacts. The implication would be that all the seven villages of Awka town had come into being long before the ninth century A.D., Agulu being the last village to be founded. No new one had since come into existence. This would suggest a situation too static

to be credible, though it would accord well with the earlier European preception of precolonial Africa.

It is therefore suggested here that itinerant Agbaja Udi smiths, the like and predecessors of Nnebuzo, seem more likely than Awka smiths to be the fabricators of the Igbo Ukwu artefacts. Benedict Akunne, Curator of Odinani Museum, Igbo Ukwu, devoted to the preservation of Nri culture, affirms that originally, Agbaja Udi smiths supplied title regalia to Nri royalty and Nri travelling ritual specialists.[22] This contradicts Nancy Neaher's claim that this function was traditionally the monopoly of Awka smiths.[23] What seems to have happened was that with the passage of time the younger industry at Awka showed greater enterprise and soon eclipsed its Udi mentor.

Professional Tours

Traditional Igbo metalcraft organisation was uniquely an itinerant phenomenon. "The fame of the Ibo iron workers", writes P.A. Talbot, "has travelled far, and they themselves go as far as Cameroons".[24] The itinerant character of Igbo smiths contrasted sharply from the sedentarism of their Edo, Igala and Nupe counterparts and explains the strong presence of Igbo smiths in non-Igbo territories including those with strong and ancient metalworking traditions. The itinerant activities of Awka and Nkwerre have received some attention in the literature, especially those of the latter.[25]

But about Agbaja Udi itinerant activity, the literature is silent. The B.A. (History) degree project report of Martin Ugwu is possibly an isolated exception.[26] The common assumption is that Agbaja Udi specialised in smelting iron for Awka smiths. Consequently, they could not undertake professional tours as Awka smiths did. This assumption, though popular, is at odds with reality. No doubt, Agbaja Udi had a number of smelting centres from which Awka iron workers got much of their bloom. The people also had a thriving smithing industry and the smiths were no less intrepid travellers than their Awka, Nkwerre and Abiriba counterparts.

Indeed, iron working-smelting and smithing - was probably the most important economic activity of Agbaja Udi in the precolonial times. Colonial rules led to the demise of smelting but smithing continued to flourish. Of the place of smithing in Agulu Umana, Ugwu writes:

The practice of this craft has affected most other aspects of the people's life. Their passive attitude towards early formal education derived from their belief that blacksmithing was the most lucrative of all

professions.[27]

This is not an exaggeration, as will become evident shortly. It is not certain how far back itineration had been an aspect of the smithing industry of Agbaja Udi. From the traditions of Agulu Umana and Agulu Uwani, smithing and itineration by smiths are siamese twins, each as old as the other. The earliest evidence of Agbaja Udi itineration derives from the Nnebuzo tradition. This would imply that Agbaja Udi had had itinerant smiths long before iron technology came to Awka. If future research establishes firmly that Agbaja Udi smiths were the fabricators of the Igbo Ukwu artefacts, it can then be argued with greater confidence that blacksmithing along with itineration had been practised in the area long before the ninth century A.D.

Sceptics in the hue of Babatunde Lawal would raise eye-brows in disbelief, considering the ninth century to be too early.[28] Thurstan Shaw's reply to Lawal and the more recent researchers of Fred Anozie and K. Ray should have sufficiently dispersed this scepticism.[29] It must be remembered that archaeological excavations in the Bende area of Igboland uncovered an iron artefact dated to 805 ± 95 AD.[30] There is a growing currency of opinion that iron technology may have been known in the Igbo area by the first millennium BC.

Careful analysis of the people's oral traditions would reveal that Agulu Umana and Agulu Uwani smiths travelled over considerable distances in pre-colonial times and even long after. The smiths seem to have been oriented in three main directions: north, to Nsukka-Igala-Idoma territory; south/southeast, to the Igbo heartland and the Cross River area; and east, to the Abakaliki-Ikom-Cameroon region.

A reliable chronology of the smiths' journeys is not possible yet, given the patchy nature of available information. This will have to await more exhausting research. As indicated above, the Nnebuzo itineration tradition to Awka is so far the best evidence of the earliest itineration we can refer to; but this is not likely to have been a solitary venture because the professional travels were invariably organised on kinship lines. It seems likely that one of the first lines of the smiths' movement was to the north. The Nsukka area was the gateway in the flow of trade goods and culture items from the Idoma-Igala country into northern Igboland and vice versa.

It is instructive that some villages in Nsukka area trace the advent of iron technology to Agbaja Udi, while some smithing lineages there claim

Agbaja Udi origin. Others claim Awka, Igala, Idoma or independent origin of the technology. While the presence of Awka smiths in Nsukka is now a thing of the past, the opposite is the case with respect to Udi smiths' presence. Up to 1984, the leading smith in Aku was an itinerant smith, Okoli Okafor, a native of Agulu Uwani.[31]

Detailed sifting of Agulu Umana and Agulu Uwani traditions and commoner genealogies would suggest that by C. 1785-1815, their smiths had penetrated well into the Igala-Idoma country using such centres as Idah, the Igala capital; Ejure, the famous horse market; Ankpa, Anyigba and Igumale as operational bases. Their main area of concentration was the Ibaji district of the Igala kingdom. This area, significantly enough, has been inhabited for centuries predominantly by people of Igbo ancestry.[32] The main route passed through Aku, Opi, Nsukka to either Enugu Ezike or Obollo Afor from which points the routes entered Igala and Idoma territories, respectively.

To the south/southeast, Agbaja Udi smiths' main operational areas included Awgu, Okigwe, Bende, Afikpo, Amasiri and Ohafia. In these areas, the primary product of the smiths was gun. But in this respect, they suffered the handicap of being regarded by the people as agents of Nkwerre people. Aneke Nwigbo, a retired Agulu Umana smith, said he spent over twenty years in the Ohafia-Ohaozara axis, gun production and repair throughout the period, in spite of his protests, he was referred to and known by the people as *nwa Nkwerre*, an Nkwerre son.[33] This was because, in the thinking of the people, Nkwerre were synonymous with gun production.

It was in the region to the east of their homeland (Abakaliki, Obubra, Ikom, Ogoja and the Cameroons) that Agbaja Udi smiths made their most extensive and fascinating peregrinations, and it was to this region that most of the smiths were oriented. From detailed analysis of commoner genealogies, it seems that by C.1832-62, the smiths had gone up to Ikom and Ogoja and that by C.1874-1904, they had reached the chiefdom of Bali in Bamenda district, Cameroons. In this general area, as in some other areas, guns and brass anklets were the main products of the smiths. Guns were in high demand because hunting was an important activity in the area while brass anklets were needed by girls undergoing the fattening process preparatory to marriage. Itineration involved the smiths in traversing a wide range of communities with different cultures and socio-political arrangements. The smiths travelled in troupes under the leadership of well

known veterans of the profession. Careful planning and preparation for the journeys were necessary to minimise difficulties. Mutual understanding had to be worked out between travelling smiths and their prospective hosts. The arrangement was made by the leaders with dignitaries of the communities the smiths were going to pass through. A travelling troupe was shuttled from one community to another by its hosts. This arrangement was necessitated by the insecurity of the routes. The journeys were done on foot through tortuous swampy routes and across dangling wooden bridges. Such journeys required considerable physical endurance and attested to the enterprising spirit of the smiths.

During their journeys, the smiths demonstrated that they had a sharp eye for business, combining smithing with lucrative trade and even farming as the need arose. The itinerant journeys of Umazi Okwesi of Agulu Umana provide a typical example. Okwesi is a retired smith born C.1902.[34] His journeys took him through Obubra and Ikom in Nigeria and Bamenda, Uwene and Konye Bakundu, Kumba, Moyuka, Victoria, Ikang to Ndian in the Cameroons. The British colonial government had established plantations at Ndian and Moyika. His first son, he said, was born at Uwene, C.1931 while his first daughter was born at Konye, C.1936.

At Konye, he established a cocoa plantation which he said is still being worked by one of his relatives who still remits money to him regularly. From Bakundu, Okwesi went to Ndian during World War II. Here he switched over to trade or contract work, supplying foodstuffs,lanterns, matchets and files to the Ndian plantation management. For this purpose, he had to travel often to Aba, Onitsha and Warri to look for the lanterns, matchets and files. His supplies, he said, were shared between the Ndian and Moyika plantations. Okwesi asserts with pride that he supplied E.M.L. Endeley, the prominent Cameroonian politician, with the lantern he first used as a pupil. Okwesi returned finally back to Nigeria in 1961 after the European manager of Ndian plantation had resigned because independence had made Cameroonian leaders rude and unfriendly to non-Cameroonians.

The journeys of Agbaja Udi smiths are thus an account of human endeavour requiring the frontier spirit. In an age when all transportation was done on foot a journey of more than 500 km. over rough terrains was not a small endeavour. This meant that the smiths had to tramp from one village to another carrying their cumbersome accoutrements.

Colonial Twilight

To the Igbo, the dawn of the 20th century was ominous because it ushered in foreign rule imposed with humiliating brutality that had no parallel in their long history. Colonialism impacted on all aspects of the people's traditional existence. Traditional crafts were assaulted from various quarters by missionaries, European trading interests, the colonial administration and even self-claimed 'civilized' Igbo. Traditional iron workers were slotted for a special pillory by the administration: they produced the weapons with which the Igbo had dared colonial military invasion.

A series of Arms Ordinances dating to 1893 but constantly amended to take care of new exigencies drastically curbed local gun production and the importation of precision arms and ammunition.[35] Massive importation of iron mongery following the opening up of the Igbo hinterland to European presence and trade posed a serious threat to traditional iron industry. The colonial climate was inclement.

Like other Igbo groups, Agbaja Udi people resisted colonial invasion with valour but to no avail. The maxim gun proved too much for the local *egbe cham* and *egbe okuu*. Hundreds of these guns were sequestrated from the people and burned at the market squares with fan-fare before the helpless and disbelieving on-lookers. The hunters had lost a very useful weapon and the *ogaranya* an important status symbol.

Thereafter, the administration kept a close watch on Agulu Umana and Agulu Uwani whom it suspected of supplying all the guns in the neighbourhood. The discovery of coal in Udi in 1909 transformed the district in the economic and strategic calculations of the administration. The government developed paranoia over the maintenance of law and order in the general area, and found a ready ally in chief Onyeama of Eke. Constant harassment of the smiths in the district became an important strategy to ensure the people kept the peace.

In 1936, the District Officer (D.O.) Udi justified the harassment, accusing the smiths of producing guns and counterfeit coins in violation of the law. As a deterrent to others, two smiths, Okafor Nwaokoro and Anike Nwatigbe, were singled out for a severe punishment. They were sentenced to several months of imprisonment each by the court for illegally producing percussion cap guns.[36] As police harassment of the people continued unabated, a five-man representation of the smiths petitioned the Resident at Onitsha, via the D.O. for Udi.[37]

Not a few smiths left Udi and Nigeria to the Cameroons where they and their predecessors had been habituated to travelling to. Conditions there were less unfavourable. For one thing, colonial presence in the British Cameroons seemed less effective and visible and the Arms Regulations operated more on paper than on the ground. For another thing the smiths enjoyed special privileges in the general area more than they did at home. Martin Ugwu of Agulu Umana was born at Widikun in the Cameroons while his father, a smith, was sojourning there.[38] He asserts: "it was a special privilege to any local person to have a blacksmith reside in his compound". Some were conferred with local titles such as *Obasi Bagunja, Obasi Kumbu* etc., *Obasi*, meaning 'Chief'. At Bakundu, one smith bagged the nick-name or rather honorific *madiba*, meaning water.[39] He was so named, firstly because, like water, he was considered indispensable to everybody, his products serving a wide range of purposes. Secondly, like flood water, he could be as devastating as he was beneficent. Smiths, as discussed elsewhere, were traditionally believed to possess enormous mystical powers which could be used, though very sparingly, to destructive ends.[40]

The accusations levelled against Udi smiths by the D.O. were not without foundation. While some smiths responded to colonial harassment by seeking for serene pastures in the Cameroons, some stayed put but limited their production to domestic and cultural items such as hoes, matchets, axes, traps, title staffs and other insignia. Some others continued to indulge in clandestine production of guns in defiance of the law. As noted above, when caught, the hammer of the law descended on such people with extreme severity.

The point is that before and during colonial rule, gun production was the most lucrative aspect of the smithing industry throughout southern Nigeria and the Cameroons. Rev. Basden aptly remarked, "It is for their skill in repairing guns that the smiths are welcomed in all parts of the country".[41] Some of the smiths had specialised in gun production and it was difficult for them to abandon so lucrative a line of production, especially since an equally attractive substitute did not seem to be available.

Again in the 1930's, counterfeiting of the colonial coinage had become a big problem to government. The colonial currency had had difficulty finding its feet against stoutly resisting manilla. The trade slump of the 1920s - 1930s and shortage of nickel, confounded the coinage

problem. Astute smiths responded by minting counterfeits, melting down brass rods and anklets for the purpose. Some of the counterfeits were described as "good imitations" of the official coins.[42] Aba was a major distributing centre while Agbaja Udi may well have had important manufactories. The administration was alarmed, rightly believing that the imitations constituted "a serious threat to public confidence in the currency".[43]

In 1935, the Aba Native Administration employed "coin inspectors" to assist people, especially in the rural markets, to distinguish between the official coins and the fakes.[44] For Udi smiths, the minting of trade currency would be nothing new, given their tradition of producing *ayu (umumu)*.

In spite of the battering from the colonial rulers and neglect by independence government, the smithing industry of Agbaja Udi has exhibited incredible resilient and adaptive capacity. Smithing remains something of a cult in Agulu Umana and Agulu Uwani, and seems intricately woven into the cultural and mental fabric of the people. One thing that strikes the visitor to date is that there is hardly any family compound without its own forge. Most of the forges are used by young men mostly in their early twenties. Many are school certificate holders who have not found paid jobs in the urban centres.

All males born in the two communities learn smithing during their childhood/adolescence. The forge seems to have a natural magnetic pull for the male children. Those attending primary or secondary school from home spend most of their after-school time at the forge. Many produce an assortment of articles which they sell and make some pocket money. Only those males born and bred in the urban centres away from home do not share in this fulfilling experience. Even then, whenever those ones come home on holidays, many gravitate to the forge to learn.

The Nigeria-Biafra conflict (1966-1970) drove Agulu Umana and Agulu Uwani indigenes, like other Igbo groups, to their homeland from other parts of Nigeria. The male returnees - civil servants, businessmen and professionals - took to the forge for a living. Among them, it is said, was Engineer G.C. Nwali of Nkalagu Cement Company.[45] Blockaded and embattled on all sides, Biafra recoiled within to satisfy her basic needs. The demand for the products of the forge, including guns, reached its vertex.

The traditional attraction of the forge for Udi youth has continued after the civil conflict in Nigeria. During the long vacation of 1984, I

encountered at Agulu Uwani, Sunday Odio Ezeajofor on the forge. He was producing knives and spoons from aluminium scrap. Then he was a fourth year pharmacy student of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.[46] He said he expected to make enough money from the job to carry him through the next academic session. Elsewhere, the transformation of Agulu Uwani into a beehive of aluminium spoons and knives manufactories has been discussed and there is no intention to rehearse this here.[47]

One lingering puzzle remains. How come that in spite of their pioneering and enterprising activity, Agbaja Udi smiths have remained an unrecognised force in the literature? No satisfactory explanation exists at the moment. Only a tentative formulation is proffered here. First, as suggested earlier, although Awka borrowed the technology from Udi, the latter appear to have demonstrated subsequently greater enterprise in the craft than their mentors. This shot them into a lime-light that tended to eclipse Agbaja Udi. Second, the prolific writings of Rev. Basden, who lived at Awka for close to two decades, helped to advertise the genius of Awka smiths. Subsequent writers have tended merely to hymn the refrains of Basden. Third, the orientation of Agbaja Udi smiths mainly to the Cameroons may well have had the effect of deflecting them from the recognition of colonial writers.

Conclusion

Agbaja Udi area occupies a crucial position in the history of iron technology in Igboland. But this fact is not recognised in popular literature. Like their Awka counterparts, the smiths demonstrated remarkable enterprising spirit, engaging in long distance tours that took them far beyond the borders of Igboland. Though the industry has come under the twilight since the advent of colonial rule, it has demonstrated astounding resilience and adaptability. In contemporary times "modernity" has not diminished the people's attachment to this ancient industry whose roots seem to go deep down in the recesses of their history.

Notes

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1. P.A. Talbot, Tribes of the Niger Delta (London, 1932), p. 272.
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