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THE DECLINE OF BLACKSMITHING IN ELELE ALIMINI AND ITS ENVIRONS: A BARRIER TO THE GROWTH OF SELF EMPLOYMENT AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN NIGERIA: CAUSES AND WAY FORWARD

BY

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ABSTRACT

Blacksmithing, an important surviving traditional art form and practice in Elele Alimini that is much sought after in the phase of modernism seem to have declined in Alimini and its environs. The people of Alimini seem not to be aware of the importance of the craft to mankind. Even the Nigerian government seems to have minute understanding of the benefits of blacksmithing to the nation. Axiomatically, a study of the decline of blacksmithing would have shown the gaps in its role of nation building. So also it would have shown the ways of continuing the art in Nigeria. The objective of this study is to examine the declining condition of blacksmithing in Elele-Alimini and its environs. The aim of the study is to establish the factors responsible for the decline with the view of providing the way forward. Biographical survey of qualitative research methods and research questions which test the objective of the study are the basis of the investigation. This research design adopts the historical survey technique which relies on Primary and Secondary source of data collection. The study shows the origin of Elele Alimini, geographical location of Elele Alimini, blacksmithing as a traditional art and the origin and practice of blacksmithing in Alimini Community. It also shows the gap in the role of blacksmithing in Alimini and Nigeria in general, as well as the causes of the decline of blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and its environs. The study therefore, suggests ways of revitalizing the art as a means of stimulating the interest of self-employment and culture preservation in the youths for a sustainable development.

Keywords: Decline, Blacksmithing, Elele Alimini, Environs, Barrier, Cultural Heritage.

Introduction

The decline of blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and its environs that is seemingly a hindrance to the growth of self-employment and cultural heritage in Nigeria is an important subject matter in biographical studies and in the study of Nigerian culture. Blacksmithing is facing a serious setback on its role of supplying agricultural implements, utensils, technological tools, and religious worshiping objects, among other tools and equipment resulting from the effect of unawareness of the value of the art form in our nation. Farmers being the most populated users of the blacksmiths products attest that the products are quite purposeful so should be on the increase in supply. Over the years, good number of persons in Alimini and its environs

fended for themselves and families through blacksmithing. The success of the craft in Alimini perhaps is the availability of metal materials in Alimini and her neighbouring cities like Port Harcourt, Owerri and Onitsha, respectively. Despite these benefits, one could notice that the practice of blacksmithing in Alimini has been neglected to near extinction. This no doubt has created a research gab and dearth of literature on "the decline of blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and its environs".

The researcher therefore was motivated by the neglect of blacksmithing in Alimini and its environs to address the issue of "the decline of blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and its environs, a barrier to the growth of self-employment and cultural heritage in Nigeria: causes and way forward". The paper provides the way forward for the revitalization of blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and its environs to enhance the growth of self-employment and culture in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Decline as described by Hornby (2010) is a continuous decrease in the number, value, quality, etc of something. Exploring this definition above, decline as used in this study is the decrease in the number of functional blacksmiths in Elele Alimini and its environs. Blacksmithing is the adjective of blacksmith defined in Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2013 edition) as a workman who works in or welds wrought iron. Sassoon (1962) describes blacksmithing as the smiting of local ores to make iron for tools and weapons. Succinctly put that blacksmithing is the art of fashioning goods from metal. Goods such as agricultural implements, technological tools, house hold utensils, weapons, religious worshipping metal items, and other metal decorative objects are of blacksmithing. Forging, picking stretching, twisting and punching among other blacksmithing activities are the processes of fashioning goods from metal. Elele Alimini is the community where this study of blacksmithing is made from.

Environs in BBC English Dictionary refer to a place and the area immediately surrounding it. In this study, it is viewed as Elele Alimini neighboring communities. Barrier in the same BBC English Dictionary means a thing that makes something difficult or impossible to happen or to be achieved. In this context, it is described as a hindrance to the growth of self employment and promotion of Nigerian culture. The growth of self-employment in Nigeria implies the increase in the number of Nigerians who engage themselves in entrepreneur skills that will enable them earn a living instead of waiting for the unpredictable government or another employer's employment for the same purpose.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three theories of psychoanalysis, professionalism, developmental and modernization. The psychoanalysis holds that creativity wells up from unconscious drive which means that creativity is a by-product of primary processes. It suggests that the future artists should disassociate with real objects and fall in love with the world as a whole (Samuels and Samuels, 1975). The theory of professionalism explains that professional groups should apply their theoretical knowledge to their professional practice so that one can deduce the narrative content, symbol, emotion, and politics from their creative forms (MacDonald, 1994). This theory is more effective problem solving as it makes for more effective innovations, financial rewards, and ethical conduct. The theory of development and modernization

proposes that undeveloped countries can be developed if the social variables of development such as economic, social-cultural and political forces are adopted as modern practices (Max Webber, 1864-1920).

Blacksmithing, an economic and social-cultural activity for a nation building has been identified as a craft that should be adopted as a modern practice in Nigeria. These theories therefore enabled the researcher to make psychological enquiry about blacksmithing in Elele Alimini Community and its environs, and established that the decline of the practice in those communities is a barrier to the growth of self employment and cultural heritage in Nigeria. The researcher proffered solution as the way forward for the practice of the craft in Nigeria.

The Origin of Elele Alimini

The history of the origin of Elele Alimini is still obscure because of its apparent contradictory views presented by oral tradition. However it is accepted by indigenes of Alimini that the town came into existence as a result of incessant inter-tribal wars which developed between Elele Okiniali (Omeneele) and her neighbouring village Ekpeye (Ahoada) in about fourteenth (14^{th}) century. (IKpe-Elenwo and Isaiah-Ihua 2005) "Oral interview" The war, which lasted for years and took many lives and properties has been sought by many people to discover the remote and immediate cause of it, but to no avail-a reason for which there could be versions of what caused the war. Presumably it was told to have emanated from the ardent slave trade of the time. Elele Alimini- a renowned town of the Ikwerre clan of Rivers State was founded by a great and renowned hunter called Anyia Wabeeme of Omuokpirikwu village of Elele-Okiniali in about fifteen (15^{th}) century, (Ikpe-and Isaiah 2005). The discovery of Alimini by the hunter could be traced to the subjugation of the powers of the Ekpeye in the war by men of valour of the Elele Okiniali. Those men of valour were chosen from different villages of the Omeneele as representatives of each of the villages to face the Ekpeye challenges. The leader of each village representatives include: Anyia Wabeeme of Omuokpirikwu village, Ugu of Mgbuanyim village, Agnarna of Omuobiri village, Eke of Omueke village, and Dum of Omeneta village respectively. These names of the leaders were intentionally given to them to enable them effect disguise in the battle-field.

All the men of valour were led to the battlefield by Anyia Wabeeme (the great hunter cum war-lord). In the battlefield; they became thirsty and needed water to drink. Incidentally they discovered a stream and drank from it. In the process, they noticed that the stream was large and deep enough than they could cross easily. They decided to provide two boats to cross the stream. To achieve this goal, they cut down six sizeable light dried white wood called "Oru" in Omeneele language, tied it together in the ratio of 3 to 1, sat on it, used paddles and crossed the water, and continued the war.

In the war, one of them named Wosa Womah used his magical gun to locate the source of power of the Ekpeye. The source of power was a shrine decorated with demonic items so awful to look at. The shrine was invaded and the power neutralized. This singular act weakened the strength of the Ekpeye and they surrendered. The men of Omeneele therefore chased them out and inhabited the area. To stop the Ekpeye from further encroachment on Omeneele land, Anyia Wabeeme stationed the five leaders of the Omuneele men of valour and their men including him at different points of entry into Omuneele territory and they

settled permanently in the areas. The availability of the stream in the area was an added advantage to their victory and settlement. All this marked the cradle of the town Omeneele Alimini-meaning people of the land of water. To this end therefore, the name Omeneele-Alimini gradually changed to Elele Alimini following the pronunciation of the early Europeans Missionaries that had contact with the people of Omuneele and Ekpeye. Other migrants into the Elele Alimini Community who lived as tenants followed such pronunciation and the name "Elele" stucked as the name of the community.

This history reveals why there are two communities called Elele. One addressed as Elele Okiniali (Big Elele) and the other addressed as Elele Alimini (Small Elele). The two communities see themselves as one but are individually autonomous. They have similar culture including language; though they inter-marry. This history also shows that Elele Alimini is an offshoot of Elele-Okiniali. No community ever separates from her parent community without a cause. No cause of action is easily forgotten. No action is taken without an event, and events constitute a factor for the survival of history.

Geographical Location of Elele Alimini

Elele Alimini is an Ikwerre Community that is located in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria. The Local Government Area has her headquarters in Emohua, a town that measures about 21 kilometers to Port Harcourt and about the same measurement to Alimini Town. It lies along East West and South West border of Rivers State. At the East West border, it lies between Ndele and Ahoada town, and between Ahoada and Elele Okiniali in the South. The town is bounded by other towns in Rivers State such as Ndele, Obelle, Rumuekpe, AHoada, Akpabu, and Elele Okiniali respectively. 343 Artillery Brigade Regiment of Nigerian Army is located in the community. The position of Alimini is strategic for business transactions. The 1991 National Population Census of Nigeria shows that the Community accommodates a minimum of 10,383 indigenes. In this number, 5,353 are male while 5,030 are female. At present, this population however may have increased due to the high birth rate occasioned by the imposed Healthcare Sciences sponsored by Nigerian government (Elenwo 2007). Elele Alimini consists of fourteen villages shown below in the order of seniority; (1) Omuokpirikwu, (2) Omuorihuru, (3) Mgbuanyim, Omuagnara (Omuobiri), (3) Omuohiaa (Omuobiri), (6) Omuohia (Omuobiri) (7) Omuadni (Omuobiri), (8) Omeke, (9) Omuigbuom (Omeke), (10) Omuordu (Omeneta), (11) Mgbuajahwiyee (Omeneta) that comprises Omumbnere, Omuezechi and Omunmaah, (12) Omusne, (13) Mgbuelelu (Omusne), and (14) Omueti respectively.

Alimini enjoys a good climatic condition such as a suitable temperature that conforms to the health of the inhabitants, minimized natural disasters like thunderstorms, destructive flood, hills, mountains, and others. Also to her advantage of the gift of nature are adequate rainfall and expanse of agricultural rich soil, etc. The indigenes of Alimini are predominantly farmers of subsistence level. They also engage themselves in other economic activities such as art and craft works including blacksmithing, trading, technicians, and civil service. A number of streams are found in the area and are good for drinking. Alimini is blessed with mineral resources. The community is gradually assuming an urban status. She has electricity supply from National Electrical Power Authority (NEPA), a post office, a daily market, and a large but substandard local market for the sale of her farm produce. Nigerian government state

schools ranging from Primary to Secondary levels and a number of religious worshipping centres is located in the community. Elele Alimini is autonomous and has community boundaries with her neighboring communities. She is a peace keeping community. The Nigerian government knows the indigenes of Alimini for their support. The indigenes speak the Ikwerre dialect, Elele specifically. Alimini indigenes are good at maintaining the rich diverse cultural heritage of the Africans but the influence of Western Christianity on African culture has reduced their interest in those activities. New Yam Festival (Hnozuzu), Wrestling Competition (Ogba-Ute), and Dancing Competition (Ohnihio-eri), are good examples of the Alimini cultural activities influenced by Western Culture (Elenwo, 2007).

The map of Elele Alimini showing all the villages in it, map of Rivers State showing Emohua Local Government Area, map of Nigeria showing the location of Rivers State, and map of Africa showing the location of Nigeria are employed in this study to show the geographical location of Elele Alimini in Nigeria. In the maps, the locations are indicated in shading for easy identification and understanding as shown in plates 1-4.

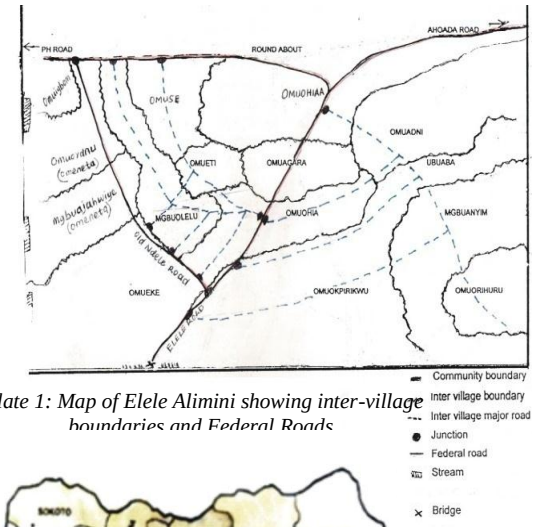


Plate 1: Map of Elele Alimini showing inter-village boundaries and Federal Roads



Plate 2: Map of Rivers State showing its Local Government Areas



Plate 3: Map of Nigeria showing all the states of the Federation



Plate 4: Map of African Continent and its countries

Blacksmithing as a Traditional Art

Egonwa (2005) defines traditional art as the original art form and cultural practice of the Africans before contact of foreign culture or with other people of the world. Art forms and styles persist in Africa but the peculiarity in African style of expressing blacksmithing has not completely broken rather forces of modernization have had serious influence on it.

Blacksmithing in Elele Alimini is one of the original art forms and cultural practices of the Nigerians prior to the severe Western influence on Nigerian culture. The art is associated with the moral and philosophical beliefs of the Alimini people. Okpara (2005) points that blacksmithing is one of the art forms and cultural practices of the Africans that have blazed the trail of indigenous Nigerian art nationally and internationally because of the Bronze and Brass cast objects excavated in Igbo-Ukwu by Thustan Shaw in about the middle of the 9th Century AD. The Elele Alimini blacksmiths practice the craft without the use of the conventional guiding principles of works of art. The working materials, tools, and equipment are mostly obtained from found objects of nature such as wood, animal skin, clay, charcoal, water, among others. The products look crude and are mostly used for traditional activities. Studying the trade is through apprenticeship training which does not require one to possess formal education. A newly trained blacksmith who has owned a smithy and is about to start production must perform some rituals for self fortification before commencing. Those blacksmiths have a little or no idea of expanding their business through art exhibitions, or other public enlightenment programmes. All of this classifies blacksmithing as a traditional art.

The Origin of Blacksmithing as an Art Form and Practice in Elele Alimini

Blacksmithing has been described as a traditional method of binding or joining metal materials like pieces of iron, steel, copper or lead by tying, gluing or welding to form a utilitarian object. In Elele Alimini, it is an old art form and practice that started in about late 1940, and early 1950s. History has it that its origin in Alimini is traced to the Awka indigenes of the Igbo tribe. (Wodah, 2020) The early indigenes of Alimini prior to the beginning of the craft had a little or no idea of blacksmithing until the Awka introduced the technology to them. The introduction of the craft was the consequent upon the migration of the Awka blacksmiths into Alimini town as tenants. The Awka being skillful and famous in the trade began to produce crude farming implements needed by the people of Alimini for their farming, hunting, and protection. Soon after the introduction of the technology in Alimini, it flourished. Notable among the early Awka blacksmiths in Alimini are Mr. Mark Okonye, Obi Okafor, James Chidokwe Nwonye, Journey Elukora, Onitsha Wosu, Fortunatus Anyanwu and others. These men had to train other Alimini indigenes interested in the craft by making them undergo apprenticeship training of five or six years depending on the trainee's ability to cope.

Among other early qualified Alimini blacksmiths are Mr. John Dimkpa Okwukwu (Dimkpa-Nwodanda), and Mr. Isaac Wodah (Akpura). Others with partial training who later became bicycle repairers and sporadically use their residual knowledge of blacksmithing to weld broken bicycle parts and produced minor metal works such as kitchen and fishing spear, javelin, short-put, and many other objects are Lazarus Nyekwere (Ndah-Nwuoakah), Mr. John Enyiogbede Woke (Alete), Mr. Woka Okneh (Odiiche), Mr. Hillary Chianuka (Dulla), Mr. Peter Nwezenwo (Abel), Mr. James Dike (Acid), Mr. Christopher Chimara (Azubuikne), and many others of the time. The people of Alimini in different names of the Alimini dialect acclaim those Alimini blacksmiths for their fantastic metal products. The trade names include: "Oji-igweh eme-eriri" meaning one who converts iron into rope, "Oji-akah eme-okah" one who beautifies things by hands, among other sorts of accolade.

In addition to those early Alimini blacksmiths is another set of Alimini indigenous bicycle repairers who emerged between 1990 and 2007 and work to the present day in similar methods and styles of their Alimini masters. These blacksmiths include Mr. Innocent Wosa (Lobo), London Ofuru (Londor), Silas Assor (Ogbordor), Smart Chukwu, Chukwuemeka W. Amadi (Emeka), and Saturday Johnson of Delta State, among others. The materials, tools, and equipment used for the artwork are named in Igbo language following the orientation of the Awka masters. Blacksmithing among other traditional art forms is an important and lucrative venture because as many as learnt and practice the craft are at least average Nigerians today. Again, the products possess the essential link between art and nation building. Okpara (2005) notes that these essential links include: creativity, aesthetics, utility and technology.

The available photographs of the Awka and Alimini blacksmiths showing them at work with some of their products are as shown over-leaf. A few pictures of the bicycle repairers are also shown. The map of Nigeria showing the states in metalwork is shown and shaded. So also are the states in metal work arranged in their ethnic groups are shown in the table below.

Table 1: The states in metal work and their ethnic groups

States	Ethnic Groups
Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Lagos, Ondo, Ekiti, Kwara	Yoruba
Niger	Nupe
Kebbi	Borgana, Bariba
Kaduna	Gwari
Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Kanu, Jigawa, Bauchi, Gombe	Hausa and Fulani
Yobe, Borno	Kanuri
Adamawa	Bura, Marghi, Longuda, Bata and Mumuye
Plateau	Birom, Katab, Jukun
FCT	Bassa
Kogi	Igbirra, Igala
Taraba	Chamba
Benue	Tiv, & Idoma
Edo	Bini
Enugu, Imo, Abia, Ebonyi, Anambra	Igbo
Cross River	Ekoi
Akwa Ibom	Efik, Ibibio
Rivers	Ikwerre, Mgbom, Ogoni, Ogba, Ekpeye
Bayelsa	Ijaw
Delta	Urhobo, Itsekiri

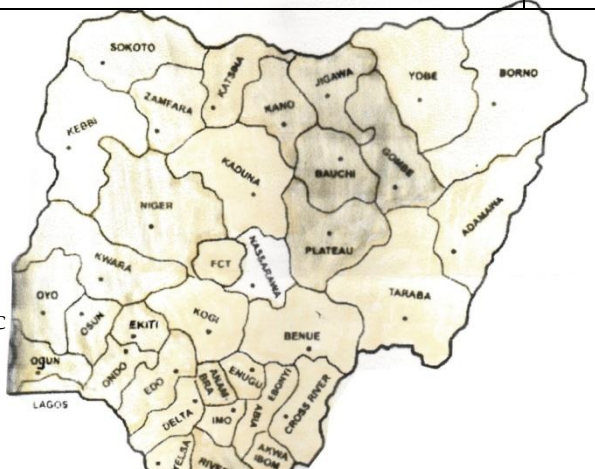


Plate 5: Map of Nigeria showing the states in metal work

The Practice of Blacksmithing in Elele Alimini

Blacksmithing is a three dimensional art work. The products possess height, length and breadth and are seen in the round. The materials used for the art production include; Brass, flux powder, wire, rod, pipe, discarded bicycle and vehicle spare parts, among others. According to Nwonye (2005) blacksmithing in Elele Alimini is a traditional art work that is associated with some mystical powers. In blacksmithing tradition, any apprentice who completes his course of training and owns a smithy must undergo some rituals for self-fortification before commencing production. The fortification is usually made at the smithy of the blacksmith a reason for which the Alimini blacksmiths forbid women on menstruation entering into their smithy when at work, and a non-blacksmith touching their anvil when at work, among other prohibitions. The smithy is spaced and built to accommodate the needed materials, tools and equipment of production. The size of a smithy is usually as desired by the owner. At a corner of the smithy is positioned an equipment called "Forge" for heating of iron. The forge is made of a low mud wall of about 4ft high, 3ft wide and 1fth thick. The wall is perforated at one end of the ground level for fire making. At the fire space is connected two clay tubes or two pieces of metal pipe of about 3ft long, 2 inches wide, and 4mm thick. At one end of each of the pipes is tied a small drum of about 9 inches high, with animal skin or rubber as the cover tied also to a long wooden handle. This device is referred to as bellows. Charcoal is usually piled at the fire space, and a fire is kindled with it as the readiness for production. The bellows are used for blowing air into the fire.

During production, a desired number of irons are put into the fire to heat to the degree of changing the colour of the iron into red. Blowing air into the fire through bellows produces the heat that changes the colour of the iron. The heat softens the iron to be easily shaped into a desired shape. The hot iron is picked out of the fire with a tongs and placed on anvil for shaping. The shaping is done through a process of striking and smoothing with hammer referred to as forging. In the process of forging, the object produced may further be decorated to satisfy the creative consciousness of the blacksmith. The items produced vary in style and size to suit the purpose for which they are made. The above processes of blacksmithing in Alimini are similar to those of other communities in Nigeria. The products are numerous and are on daily demand in Nigeria. Some products of the Alimini blacksmiths and their purpose of production are as shown in the table below. The picture of a local forge and those of the blacksmiths at work and their products are shown. So also the blacksmithing tools and equipment named in English, Igbo, and Ikwerre (Elele) languages with their specific functions are shown below:

Table 2: The Blacksmiths Products and Their Purpose of Production

S/N	PURPOSE	PRODUCTS
1	Agricultural Implements	Hoe, machete, mattack, shovel, axe, iron-trap, head-pan, palm wine tapping chisel, rubber tapping knife, fishing spear etc
2	Household Conveniences	Hinches, Nail, Traditional iron pots, griddle, cloth pressing iron, bucket, bicycle frame, bicycle carriage, bicycle standing, kitchen pin etc
3	Ceremonial/religious worshipping instruments	Staff, metal gong, bell, flute, cannon, hunting gong, jingling pipe, etc
4	Sports equipment	Shot-put, javelin, etc
5	Engineering and Architectural tools	Hammer, chisel, pliers, hand trowel, tools box, chain, punches, saw, nail bar, etc
6	War Equipments	Dane gun, bows and arrow, knife and some explosives, etc

Showing a Local Forge, A few of Awka and Alimini Blacksmiths at Work and A few of Alimini Bicycle Repairers

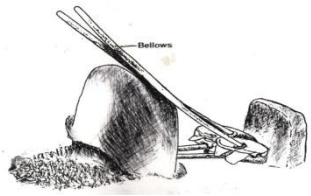


Plate 6: Local Forge
Drawing: By Elenwo Morrison



Plate 7: (Awka) James Chidokwe Nwonye at work in Elele Alimini (Oct, 2005) Born 1927

Awka and Alimini Blacksmiths at work



Plate 8: Nwonye J.C. Blowing air into the charcoal fire with bellows to heat a piece of iron into red colour in his smithy at Elele-Alimini (Oct, 2005)



Plate 10: Isaac Wodah (Akpura) Beating and shaping a heated iron into a desired shaped of a hoe on the anvil.

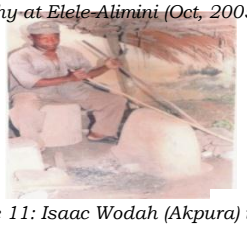


Plate 11: Isaac Wodah (Akpura) in his smithy pumping air into the charcoal fire with bellows to heat iron into reddish colour (Oct, 2005) Born 1938



Plate 9: Emeka Nwonye displaying the available metal products of his father Mr. J.C Nwonye

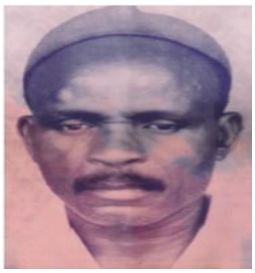


Plate 12: John Dimkpa Okwukwu Alimini Blacksmith 2005 Born 1927 – Dec, 23rd 2003

Alimini Bicycle Repairers

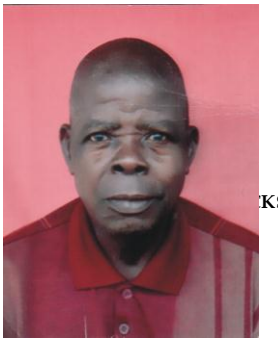




Plate 13: Mr. Hilary Chianuka (Dulla)Born 1944



Plate 15: Mr. Lazarus Nyekwere (Ndah-Nwoakah) (1930-2009)

Plate 14: Mr. John Enyinogbede Woke (Alete) Born 1947



Plate 16: Mr. Smart Chukwu 1974

Showing Samples of Alimini Blacksmiths Products

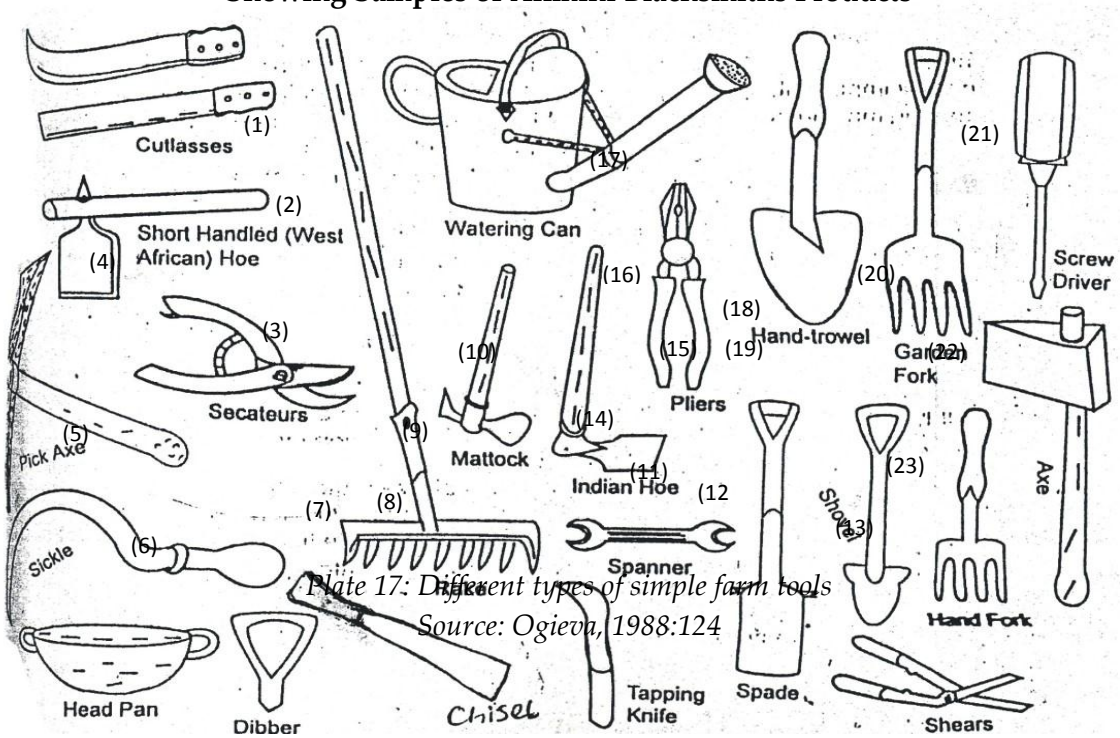


Plate 17: Different types of simple farm tools
Source: Ogieva, 1988:124

Nail bar

Plate 18: Engineering and Architectural Tools (Elenwo M. 2020)

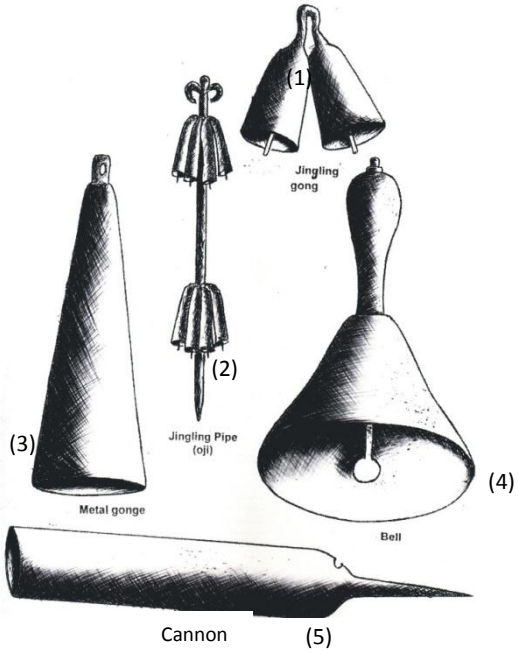


Plate 19: Ceremonial and Religious Instruments (Drawing: By Elenwo, Morrison 2020)

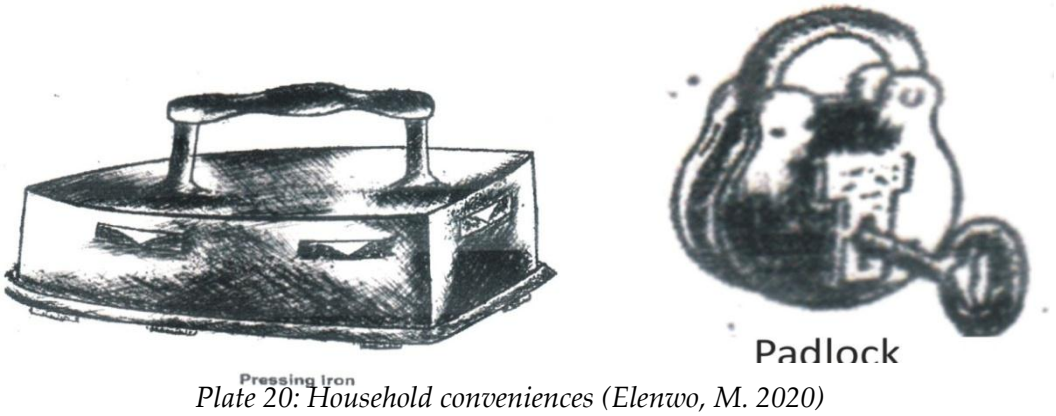


Plate 20: Household conveniences (Elenwo, M. 2020)

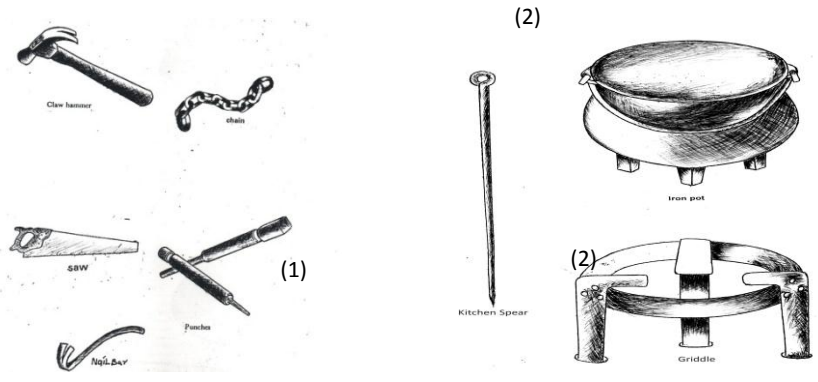
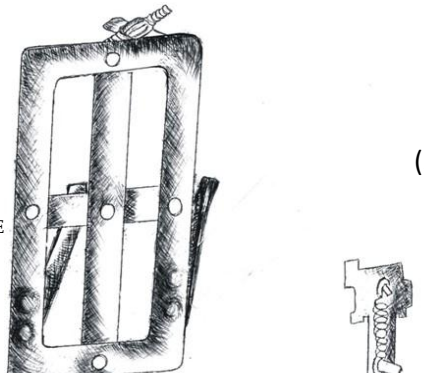


Plate 21: Cooking utensils (Elenwo, M. 2020)



(2)

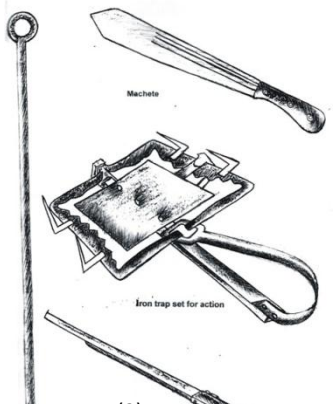


Plate 22: Bicycle parts (Elenwo, M. 2020)

Plate 24:War Equipment (Elenwo, M. 2020

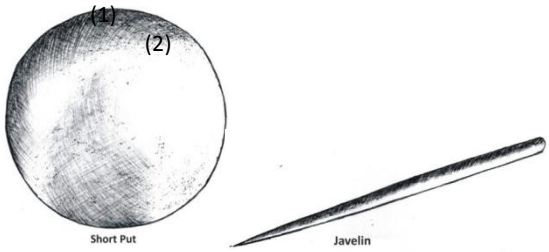


Plate 23: Sports equipment (Elenwo, M. 2020)

Table 3: Tools and Equipment

English	Igbo	Ikwerre	Functions
Anvil	Osiama	Usisi-Nkpor	Used for placing hot metal as to hit and shape it into a desired shape.
Sledge hammer with wooden handle	Otiti	Akni-igwegbe	Used for hitting and shaping a hot metal into a desired shaped.
Sledge hammer with metal handle	Anyonka	Amu	For leaning and smoothing a fashioned shape.
Tongs	Mkpa	Mkpa	For picking up hot metal from the forge
Chisel	Aku-koi-koi	Dinkwu Igwe	For cutting iron when hot or cold
punch	Ndudu	Agiga	For bowing holes
Light hammer	Hama or Otiti-Obereh	Amala or otiti-ogbede	Used for hitting the punch when bowing a hole on a metal. Also used for driving in nails, and tapping edges into shapes.

Smithy	Mbari-orzu	Obiri-orzu	The workroom or workshop of a blacksmith.
Forge	Eki-orzu	Ogidi-orzu	Used for firing or heating of metal.
Bellows	Ekno	Epupe-orzu	Used for blowing air into the fire in the local forge
Large shaft surface	Igweoche	Igwe-orzu	Used for placing thin bits of iron when cutting it with chisel.
Table	Oche	Ngodongokwu	Used for displaying the blacksmith products at the front of the smithy for sales.
Adze	Egbu	Egbugbu	Used for trimming protruding bits of hot metal

The blacksmith's tools and equipment named in English, Igbo and Ikwerre (Elele) Languages and their functions.

The Gap in the Role of Blacksmithing in the Development of Elele Alimini, and Nigeria in General

The research made on the above subject matter shows that the decline of blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and environs is an impediment to the growth of Nigeria in the following ways:

1. *Employment Opportunity:* Blacksmithing is a self-reliant occupation. Over the years, a good number of Nigerians were known for blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and its environs. Those blacksmiths fended for themselves and their families and are rated as average Nigerians. The involvement of a number of Nigerians in such an occupation would have helped to reduce the number of the non-working population in the country.
2. *It is a source of the availability of household conveniences:*In Nigeria, every family makes use of metal products as cooking tools such as pot, knife, spoon, griddle, axe etc, and other conveniences like bed, bucket, lamp, padlock, and cloth pressing iron among others which are of blacksmithing. Blacksmithing therefore provides enough goods that support life. The involvement of people in the craft would have provided supportive measure to the growth of the nation.

3. *It is a source of tools and equipment for agricultural and industrial practices:* In Elele Alimini and other parts of Nigeria, blacksmithing constitutes the highest supply of the implements needed for agricultural and industrial activities. Ogieva (1998) asserts that "about sixty percent (60%) of the Nigerian population is engaged in agriculture", so also do a few others work in factories where other things are produced. Their most needed implements of operations such as machete, hoe, axe, spade, rake, head pan etc, and technological tools like pliers, spanner, screw driver, chisel, nail bar, saw, hammer etc are blacksmithing. Obviously, blacksmithing is the pivot on which agricultural and industrial activities

rotate. No nation exists without agriculture and industry. As such, the involvement of people in the occupation would have enhanced the availability of agricultural and industrial tools and equipments in the country.

4. *It is a source of market for metal products:* Blacksmithing in Elele Alimini would have created the opportunity of buying and selling of metal products such as iron pot, griddle, charcoal pressing iron, etc in Alimini Community rather than traveling far and wide to get the same needed products. This development would have enhanced the popularity of Alimini Community and Nigeria in general in outside world. So also it would have enhanced the popularity of the Nigerian blacksmiths in metal work.
5. *It is a source of the military defense of the country:* In Nigeria, most war weapon like bows and arrows, knife, spear, gun shell, bomb and other explosives used by the military personnel to defend the country in times of war are of blacksmithing. The availability of the war equipment and government would have greatly enhanced peace in Nigeria and other parts of the world.

6. *It is a source of knowledge:* In Nigeria, blacksmithing is a traditional art. Its art form and practice is educating. The indigenous Alimini blacksmiths are good technicians today. Their products are often needed in the country for various end use including environmental and personal beautifications. The involvement of people in blacksmithing perhaps would have enabled some of them to have jobs in reputable co-operate and private companies, public service and other private ventures, where they would have exhibited their professional acumen in so many respects.

The Causes of the Decline of Blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and its Environs

The research made about the decline of blacksmithing in Elele Alimini and its environs discovered that the factors responsible for the decline include;

1. ***Funding****:* The capital needed by the blacksmiths to run their business of blacksmithing is not enough. The little capital a blacksmith uses to run his business cannot produce a good number of metal forms that can fetch him enough money to expand his business.

2. *Inadequate Patronage:* Blacksmiths products in Elele Alimini and its environs are sold at cheaper prices. They are not bought in large quantity. The ones bought are not adequately paid for. Some are even bought on credit. All this constitute a problem in the sale of the products and hinder the business expansion. Experience has shown that the reason for this is the low income of the regular buyers of the products.

3. *Lack of Materials:* The materials needed for blacksmithing are limited in supply. They are not easily obtained. Many are usually obtained from distant areas to where they are needed. The materials are also expensive for the caliber of people that buy and use them. All this also constitute some setback in the progress of the business.

4. *The products are largely seasonal:*The blacksmiths products are largely seasonal. They are mostly produced and sold on request, and at festive and farming season especially the

rainy period. When this period is over, the blacksmiths experience occasional odd jobs which eventually affect the business.

5. *Low output:* The blacksmiths do not produce their items in large quantity as needed by their uses. Blacksmithing is a manual based work. Its materials tools and equipment are locally sourced. It takes a lot of processes and time to produce an item of a blacksmith. The production process is unlike the modern machine approach which can produce goods in large quantity within a given period of time.

6. *Lack of Apprentice:* Blacksmithing is a manual work. A blacksmith hardly gets a trainee that can assist him produce more goods. The children of nowadays hardly take to a job that will make them labour much and gain a little. Blacksmithing is one of such jobs. The blacksmiths produce their goods alone, and this reduces their quantity of production, which eventually affects their business.

7. *The influence of modern tools and equipment:*Modern welding that is practiced with industrial machine competes favourably with blacksmithing. Although the solidity of the blacksmiths products have not been in doubt, but, most jobs that are supposed to be done by the blacksmiths are often diverted to the modern welders for quick production. This also affects the blacksmithing business.
8. *Problem of Age:* Most blacksmiths in Alimini and its environs are aged and are saddled with family problems. They no longer produce enough goods that will yield huge amount of money needed for the maintenance of their families and expansion of business.

9. *Problem of Continuity:* Blacksmithing is a sole proprietorship business. The exit of many blacksmiths in Alimini and its environs has collapsed most of the blacksmithing business. Some of the blacksmiths' children who have a little or no idea or interest in the job, may not be willing to continue with the trade if serious sickness or death befalls their father.

10. *The fear of sustaining injury:* The blacksmiths are safety conscious. They are aware that being close to fire at all time and the difficulty of working on hot iron is boring. So also do the youths are aware that the use of fire and iron as materials to fashion out objects is a threat to life as one may easily sustain injury with them. This impression makes the blacksmiths to be careful and slow at work which reduces the quantity of their production, and eventually affects the business.

The Way Forward

Blacksmithing has positive values in Elele Alimini and its environs. It is therefore imperative that the art form and practice be revitalized as it is an alternative income earner for Nigerians. Below are the recommended ways of reviving the art not only in Alimini but Nigeria in general.

1. ***Incorporation of Blacksmithing into School Subjects:***

Government should review the Nigeria education curriculum as to incorporate blacksmithing into school subjects. This will motivate people to take up blacksmithing as a career thereby promoting self-employment in the country.

2. ***Provision of adequate training on skill acquisition:***
   Government should plan on adequate Education Programme for the training of the traditional craft men and women in the country. This programme which will involve blacksmithing will motivate the youths to choose the trade as a career, so also shall it expose them to the possibilities of improving on the skill. The recentintroduced government skill acquisition programme in Rivers State by the wife of the former Executive Governor of the State Justice Mary Peter Odili is a good example of this recommendation. This programme which seems to have been proscribed needs to be revitalized by the federal government in order to encourage self-employment through craft work as a means of tackling the problem of unemployment in the country.

3. ***Public Enlightenment Programme:***
   The government should plan a public enlightenment programme on the need for blacksmithing in the country. This programme will create awareness that will support the art practice in the country. It will also create market opportunities for the metal products among other benefits.

4. ***Availability of Fund:***
   The government should ask for monthly financial support from all the companies, trade unions and recognized co-operative bodies among others operating in the country to encourage the practice of blacksmithing. If this request is met, there should be a simple process of registering the functional blacksmiths with the government for easy allocation of the fund raised to them.

5. ***Availability of Materials:***
   The blacksmiths working materials should be made available at the communities close to their workshops with affordable prices to enable the blacksmiths purchase them when needed. This recommendation will encourage the functional blacksmiths, and spur the youths to choosing blacksmithing as a career.

6. ***Adequate Patronage:***
   The government should establish a functional marketing channel for the sale of metal products. This will encourage the blacksmiths to produce more goods that will serve people in varied ways, and also attract interest to the trade.

Conclusion

Revitalizing the blacksmithing occupation in the communities where it is practiced in Nigeria is a way forward of confronting the issue of unemployment in Nigeria. Government intervention in providing an improved method of practicing the craft becomes another way forward. These strategies above, if met, will motivate the blacksmiths to be fully engaged in

the job and the youth's interest of acquiring the skill and starting production will be high. Government intervention will also increase the youth's enthusiasm of promoting other self-reliant occupation such as weaving, and woodwork, among others in Nigeria. It is therefore anticipated that the government will subject this submission to adequate consideration when addressing the problem of unemployment in the country.

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