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Shifting Gender Roles of Females in the Indigenous Weaving Art of Daboya 'Benchibi' in Ghana

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Abstract:

Benchibi is an indigenous woven fabric used predominantly to produce smocks (a traditional dress in the northern parts of Ghana). Historically, the production of Benchibi was the preserve of male-dominated occupations in the area. Traditionally, women's roles and participation in the production line of benchibi were to spin the cotton fibres into yarns and gather plants for preparing dyes. Women were not allowed to weave for cultural and traditional reasons based on taboos and superstitions. Recently, there has been a paradigm shift in the production line of this indigenous craft. Females have broken the umbilical cord that prevents them from weaving. The purpose of the study was to ascertain the shifting gender roles in the production of Benchibi and what has necessitated the increased female participation in the once male-dominated occupation. The descriptive research method was used in the study, which was based on a qualitative research design. Observation and interviews were the instruments used for the data collection. For the study, purposive sampling techniques of expert and homogeneous types were used to select fifteen (15) female weavers. The descriptive method was used to analyze the data. The study revealed that self-motivation and passion sustained the females in acquiring skills for the industry through apprenticeship, leading to the breakdown of the superstition and taboos associated with weaving in the community. The study concludes that the once common superstition that limited female involvement in the weaving tradition has been broken as many, through this business, have become self-sufficient. The study, therefore, recommends that more efforts be made by the females who have taken this bold decision and ventured into this male-dominated tradition of weaving to empower more females to take up the weaving business.

Keywords: Benchibi, weaving, female, indigenous weaving, daboya, gender roles

1. Introduction

In Ghana, weaving is one of the predominant ways of manufacturing fabric. Weaving has been one of the leading indigenous occupations in Ghana since pre-colonial times. It is mainly practiced in Ghana's Volta, Ashanti, and Northern regions. It is prevalent in Agotime Kpetoe in the Volta region, Bonwire in the Ashanti Region, and Daboya in the northern sector. According to Amissah and Afram (2018), the entire fabric is hand woven in strips and designed with narrower stripes and geometric shapes. Adu-Offei (2004) and Appiah (2004) assert that weaving is one of the earliest methods of cloth construction, which involves the interlacing at right-angles of two sets of yarns. The first set, called the warp, runs lengthways on the weaving frame.

The second set of yarns, called the weft or filling yarns, runs width-ways across the weaving frame, at right-angles to the warp. Weaving follows common preparatory and actual processes. The preparatory process comprises designing, yarn preparation, warping, heddling, reeding, tying-up, and weft preparation (Adu-Offei, 2004; Amankwa & Oppong, 2002; Sackey, 2002). Designing is an integral aspect of product development, and, as such, a weaver engages in several design approaches. It is vital to organize the ideas of weave patterns in terms of colour, length, and width of cloth, as well as the number of strips required for a whole cloth, before commencing the weaving process. Both the width and the length of the warp must be properly catered for. This is considered the most urgent aspect of the weaving vocation. The ability to judge and blend colours and patterns to aesthetically appeal is an excellent innovation of the weaver. The designs in Ghanaian indigenous weaving are all worked out from memory. No paperwork is involved. This is the process whereby many long yarns are put together to form the yarns that run lengthwise (warp yarns) in a woven fabric. This is done on a warping mill or warping board. After obtaining the figures for the number of warp ends and a total number of hanks needed for the warp, the following process will be to build up the warp (Asmah, 2004; Fiadzo, 2010).

The width of the prepared warp must reflect the width of the finished fabric required, plus about 2-inch yarns at the selvedge. The same is done for the length of the fabric, which also requires about 10 inches of extra yarn at each end. In addition, the openness of the weave is considered while calculating the warp. This determines the number of warp ends per inch, also called the warp sett (Coffie, 2009). Adu-Offei (2004) further explains that once the warp length has been determined, a piece of thread called a measuring cord or guide string with a contrasting colour to the warp is used as a guide on the warping mill. The cord will guide the weaver in winding the warp threads in sequence and ensure that they do not become tangled or crisscrossed when they are placed on the loom. This is then followed by beaming, which involves

tensioning the warp yarns, arranging them, and winding them through the raddle onto the warp roller. The purpose is to ensure the warp yarns' uniformity and maintain the warp's crosses (Adu-Akwaboah, 1994). Heddling, or drawing-in, is the next stage of the process. This is the passing of warp threads through the eyes of the healds, determined by the nature of the pattern to be produced. It is done by passing a heddle hook through each heddle eye in succession.

The operation is generally done by hand (Appiah, 2004; Coffie, 2009). Reeding, which follows the heddling process, involves passing the yarns through the reed dents with the reed hook. The selvedge yarns are usually doubled to strengthen the edges of the fabric (Amankwah & Oppong, 2002). This is followed by the tie-up process, which is tying treadles and lams to the heddle frames to facilitate the correct shed opening for weaving. A strong cord and a switch knot or a non-slip knot is used for the tying. The method of tie-up differs from loom to loom. The lams and treadles have a series of holes along their length, and the tie-up is done according to the design to be woven. The tie-up cords must be of equal length to properly open the shed. The treadles are made to hang evenly and parallel at the same height from the ground within the easy reach of the foot to create a very good shed (Asmah, 2004). In the weft preparation process, the weft yarns unvaryingly receive simpler treatment than warp yarns. The hanks of yarn are fixed on skein winders to unwind them, while the bobbin winder is used to wind the yarn onto bobbins.

The latter is inserted into the shuttle for the picking operation to be affected (Adu-Offei, 2004; Asmah, 2004), then the actual weaving operation follows. During this process, a treadle is depressed to open a shed; a shuttle containing the binding weft is thrown through the shed from one side of the loom to the other. The treadle is released, and the weft is beaten up with the reed. The process is repeated alternatively until an appreciable weave is produced (Tettefio, 2004). There are four major operations involved in weaving: shedding, picking, beating up (battening), and taking up and letting off (Adu-Offei, 2004; Coffie, 2009; Fiadzo, 2010; Sackey, 2002). They explain the weaving operations as 'shedding,' where each alternate warp yarn is raised to form a shed. As the warp is raised, the filling yarn is inserted through the shed by a carrier device such as the shuttle.

Similarly, in the beating up (battening) operation, the reed pushes or beats each filling yarn against the portion of the fabric that has already been formed. Reed is a comb-like structure attached to the loom. It gives the fabric a firm, compact construction. The last part of the process is the taking up and letting off motion. Here, with each shedding, picking, and beating up operation, the new fabric must be wound on the cloth beam, a process called taking up. At the same time, the warp yarns must be released from the warp beam, a process called letting off. Every indigenous weaver uses these weaving processes to create a fabric on the loom.

Pre-colonial Ghanaian society considered the weaving process laborious and time-consuming and, as a result, proscribed females from weaving. Females were only involved in cotton spinning, which formed the raw material (yarns) for weaving. Weaving demands that one sit for a very long time. Some activities, such as warping and the actual weaving, are very vigorous and challenging. Males are traditionally the custodians of the weaving profession (Tettefio, 2009). Women take care of the home and do household chores such as washing, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. The society considered combining these household chores with time-consuming weaving activities as burdensome. To give this position an enforceable creed, indigenous Ghanaian society regarded female weaving as a taboo and ascribed superstitious belief of barrenness to deter females from weaving. For example, females were not allowed to weave in Daboya and other northern sector communities. Again, Bonwire in the Ashanti region did not permit females to weave. Ross (2009) conducted a study about women weaving at Bonwire and found that during their menstruation, women were forbidden to even go near the weaving area, let alone weave. It was believed that women who engaged in weaving would be barren. Traditionally and socially, children are cherished by society and condemn women who do not bear children, so this instilled fear into women in Bonwire not to venture into the craft of weaving. These superstitions deterred women from Bonwire from engaging in weaving since every woman wanted to be a mother. The myths, taboos, and misconceptions about female participation in weaving made the art in many Ghana communities a preserve for males. However, there seems to be a change as some females have ventured into the art of weaving in some communities in Ghana (Kulevome & Amissah, 2017; Amissah & Afram, 2018; Tettefio, 2009). These studies were silent on female participation in weaving smock fabrics (Benchibi) in Daboya and its surrounding communities in the northern sector of Ghana. This study, therefore, explores the shifting gender roles of females in the production of Daboya Benchibi and their underlying motivation in acquiring the weaving skills.

2. Theoretical Framework

The gender role theory and the nurture theory underpin the study. The gender role theory suggests that boys and girls learn the appropriate behaviour and attitudes from the family and overall culture they grow up with. So, non-physical gender differences are a product of socialization. This is rooted in social structural theory or social role theory, proposed by Eagly and Wood (1999). According to this view, social structure is the underlying force for gender differences. Social role theory proposes that sex-differentiated behaviour is driven by the division of labour between the sexes within a society. Gender roles are created because of the division of labour, which leads to gendered social behaviour. A fundamental precept of social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Steffen, 1984) is that women's presumed communality derives from their historical distribution into homemaker roles and that men's presumed agency derives from their historical distribution into occupational roles (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). This explains the tradition held by the male community that weaving is solely a preserved occupation for them alone due to the cumbersome activities the weavers must go through in the weaving processes.

Weaving was viewed as a masculine gender role. The relative division of labour and roles among women and men in each society is an essential cultural factor in adolescents' gender-related experiences. As articulated in social role

theory, the gendered division of roles in a society shapes the expectations about gender roles that individuals formulate for themselves and others. This idea ruled for centuries in the community until recently, when the terrain dramatically changed. This supports the nurture theory (that is, social essentialism) that allows people to believe in change in the division of labour across cultures and periods in response to changing circumstances. The pattern of the labour division within a specific society is a dynamic process determined by its specific economic and cultural characteristics. This is what happened to the weaving occupation in Ghana's three dominant traditional weaving societies (i.e., Bonwire, Daboya, and Agotime Kpetoe). Nowadays, it is common for both men and women to violate those traditionally assigned gender roles and norms and take on social roles that were traditionally held by the other genders. The woman now perceives that the gender roles they are taking are not related to their sex but rather to the social roles they perform. This concept is what has taken the weaving industry by storm in the northern parts of the country, especially within the Daboya community. For the sake of economic empowerment, females have learned to participate and have even taken over the weaving trade. It is now a trade that provides them with financial security rather than mere rhetoric as a male occupation. As a result, there has been a shift in job orientation. Females do the weaving while males put the woven fabric into garments.

3. Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative inquiry design to seek the views of female weavers in active practice in the Daboya community in northern Ghana. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological inquiry traditions that explore a social or human problem. The qualitative research approach builds complex, holistic pictures; analyses words; reports detailed views of informants; and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). It focuses on the discovery, description, and interpretation of experiences and views of research respondents (Given, 2008; Acquah, 2015). Expert and homogeneous types of purposive sampling techniques were deployed to obtain a total sample size of fifteen (15) respondents, comprising ten (10) female master weavers with a deeper understanding relating to weaving processes and cultural practices and five (5) apprentices who have spent between five months and two years within the Daboya community. The ages of the respondents ranged between thirteen and forty-five years. Respondents were asked to give their views on misconceptions about the female weaving of benchibi and their motivation and acquisition of the weaving skills. The instruments for data collection were interviews and observations. The study employed thematic analysis in analyzing the data and ensured the anonymity of the respondents.

4. Results and Discussion

The discussion of the study's results was thematic to reflect the main objective set for the study. These are the misconceptions about the female weaving of benchibi and their motivation and acquisition of the weaving skills.

4.1. *Misconceptions about Female Weaving*

The art of weaving over the years has been the preserve of men's occupation in various communities in Ghana where it is practised. It has been an art form in transition, handed over from generation to generation since its inception (Kulevome & Amisah, 2017; Tettefio, 2009). Respondents shared their personal experiences of the male dominance and discouragement they had to endure from their male counterparts. A respondent confirms that her father was the main obstacle for her in learning the weaving trade. However, she has been able to overcome the misconceptions and discrimination from her father. She had this to say:

I had an interest, but I was discouraged by my father. I remember growing up. I went to the weaving hub one morning to help him. He drove me away and said that the weaving art is not for girls. I should go inside and wash bowls. Since then, I lost interest until recently when I decided to learn to weave to support my teaching profession. I just started learning about five months ago from a colleague teacher. Later, when he saw my products, he allowed my younger sister to assist him in arranging the yarns for the weaving, but he never allowed her to weave.

Respondent B remarked:

My grandfather was a traditional weaver who taught my father and uncles. However, weaving was not their primary job. None of my aunties were into it. Several years before I got married, I was interested in weaving, but my uncles discouraged me and told me it was not a trade for women. I tried to convince them, but they insisted that I should look throughout the Yendi town and name any female weaver within. Unfortunately, I could not name any in the trade at that time. Thus, I gave up.

Sharing a similar experience, respondent C said:

I showed a lot of interest in weaving when I was seven years old. Nevertheless, my father, who learnt the trade from my grandfather, did not like the idea. He discouraged me outright, saying that weaving is not a job for women. It was when I started senior high school and told him I was studying textiles and that he succumbed that weaving was one of the practical subjects I had learned. It was then that he decided to teach me. As a result, I can now weave on both the traditional and broadlooms. I am now a master weaver, having woven for the past eight years.

The narrative accounts of the respondents indicate that for many years, females have always had the passion and desire to learn the trade of weaving, but for male dominance and restriction. Tettefio (2009) posited that women were discouraged from venturing into the profession. Those who got themselves involved were called names, disrespected, and even branded as witches, which deterred them from engaging in weaving. The narratives keep changing as weavers' occupation in the Daboya community gradually gives way to female participation. Many of these brave women have ventured into this weaving tradition. Females are greatly involved in all aspects of the production line. They are working

from the design concept through to the actual weaving of the fabric. This confirms Afram's (2015) view that weaving is not the preserve of men. Women can also engage in weaving.

4.2. Motivation for Learning and the Acquisition of Weaving Skills

The respondents said the idea that weaving is tagged as a male-stereotyped work is a thing of the past. Many of them have entered the business and grown it even larger than their male counterparts, who were previously the preserve of this noble indigenous business. They all agreed that learning the art of weaving demands a self-motivated approach. They learnt the trade through apprenticeship. The apprenticeship training lasted between a year and three, and that largely depended on the learner's ability. This indicates that the individual's ability, intellectual level, and passion for the trade influence how long they learn the trade. One of the respondents (D) has this to say:

I learnt the trade through apprenticeship and have added many skills to what I learnt from my madam (a master weaver) during the apprenticeship period. I learnt this work because at our place, it is like males do not value this work anymore as it used to be, and the females are to fight for ourselves. Okay! Through that, I learned this trade. I am a Madam (master weaver) now. I do everything myself, from the beginning to the end (from designing to actual weaving).

In confirmation of the dexterity and weaving business establishment, one of her young female apprentices, who doubles as a student in one of the senior high schools in the Northern sectors, said:

I am a thirteen-year-old girl and a student. I am in form two. I have been weaving for the past six and a half months as an apprentice, learning the skill of weaving from my madam (a master weaver). I like weaving because I prefer weaving to other careers or trades available within the community. I come to weave during the weekends and after school on the weekdays. Schooling and weaving simultaneously are complex tasks, but I like weaving.

One of the female master weavers said:

I have been weaving for the past four years—two years as an apprentice and two years on my own. Though I do not have any apprentices yet, I hope to get one soon and teach her the weaving trade. I motivated myself to engage in the weaving trade. I am passionate about weaving and enjoy what I do in the weaving industry. I do everything myself in weaving, from designing and warping to selling the products.

Of the fifteen respondents, all were driven into the weaving business because of their passion for the job. From the narratives, it could be noted that most of the respondents acquire the skills of weaving through apprenticeship and are greatly self-motivated to engage in the business. They are poised to make the weaving business more attractive to themselves as it also helps them cater to themselves. Once the individuals are motivated enough to learn, they gladly join as apprentices. A respondent asserts that she learnt the trade when she was eighteen years old and used two years to master the skills before setting up her own business. At age twenty-six, she had two female apprentices under her tutelage, having already trained about four in the past years. This comment supports the idea that age is not a barrier to acquiring knowledge in the traditional weaving industry. For that matter, female weavers in the Daboya community are learning the skill of weaving. It could also be deduced that females now participate fully in the weaving industry at Daboya because the male weavers do not value the trade as they used to. The males' interest has shifted to sewing smock garments, locally called fugu, more than engaging in the actual weaving processes.

5. Conclusions

The study examined the views of female weavers in the Daboya community about gender roles in the weaving trade and how they were motivated to engage themselves in the once-dominated male occupation. They shared their views on the misconception of female weaving of benchibi, what motivated them into the trade, and how they acquired the weaving skills. The study revealed that Self-motivation and passion sustained many in acquiring skills for the industry through apprenticeship. The study also revealed that motivation for financial sustainability was one of the main factors that drove many into the weaving industry. The study found that it is common for females to violate traditionally assigned gender roles in the weaving cottage industry through a passion for the art and for the purpose of livelihood. However, the study also found that the females have questioned the negative perception about gender roles in weaving and hold a renewed view that their biological makeup should not obstruct their passion. The study concludes that many female weavers have successfully established themselves economically due to their motivation and passion for learning the weaving trade. The study also concludes that the weaving trade has provided financial sustainability to the many poor females in the community through the acquisition of the weaving trade. Due to economic livelihood, the traditionally assigned gender role is completely non-functional in the community as this paradigm shift has changed their perception forever. The study concludes finally that the once common superstition that limited female involvement in the weaving tradition has been broken as many, through this business, have become self-sufficient. The study, therefore, recommends that more efforts be made by the females who have taken this bold decision and ventured into this male-dominated tradition of weaving to empower more females to take up the weaving business. The study also recommends that the financial empowerment through the weaving business should be sustained to enable many females to learn a trade. It is also recommended that the male weavers in the community should appreciate the role their females contributed to sustaining the weaving tradition in the community.

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