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**TRANSFORMATIONS IN ILORIN:  
ACTIONS AND ARTEFACTS  
SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS**

*By Ann O'Hear*

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**TRANSFORMATIONS IN ILORIN:  
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*By Ann O'Hear*

This paper is concerned with the transformations that did and did not occur in two of the major "traditional" industries carried on in the city of Ilorin, now capital of Kwara State, Nigeria.<sup>1</sup>

Ilorin became a major population center in the early nineteenth century, first under the rebel Oyo general Afonja, and then under Fulani and other Islamic reformers, who overthrew Afonja and made the city the center of an emirate on the southern marches of the Sokoto Caliphate. The population that flowed into Ilorin was ethnically mixed but largely Yoruba, and the industries discussed below are the work of Yoruba Ilorin people. The city was noted as an important entrepot in the years before the beginning of the colonial period, but it was also (and has remained) a major center of production. Three of its industries have been of special importance, at varying periods, in the export trade from the city. One of these, *lantana* bead-making, may be briefly disposed of here. The *lantana* bead-makers enjoyed great prosperity in Ilorin until the 1920s, then their industry suffered a speedy and catastrophic decline, becoming moribund by the end of the 1930s. This decline was due to a combination of overproduction and drop in demand (for a variety of reasons), which led to a disastrous fall in the product's price. The bead industry has never recovered, but two other export industries, namely pottery and

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to the editors of *Africa* and *African Affairs* for permission to reproduce material already published in these journals.

narrow-loom weaving, survived the colonial period and continue to thrive today. These two industries provide a useful contrast: narrow-loom weaving is carried on by males, and produces a luxury good; pottery is a women's industry in Ilorin, producing cheap, everyday household items.

Ilorin pots seem already to have enjoyed quite a widespread reputation, and may even have been headloaded considerable distances from Ilorin, before the colonial period began. But when the railway arrived in Ilorin in 1907, the potters found themselves in possession of a new export opportunity, which they lost no time in seizing. By 1912, only five years after the railway's arrival, "great baskets full" of their products were "seen almost any day of the week at the railway station waiting to go south to Lagos, and north, at any rate as far as Zaria."<sup>2</sup> By 1917, pottery represented about half the total tonnage carried from the city by rail.<sup>3</sup> In the 1940s, Ilorin pots were popular in the Gold Coast, and by the 1950s were sold as far away as Liberia.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1950s, again, the city was reputed to have "probably the greatest output of native pottery of any town in Nigeria."<sup>5</sup> Thus the potters took advantage of their existing reputation for producing quality products, to capitalize on the new opportunities provided by the railway (especially in the south), and in later years by lorry transport.

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<sup>2</sup>J. W. Scott Macfie, "The Pottery Industry of Ilorin, Northern Nigeria," *Bulletin of the Imperial Institute*, 11, 1913, 111.

<sup>3</sup>Nigerian National Archives Kaduna (NNAK), Ilorinprof 4/69/1919, Report Ilorin Province 1918, para. 67.

<sup>4</sup>Information from Michael Cardew and J. D. Clarke.

<sup>5</sup>NNAK Ilorinprof 5 5436, Pottery 1950-52, Report by Michael Cardew, November-December 1950, para. 24.

Basically the strategy they adopted to meet this demand was one of streamlining, developing a kind of mass production (albeit unmechanized) approach. The potters have concentrated on the large-scale production of those types of pots which have been most in demand, and which are relatively simple and speedy to make; this at the expense of the variety of pots previously produced, and at the expense of complexity, decoration, and "finish." In black ware, the pots they have concentrated on have been lidded and unlidded soup pots of various sizes, and pots for the storage of liquid medicines and oils; these have been particularly important in the export trade. In red ware, they have concentrated on large pots for storage of water and grains. The manufacture of food plates and serving bowls, less popular, gradually dwindled. Production of smaller size decorative water coolers (in some cases also used as ritual ablution pots) has declined in terms both of variety and numbers. While some oil lamps continued to be made, the elegant pedestal lamp was virtually forgotten over time. Pots of some complexity, used for pre-Islamic religious observances, seem to have completely disappeared. A coarsening in the process of production over time has been particularly noticeable in the coloration of black ware, and reflect a reduction in firing time.

No technical innovations have accompanied these changes, however. After the Second World War, in line with general policy on "development," the various Nigerian pottery industries, including that of Ilorin, were surveyed. But the suggestions for "improvements," briefly mooted around the 1950s, were never taken up. Equipment such as kilns and potters' wheels would have made demands on the potters, for example in time and finance, which they would have been quite

unable to meet. In any case, the innovations would have removed the major advantages of the traditional ware. High-temperature kiln firing would have removed its single most important advantage, the ability to be used without cracking over an open fire. The subjection of the clay to the treatment required before wheel throwing would also have lowered this resistance to thermal shock. The low firing temperature traditionally used also ensures maximum porosity, thus the suitability of the pot for storing cool water. The clay mix used by the Ilorin potters is unsuitable for wheel throwing; but the wheel, if introduced, would be incapable of producing the larger pots in a single piece; these would either have to be made by joining together two or more wheel-thrown pieces, or by a return to the building method, which would in turn require a return to the traditional clay mix. The government pottery officer, Michael Cardew, was well aware of all this, and concluded that

The potters operate a very ancient tradition, and they know well just what they are doing and how best to do it . . . their notorious conservatism is grounded in good traditional knowledge and knowhow. . . . The product is finely adapted, technically and economically, to the needs of village life: any attempt to tamper with the

techniques used would upset this fine technical and economic equilibrium. . . .<sup>6</sup>

The fact that no serious effort was made to introduce the mooted innovations to the Ilorin pottery industry was hardly due, as one colonial officer put it, to "the indolence and apathy of the people,"<sup>7</sup> but rather to Cardew's and the potters' perceptions that they were not only unnecessary but disruptive, when the pots already produced cheaply and conveniently, were well suited for their purpose, and enjoyed a large and steady market.

The narrow-loom weavers of Ilorin also utilized the opportunities provided by the railway to import raw materials and export their finished products. They also enjoyed a continuing export demand. In the 1920s and 1930s this demand was high,<sup>8</sup> and after the problems occasioned by the Second World War (when the import of thread and the export of cloth to the Gold Coast were both banned), the 1950s again saw a ready market for the "fairly expensive" Ilorin cloth, with a "definite snobbery" in favor of local as against imported cloth.<sup>9</sup> Other Yoruba centers of narrow-loom weaving, notably Iseyin, also continued to flourish during the colonial period, but the Ilorin industry does not seem to have suffered any adverse effect from Iseyin competition: the two towns had different specialties, and both

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<sup>6</sup>Michael Cardew, *Pottery in Nigeria*, Incorporation "A Preliminary Survey of Pottery in West Africa," 1950 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Libraries, National Museum of African Art Branch, 1986), 4 (letter from Michael Cardew, 31st August 1964.)

<sup>7</sup>NNAK Ilorinprof 5 5436, Pottery 1950-52, Minute by Resident, Ilorin, 14th June, 1952.

<sup>8</sup>Nigerian National Archives Ibadan, CSO 26/2 12687 vol. 4, Ilorin Province Annual Report 1926, para. 80; and vol. 12, Ilorin Province Annual Report 1938, para. 81.

<sup>9</sup>"Ilorin," *Nigeria Magazine*, 49 (1956).

succeeded in retaining a considerable market for their products, despite the competition from imported goods. It would seem that there has long been a demand for a *variety* of types of prestige cloth, which neither any one local industry nor imported items were able totally to satisfy.

A range of new raw materials was adopted by the Ilorin weavers. Early in the colonial period, imported machine-spun cotton became popular. This (plus imported dyes) produced a greater range of colors available to the weavers. It also broke less and tangled less and ran more smoothly than handspun yarn, thus greatly increasing production speed. In the early 1930s, European colored silks were introduced, "in place of the white cotton generally employed for the weft designs used in the decoration of the more expensive types of Ilorin cloth."<sup>10</sup>

The weavers also took advantage of a technical innovation (an innovation insofar as the Ilorin male weavers were concerned), that is, the loom adaptation used to produce the supplementary weft float motifs referred to above. To produce these motifs, extra weft threads float across one face of the cloth, and are laid in at intervals with the ground weft. Alternately (but more unusually in Ilorin), they float across each face of the cloth in turn. Such motifs have long been used by other West African weavers, and the Ilorin men may have been influenced in their introduction and development by weaving as close to home as that of the Yoruba women, and as far afield as that of the Fulani, Ashanti, and Jukun. As far as the twentieth-century narrow-

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<sup>10</sup>J. D. Clarke, "Ilorin Weaving," *Nigeria*, 14 (1938), 122.

loom weaving in Yorubaland is concerned, however, these motifs have become particularly characteristic of Ilorin, and have been little used elsewhere. Ilorin weavers credit the introduction of these motifs to one Yahaya Kalu Olabintan, an expert weaver who was born probably in the 1890s and died in 1982, and who was producing cloth at least from about the 1920s to the 1950s. In fact, however, there is clear evidence that the motifs were produced by Ilorin male weavers before the colonial period began, and certainly before Kalu became a mature weaver. The stories have clustered around him, partly because he was indeed an innovator and experimenter (in design, materials, and width of strips), but also because his heyday as a weaver represents the period when the Ilorin weavers really began to exploit the combination of new materials and colors and the weft float designs in order to supply – and perhaps in part to create – an expanded market in Southern Nigeria due to new types of demand.

This new demand did not emanate from the old austere Islamic elite of the northern Caliphate, who were constrained to dress in subdued fashion, but rather from Southern Nigerians who had newly become wealthy as a result of export crop production and trade, and who were looking for brighter colors and more obtrusive patterns with which to express their prosperity.<sup>11</sup> The southern orientation of the trade is illustrated by the situation of the major twentieth-century cloth marketplaces, which have been especially in Lagos, Ibadan, and

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<sup>11</sup>Compare Judith Perani's comments on the "aesthetic language" of the Fulani jihadists, and the "austerity" of the nineteenth-century Nupe embroidery compared with that of the twentieth century. Judith Perani, "The Cloth Connection: Producers and Patrons of Northern Nigerian Strip Weave," paper presented at the Symposium on History, Design and Craft in West African Strip-Woven Cloth, National Museum of African Art (February 1988).

Onitsha. Oje Market in Ibadan began to operate as a cloth center in the 1930s, and became the most important center for the sale and distribution of Ilorin cloth. The attractions of Ilorin cloth must have been stimulated particularly by the introduction of European colored silks in the 1930s, silks which Kalu was undoubtedly one of the first Ilorin weavers to use.

A British education officer, J. D. Clarke, was a customer of Kalu's in the 1930s, and took a keen interest in the weaving industry as a whole, noting its adaptability "to new conditions and requirements,"<sup>12</sup> and citing the increasing use of imported yarn. Like later officials, however, Clarke criticized the weavers for their refusal to accept a broader loom.<sup>13</sup> In 1945, in keeping with the policy of "modernizing" traditional industries, a textile development program was incorporated into the Nigerian development plan. Territorial centers were set up for training weavers, and broad looms were introduced to them. In 1949 one of these centers came into operation in Ilorin, but it was never successful and had little effect on the local industry. It was considered regrettable that

the conservative outlook of the weavers should make it so difficult for them to accept the technical advice which would enable them to modernize and revivify this important industry.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Clarke, "Ilorin Weaving," 121.

<sup>13</sup>Information from J. D. Clarke.

<sup>14</sup>Northern Region of Nigeria, *Provincial Annual Reports 1956*, Kaduna, 1958, Ilorin, para. 58.

But it is unlikely that the weavers' refusal to convert to the broad loom was due to mere conservatism, even if they declared, as they did to British officials in the 1930s, that they wished to continue with the narrow loom "because it was done like this by my father."<sup>15</sup> If the weavers had attempted to convert, they would have faced unfamiliar tasks requiring considerable unproductive retraining periods; and local tailors would have had difficulty cutting garments economically from a broader cloth. The European broad loom was too expensive (at perhaps 20 pounds sterling per loom), too large and too complex to be locally made, and it lacked the portability of the local narrow loom. As in the case of the potters, conversion would have entailed considerable expense, and there could have been no incentive for change to a product whose reception would be uncertain, while their narrow-loom cloth was enjoying a large and ready market.

The Ilorin industries discussed above provide examples of transformations carried out where they would be to the advantage of the practitioners, and rejected where they would not. They also provide an illustration of a considerable communication or comprehension gap on the part of many colonial officers (though Cardew is a shining exception). It was a gap, however, which was not only brought about by the prejudices of the European "improvers," but also exacerbated by the types of responses given by the people they were targeting. Why did weavers explain their reluctance to change to the broad loom by saying they would continue the way their fathers did it, or by alleging that the broad loom was for women to use, when

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<sup>15</sup>Information from J. D. Clarke.

they had perfectly good economic reasons for their choice? Why, when Michael Cardew revisited Ilorin in the 1960s at the invitation of the Native Authority, and demonstrated wheel-thrown pots to the potters, did the latter express their reaction only by refusing to allow the wheel-thrown pots to be fired among their own?<sup>16</sup> It seems to me that answers to these questions may help to explain the other side, as it were, of the comprehension gap, and help us to achieve our aim of a more "Afro-centric" view of colonialism.

In conclusion, I would point out that this comprehension gap has been continued and further exacerbated by the proponents, both Western and African, of a kind of vulgar dependency theory, who see the colonial period as uniformly destructive of "traditional" industries, and refuse to accept the evidence – in their actions and products – of these industries' capacity for adaptation and innovation.

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<sup>16</sup>Information from Michael Cardew.

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