

IT STUDIES IN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND DEVELOPMENT

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INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

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7 The importance of indigenous organizations to the sustainability of contemporary Yoruba strip-weaving industries in Iseyin, Nigeria

NORMA H. WOLFF AND BOLANLE W. WAHAB

Introduction

'*ASO-OKE*', THE HAND-WOVEN strip cloth of the Yoruba¹, has retained its economic and cultural importance in south-western Nigeria for well over two centuries. A number of towns in the northern Yoruba area, such as Iseyin, Shaki, Igboho, Igbeti, Oyo and Ilorin are indigenous centers of strip-woven cloth production and are still homes to large numbers of weavers. Other more southern towns such as Ibadan and Ondo have gained recent prominence as weaving centres of strip-woven cloth catering to the urban élite.

The resilience of Yoruba strip-weaving industries has been proven repeatedly as forces of cultural change emerging inside and outside Yorubaland have tested the craftspeople's ability to adapt to ever-changing shifts in taste, competition from outside markets, dwindling local supplies of raw materials, unstable weather that periodically affects production, changing technologies, inflation, intrusive government development policies and projects, and the lure of modern sector occupations drawing away the work-force.

Indigenous organizations in Yorubaland that shape production and marketing of crafts continue to play an important role in assuring the continuing vitality of the *aso-oke* industry. The importance of such organizations to the continuity of hand-woven cloth production is particularly evident in the town of Iseyin, an historically important Yoruba weaving centre. This chapter focuses upon the weaving industry of Iseyin² and the key role that indigenous production and marketing organizations have played in adapting the weaving industry to changing conditions and how such organizations have contributed to keeping the *aso-oke* industry alive and flourishing. The degree to which attempts by the government to 'modernize' the weaving industry have succeeded will also be described.

The importance of Yoruba strip-weaving

Cloth production has been important to the Yoruba for almost three centuries. The Yoruba use both the West African narrow-strip double-heddle horizontal loom and the vertical loom. The vertical loom is an older technology; the horizontal loom came from the north with Islam. Historically, weaving narrow-strip cloth became an economically important male occupation, while cloth production on the vertical loom remained a female vocation.

Scholars generally agree that the wide distribution of the horizontal loom in West Africa is tied to the movement of Muslim scholars and traders in Western

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and Central Sudan. The textile arts of weaving and embroidery are common occupations for Muslim scholars even today. In Iseyin, for example, over 88 per cent of weavers were Muslims in 1980 (Wahab 1980). Based on the indirect evidence of the spread of Islam, the horizontal loom and the production of narrow-strip cloth reached the northern edges of the Oyo Yoruba Empire area by the seventeenth century, spreading southwards from the Hausa and Nupe (Kriger 1990: 39). By the end of the seventeenth century the high quality of Yoruba cloth, produced on both the horizontal and vertical loom, was noted by European traders who purchased it to sell for higher prices elsewhere (Captain [John] Phillips 1693-4, quoted by Thornton 1990: 10). In 1823 a trader, J. Adams, who cruised the west coast of Africa as far south as the Congo, stated:

The cloth manufactured in Hio [Oyo] is superior, both for variety of pattern, colour, and dimensions, to any made in the neighbouring countries
(Law 1977: 204).

William H. Clarke, a Baptist missionary, who travelled through most of Yorubaland between 1854 and 1858, noted that the quality of both men and women's weaving was excellent.

As good an article of cloth can be woven by the Yoruba weavers as by any people, and for durability far excels the prints and homespuns of Manchester. Hence the native cloths are by far the more costly
(Clarke 1972: 273).

Narrow strip-woven cloth, in particular, became important to the internal and external trade of the Oyo Empire over the next century. Oyo Ile, the capital city of the Oyo Empire (c.1600-c.1836), was a major production centre for the craft, and cotton and indigo were raised in quantity in the vicinity to meet the needs of the craft (Law 1977: 204-5). By the late eighteenth century, the products of Oyo Yoruba weavers entered the long-distance trade networks of the Sokoto Caliphate to the north (Kriger 1990: 41; Perani 1992: 102).

In the early nineteenth century, the Oyo Empire began to disintegrate, due to political unrest and disruption of the trade routes, and the Oyo Yoruba suffered a 'severe commercial depression' (Law 1977: 281). A series of wars followed, and the evacuation of Oyo Ile in 1836/37 marked the end of the Empire (Law 1977: 245-99). There was a disruption of cloth production as weavers fled the doomed city, but weavers quickly returned to their looms in their new homes. Iseyin, the focus of this study, was a refuge for many Muslim weavers who fled Oyo Ile during the period of final conflict (Bray 1968: 271). The town quickly became a recognized centre for *aso-oke* production, and it has a worldwide reputation as a producer of quality hand-woven cloth today.

Yoruba cloth was competitive with imported European cloth throughout the nineteenth century despite British efforts to dominate the market. *Aso-oke* continued to be an important Yoruba regional export, particularly to the north where it was highly prized by the Nupe and Hausa (Kriger 1990). In the 1900s, however, export of strip-woven cloth to other parts of West Africa, especially the areas of Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana began to diminish as imported textiles became increasingly important for clothing. Nevertheless, local demand for strip-woven cloth remained high, so that the initial impact of colonialism on indigenous cloth production was relatively slight. Colonial influence was most strongly felt in the introduction of machine-spun weaving thread to the Nigerian

market. The indigenous weavers quickly perceived the advantages of using the imported thread which was easier and faster to weave than handspun thread and increased production. However, the adoption of machine-spun thread created unforeseen problems for the weavers. The colonial policy of discouraging modern spinning (and weaving) mills inside the British West African colonies³ made the weavers dependent upon imported thread. Thus the *aso-oke* industries faced a crisis during the Second World War when the colonial government not only banned cloth exports to the Gold Coast but also banned thread imports. This led to a decline in production that continued until the 1950s when higher incomes, a surge of nationalist sentiment, reopened markets, and the resumption of thread importation, invigorated the industry again (O'Hear 1987: 512).

Ultimately, the fate of Yoruba *aso-oke* industries in the twentieth century has been closely tied to in-group patronage, that is, Yoruba demand. *Aso-oke* is used for clothing and is thus greatly influenced by the vagaries of fashion. The Westernization of Nigerian culture since the turn of the century, with the adoption of European-style dress and the flooding of the Nigerian market with cheap imported cloth, has been cited as a death threat to the *aso-oke* industry (e.g. Robinson 1982: 45–51). This has not been the case. European-style clothing never dominated Yoruba fashions, although tastes for imported cloth have periodically affected indigenous hand-woven cloth production since European contact. From 1900, when British influence strengthened, a small but influential group of Westernized Yoruba élites tied to a newly emerging urban society adopted European fabrics and dress. In Lagos, where the population was more than 80 per cent Yoruba, Western style of dress was common among those people who had attained the highest level of European formal education, including repatriates from Sierra Leone, missionaries, businessmen and educators (Wass 1979: 334–5). While Yorubas in the more provincial towns and cities and the rural populations were not as apt to adopt European-style of clothing, the availability of cheap and luxury European imported cloth in every market influenced textile purchasing patterns. Spreading from the Yoruba educated élite populations of Yorubaland's large cities, such as Lagos, Abeokuta and Ibadan, fashion vogues in imported damasks, brocades, velvets and 'laces' influenced the market for indigenous strip-woven cloth.

Politics and a rising demand for self-determination in Nigeria following the Second World War gave *aso-oke* a boost as the cloth of choice. Among the Yoruba élite who had adopted Western dress as a visible social indicator of the educated, urbanized Christian, a return to the wearing of indigenous styles signified identity with the independence movement and a renewed pride of ethnic heritage (Wass 1979: 339). Indigenous dress began to be worn more often, particularly by men, in the decade preceding independence (1950–59) (Wass 1979: 341). The demand for *aso-oke* grew and weaving industries such as those of Iseyin and Ilorin flourished (O'Hear 1987: 511). Since that time, Yoruba indigenous dress has continued to be worn along with Western and pan-African fashions, and *aso-oke*, despite fluctuations in tastes for imported cloth, has never totally lost its appeal. It remains important as a status symbol, especially for expressing 'Yorubanness', and is worn particularly for those important ceremonies that mark life transitions such as naming ceremonies, graduation ceremonies, weddings, funerals and chieftaincy installations (Wolff 1991).

This does not mean the product has not changed. Strip-woven *aso-oke* cloth has remained competitive because of the weavers' willingness to adapt to changing taste. Materials and patterns have changed continually. For example,

when shiny imported rayon and damask cloth became popular, glossy synthetic threads were incorporated into the cotton strip-woven *aso-oke*, usually in an overlaid weft-float pattern (O'Hear 1990). In the 1990s, a contemporary taste for lightweight cloth is being met by the adoption of lighter weight cotton and lurex threads. The gleaming '*shain-shain*' cloth woven with a mix of cotton and metallic-like lurex thread is considered to be cool and light-weight, and successfully competes with imported options.

Having determined that a demand for narrow-strip cloth has never completely disappeared, we now turn to how indigenous organizations have contributed to keeping the *aso-oke* weaving industry lively despite market fluctuations.

The nature of Yoruba craft organization

To understand the importance of indigenous organizations to weaving, it is necessary to look at the way Yoruba people organize themselves for craft production, both within the basic kinship group and in additional groups that transcend family and kinship ties.

Among the Yoruba, certain patrilineages specialize in the production of specific crafts, so that the organization of the craft group is inseparable from the lineage structure (Lloyd 1953: 31). Weaving is such a craft. Weaving skills are taught in the context of the family compounds by related specialists who trace common ancestry to a male founder. The linkage of occupation and kinship lowers the opportunity costs for learning the craft, because apprenticeship takes place in the context of family enculturation. With the looms located in the compounds, opportunities to observe and experiment with weaving are available to children from an early age. When the child gains the skills needed, the family usually helps with the cost of start-up (i.e. the loom and its parts).

The lineage or extended family compound residents make up a production unit, although it is not compulsory that all take part in the lineage craft. Due to the simplicity of the technology involved in Yoruba crafts, little co-operative labour is needed. Each craftsman can carry out the full production process with occasional help solicited from siblings or children (Lloyd, 1953: 32). Independence in production is also encouraged by the fact that the costs of production tend to be minimal. Tools are simple in design, made locally and cheap to obtain. In most indigenous crafts, the capital outlay for raw materials is also low.

In weaving, the thread is the most expensive production cost. With the contemporary dependence on machine-spun bought thread, weavers must often call on the help of prosperous entrepreneurial weavers, both from within and from outside the family, to obtain the essential raw materials. Once the thread is obtained, however, the weavers work individually at their own looms. The economic individualism that characterizes the kin-based production of indigenous Yoruba crafts, such as weaving, contrasts with the more recent guild organizations that distinguish the modern Yoruba crafts such as tailoring, automobile repair, tinkering, gold and silver smithing, as well as many of the contemporary co-operatives which produce crafts inspired by indigenous forms (Lloyd 1953: 36; Koll 1969).

Family-based weaving, either as a full- or part-time occupation, within the family compound allows the craftsman economic flexibility and cuts the costs of production. For the weaver, the costs of food and shelter that have to be factored into the selling price of products are lower when working at home.

Family support in times of economic stress is available, and farming on lineage land is always an option to provide subsistence needs. In addition, the compound-based group has a broad labour base. For example, in the past when handspun thread was commonly used, the cotton was spun by the family women so that thread did not have to be purchased from traders. Today, the labour of women and children frees the weavers from time-consuming tasks such as winding bobbins and preparing warp bundles. A final economic advantage of basing production inside the lineage compound involves marketing directly to end-use consumers who come to order cloth for special ceremonies and events. This is seen as an advantage to both buyer and seller. Through direct contact, the consumer is able to explain exactly what is wanted and negotiate the price with the producer. The master weaver, with whom they deal, avoids either the commission which must be paid to a middleman or the costs of carrying cloth to market.

The bonds of kinship, tradition and economic advantages explain in part why weavers continue to site production in lineage compounds. In addition, a final reason that most *aso-oke* weaving remains compound-based is the social comfort that such an arrangement provides. The simple technology of the horizontal strip-cloth loom does not require a factory set-up for weaving.⁴ In 1993, Iseyin weavers consistently stated their preference for working at home where loom benches and racks are set up on verandas and in the open spaces between houses and compounds. The weavers prefer being near family, where property and children can be supervised. A weaver can easily take a short rest when tired or be served a meal when hungry without leaving the weaving spot. It was also felt that the home compound offers open airy places to weave, in contrast to central weaving buildings such as were advocated in some government-sponsored programmes.

While economic individualism is practised in production, an overall hierarchical organization in the lineage compound affects the craft. The importance of a craft makes matters of production a concern for all compound residents. In craft lineages, the business of the craft is the business of the family. The *bale*, or eldest resident male in a compound, is not only the head of the kin group, but is also the final authority on all matters related to the family craft. He acts as an intermediary between the craftspeople and important clients in the marketing of products, and presides over periodic family meetings in which matters concerning production, prices and disputes are settled by consensus (Lloyd 1953: 34). In the past, if the same craft was practised by several lineages in a town, a larger overreaching organization made up of the heads of craft compounds was common. The *bale* of the most important or senior lineage was given jurisdiction over similar craft lineages, and only he dealt directly with the local *oba* (king) or chief. Inter-lineage meetings of practising craftsmen were held so that he could be aware of the needs of all who practised the craft (Lloyd 1953: 34-5). Today, with the decline of many of the indigenous crafts and the breakdown of traditional authority, these kinship-based organizations for the promotion of the crafts beyond the lineage have largely disappeared.

Beyond kinship, the Yoruba organize themselves in other ways that have relevance for craft production. Membership in associations (*egbe*) which criss-cross lineage lines is very important to Yoruba men and women. An *egbe* is basically a common interest group. Age sets, title associations, religious cults and occupational groups are organized to promote and protect common interests in politics, economics and religion; other *egbe* are formed on the basis of

friendship for recreation and enjoyment (Fadipe 1970: 243). Today town improvement associations and hometown associations formed by enclaves of Yorubas living outside their birthplaces are also common (Eades 1980: 61-2). *Egbe* membership enters every aspect of life, because 'a person who had no *egbe* [is] not a properly adjusted and socialized being' (Fadipe 1970: 257); such a person is regarded as an introvert and a bit of a social misfit. In all *egbe*, even those formed on the basis of common occupation, a sense of friendship, mutual aid and support binds members together and involves them in participation in each others' projects, celebrations and life-cycle ceremonies. The ubiquity of the Yoruba *egbe* is reflected in the saying: 'Put two Yorubas together and they will form an *egbe*.'⁵ The cultural tendency to formalize group relationships is commented upon by the Yoruba anthropologist, N.A. Fadipe, as follows.

One interesting result of this tradition of associations is that wherever there is an appreciable community of Yoruba, either outside Yorubaland or even only outside their own particular communities, an organization will spring up complete with officers. This organization will certainly have judicial functions, and will have its convivial and mutual help features strongly developed. It has been said that even in the New World, during the time of the slave trade, the genius of the Yoruba for organizing associations found expression in ways that were not always welcome to their masters.

(Fadipe, 1970: 243)

Two types of *egbe* are particularly relevant to understanding indigenous craft organizations: the *esusu* and the occupational *egbe*.⁶ The *esusu* functions as a kind of credit association in which a group of people pool their money. Set contributions of cash are collected from members periodically, and the total is given to one member as a lump sum in rotation. Members receive their share in sequence (Fadipe 1970: 256-7; Eades 1980: 77; Bascom 1952). The *esusu* is still an important financial institution in Yorubaland, and it is common for friends and co-workers in the formal sector to organize *esusu*. They are also a feature of the informal sector, particularly among craftspeople and traders who need to invest money periodically in their businesses (Eades 1980: 77). The *esusu* allows the craftsperson to buy raw materials or tools and the trader to expand stock with relative ease.

Occupational *egbe* emerge when the products of a craft industry gain importance as a commodity, such as in the case of strip-woven cloth. Occupational *egbe* are formal organizations that are established to protect the economic status and interests of a craft, to regulate production and trade, and to provide mutual aid to members (Fadipe 1970: 254-55; Eades 1980: 160). They differ from *esusu* in that they do not pool money to lend to members. They basically fill the gap left by the disappearance of the older kin-based organizations made up of lineage heads, but the membership is less restricted. Most weavers, for example, belong to one or more occupational *egbe* in which members are bound to each other not only economically but also socially. Members support each other not only in the interests of their craft, but also in their life events—weddings, naming ceremonies and funerals.

In the past, it was often the case that only members of the appropriate *egbe* could practise a trade in a particular town (Fadipe 1970: 254-5). These occupational groups resembled the craft guilds of the European renaissance in that membership was a prerequisite to producing and selling a craft. Apprenticeship took place within the context of the group, the group provided financial help in

times of need, and acted as a 'power block' in dealing with the local government (Cole 1983: 20-1). However, one must question the uncritical use of the term 'guild' to describe these Yoruba *egbe* that linked kin-groups, that is, lineages, together for common action. The membership of European guilds was not based on kinship, and the guild was more of a mechanism through which the political and religious élite controlled the production of the arts than an organization formed for the common good of the membership (Cole 1983: 20-1).

In the case of cloth weaving, the indigenous occupational *egbe* has played an important role in organizing production, and particularly in marketing. In addition, the importance of cloth as commodity has encouraged external efforts to control and shape production and marketing. Attempts have been made by the British colonial and Nigerian national governments to establish craft centres and co-operatives. However, as we shall show, it is the indigenous forms of organizing production and marketing—lineage-based production groups and *egbe* marketing associations—that have prevailed and are responsible for the continuing vitality of the *aso-oke* industry. Iseyin provides an example.

Iseyin: a case-study

Iseyin, the present headquarters of the Iseyin Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria, has been a centre for the production of *aso-oke* strip-woven cloth since the town was established in the early nineteenth century during the period of the Yoruba wars that marked the decline of the Oyo Empire. In the 1820s, the population of Iseyin swelled with the influx of refugees from Oyo Ile and Ogbomoshu, including a vigorous Muslim community that brought the weaving techniques of the horizontal loom to the town (Bray 1974: 143). Iseyin lay at the junction of two established nineteenth-century long-distance trade routes, one running west to the region of present-day Ghana and the other linking the northern Hausa-dominated trans-Saharan trade routes to the southern Yoruba population centres, such as Abeokuta and Lagos (Dodwell 1955; Falola 1991: 125). Once peace came to the area, the *aso-oke* industry in Iseyin was energized by these trade opportunities. However, with the twentieth-century development of major arterial roads and the railway system, Iseyin was bypassed. The town lost importance as a market centre. It retained its trade links for *aso-oke* largely through the efforts of indigenous long-distance traders and trading organizations (*egbe*), so that it continued to be a major production centre for *aso-oke*. To this day, the marketing of the bulk of Iseyin cloth is in the hands of weaver-traders who carry *aso-oke* to regional cloth markets (such as Oje market in Ibadan, Jankara market in Lagos, the Ede market, and, of late, Araromi market in Oyo), which attract traders who buy goods to carry to secondary markets in Nigeria and other areas of West Africa.

In the mid-1950s, shortly before Nigerian independence, the Iseyin strip-weaving industry was described as 'flourishing' (Dodwell 1955). C. B. Dodwell, who studied Iseyin in 1952-3, described a town where one in five adult men were weavers who produced about one million square yards of *aso-oke* a year (Dodwell, 1955: 118).⁷ Dodwell linked the vitality of the industry to a general increase in textile purchases throughout British West Africa in the prosperous period following World War II (Dodwell 1955). Once the wartime ban on imported thread was lifted, production in Iseyin expanded to meet these new demands. In the decade following the war, the value of thread imports to Nigeria rose from L450000 in 1945 to L1734000 in 1953 (Dodwell 1955: 124).

Iseyin consumed 20 per cent of these imports (Dodwell 1955). In a more thorough study done in 1965–6, Jennifer Bray described an Iseyin strip-woven cloth industry that had grown in the twelve years since Dodwell made his observations. Drawing upon the 1966 Iseyin tax rolls, she estimated that 27 per cent of the total male population was engaged in full-or part-time weaving, with 1540 full-time weavers drawn from 188 of the 670 compounds of the town (Bray 1974: 144). Eighty per cent of the full-time weavers were concentrated into six of the 17 town quarters while most part-time weavers were scattered through the non-specialist quarters (Bray 1969: 540). The annual production of *aso-oke* by Iseyin weavers at that time was estimated at a minimum of 1031 800 square yards by full-time weavers and an additional 1333330 square yards by part-time weavers. 'It is probably no great exaggeration, therefore,' Bray claims, 'to suggest that the annual production of cloth in Iseyin is approximately 2.5 million square yards' (Bray 1969: 548). Bray concluded that:

Iseyin is by far the most important center of men's weaving in Nigeria, and the combined production of other towns, such as Ilorin and Oyo, is unlikely to be higher than that of Iseyin itself.

(Bray 1969: 548)

At the same time, however, Bray voiced a concern about the future of the Iseyin industry, pointing out that it was 'stagnant' with little or no recruitment to the craft taking place (Bray 1969: 551).

Despite Bray's doubts, Iseyin has remained an important centre for weaving, despite the competition from newly emerging weaving workshops in Ibadan, Ondo, Ilesha, etc. There are a number of reasons why the Iseyin weaving industry has remained vital despite the competition it faced. Most important are the ways in which Iseyin weavers organize themselves for production and for marketing.

Organizing for production and marketing

Indigenous organization

When Dodwell visited Iseyin 40 years ago (Dodwell 1955), he observed three categories of economic and social groupings that organized *aso-oke* production. These were the extended family or lineage production group, production units within the lineage controlled by entrepreneurial weavers, and, finally, independent weavers who broke away from the other types of groupings to work alone. All were indigenous developments and are still evident in Iseyin today.

The kin-based group made up of a core of related weavers who weave in their lineage or extended family compounds is still conspicuous. Such a group can be as small as a father and his unmarried sons working together or may involve a larger residential group made up of the married and unmarried members of a patrilineage living and working in a large residential compound. As we have already seen, this type of kin-based co-operating production group has a number of advantages. It is in this context that a boy usually receives his initial training as a weaver and at the same time contributes to the production and economic gain of the family. Beginning with simple tasks such as winding thread on to spools and preparing warp bundles, by the mid-teens a child is capable of unsupervised work and is set up by the family with the equipment and working capital needed to weave independently. The elder male compound head normally gives up weaving to supervise the family work. He determines patterns and quantity of cloth to be produced, buys and distributes the thread needed for

production, sells the finished cloth, and distributes the profits between the family weavers (Dodwell 1955). This type of craft organization with its roots in the indigenous social organization of Yoruba patrilineal society is still the norm in Iseyin today. The greatest change has been the role of women in the *aso-oke* industry. In the past, wives and daughters played a vital role in spinning and dyeing thread. Today little handspun thread is used and machine-spun thread is most often bought already dyed. However, an important change has occurred in the gender restrictions of craft production in weaving. Strip-weaving, which in the past was restricted to males, is now also done by young women. This is in part due to the lack of opportunities for female school-leavers in their natal hometowns, government encouragement of open apprenticeship, and the vitality of the weaving industry which can incorporate an ever-growing work force.

The second type of grouping for weaving production involves the organizing abilities of entrepreneurial master weavers who supervise production and market the products. Entrepreneurial weavers who have accumulated sufficient capital to support other younger weavers take on young people as apprentices or hire those who are already trained in the basics of weaving but lack the capital needed for independence. Young weavers can turn to these master weavers, usually relatives,⁸ who supply them with thread, the principal expenditure in weaving. The master then sells the finished cloth, takes a commission, and returns the remaining profit to the producer or pays him or her an agreed-upon fee for the job done. At the time Bray did her study in the early 1960s, this arrangement usually involved a family group in which an older successful member carried out his entrepreneurial activities in the context of family. Today, entrepreneurial weavers practise a more open recruitment policy in building up a production unit. Apprentices are accepted from outside family groups and even outside Iseyin itself. In field observations in 1993, we discovered that apprentices, especially students, came from other towns such as Shaki, Okeho, Oyo, Ogbomosho, Ado-Awaye and even Ibadan.

The final category of production organization involves younger independent weavers, who, through their own efforts, raise the capital to break away from a dependency relationship with an entrepreneurial master weaver. They own their equipment and buy their own thread or get it on credit and sell their cloth for themselves. With time, many of these independent weavers raise the capital to become entrepreneurs themselves. Dodwell noted that the majority of dependent weavers were able to achieve independence by the age of 35. By age 40 most were fathers training their sons and were themselves often extended family heads, so that production reverted to the family-based indigenous pattern (Dodwell 1955). Individual weavers often work in the context of all three types of organization in their life careers (Dodwell 1955: 132-4).

Whether weavers are part of a family, entrepreneurial, or independent production unit, the family compound still remains the preferred production site in Iseyin. Attempts to introduce weaving centres or villages have failed because individual weavers perceive the advantages mentioned previously to working in family compounds.

Marketing, like production, is organized using indigenous guidelines in Iseyin. The *aso-oke* traders are also weavers, assuring that there is a close linkage between market demands and cloth production quantity and quality. The weaver-traders are organized into occupational *egbe* that have the primary function of linking weavers into regional trading networks that broaden the market-base for Iseyin cloth. Local marketing is still primarily in the hands of individual weavers

who sell their own cloth or that of their apprentices in the compounds. In Iseyin, weavers can sell directly to the terminal consumers, either to patrons who come to their compounds to commission cloth or who buy stockpiled goods in the Iseyin night market which has been in operation for over one hundred years. However, most Iseyin *aso-oke* is sold outside the town. This trade has been dominated for many years by members of *egbe* trading organizations who carry the cloth to regional markets, particularly those that specialize in cloth in Ibadan and Lagos.

According to Alhaji Gbeko Shittu, the Baba Alaari of Iseyin,⁹ who was in his eighties when interviewed in 1993, the cloth traders first organized into *egbe* trading organizations about 50 years ago to increase their marketing opportunities outside of Iseyin. Up to that time, Shittu stated, each weaver sold his own products in Iseyin. The organization of the first *egbe* may very well have been due to factors associated with World War II when petrol shortages affected travel and transport within the country at the same time as it created an increased demand for locally produced goods, such as cloth.

In 1955, Dodwell noted that the *aso-oke* industry in Iseyin was 'dominated by the cloth traders, the most interesting and important figures in it' (Dodwell 1955). At that time, these traders were formed into two organizations. One group carried cloth to Ibadan for resale, the other to Lagos (Dodwell 1955). As reported by Bray almost a decade later (1963), all trade in Iseyin cloth to the important cloth markets of Ibadan and Lagos was controlled by these two large Iseyin *egbe*: *Egbe Ero Ibadan* and *Egbe Ero Eko* (Lagos).¹⁰ Members were full- or part-time affluent weavers from large compounds; no non-weavers were allowed to join. Weavers from smaller compounds and part-time weavers, who were less likely to have accumulated the capital needed for trade, called upon members of the organizations to represent them in the markets to the south (Bray 1968: 276). *Egbe Ero Ibadan* had 311 members and *Egbe Ero Eko* had 335. Their combined membership incorporated over 40 per cent of the full-time weavers in Iseyin (Bray 1968: 276). The primary function of the two trading organizations was to transport and sell cloth. Money collected as entrance fees and dues was used to rent lorries so that traders could carry cloth to the markets for a minimal charge (Bray 1968: 276). The associations left the problems of capital accumulation to initiate weaving to compound and extended family production units; individual weavers could apply to their local *esusu*. However, the trader-members often bought the imported thread where it was cheaper for the use of the weavers in their own compounds to promote production. The traders who attended the periodic cloth markets also played an important role in keeping the weavers informed about fashions in cloth. Although individual patrons played some part by bringing fashionable *aso-oke* samples to be copied, the weaver-traders who attended the markets introduced popular new designs into the repertoires of their hometowns (Okuwa 1989: 34).¹¹

In the 1990s, the *Egbe Alaso-oke Iseyin* (The Association of Iseyin *Aso-oke* Cloth Sellers), dominated by members of the *Egbe Ero Ibadan*, was the organization most mentioned by master weavers as controlling cloth production and marketing. However, the dominance of the association was challenged in 1993 when a third trading *egbe* emerged. A group of trader-weavers formed a new association with the goal of establishing a major cloth market for Iseyin products at Araromi market in Oyo, a large city a few miles away on a major north-south road. At that time petrol shortages were the norm, and travel expenses were on the rise. The idea was to increase profits by reducing the

expenses of long-distance transport, as well as reduce travel risks. A further advantage was that cloth unsold at the end of a market day could easily be carried back to Iseyin, rather than being sold at a reduced price in Ibadan or Lagos. The new market was established at Oyo, but it had limited success. A division among the sponsoring weaver-traders quickly emerged, and some traders renewed their affiliation with the *Egbe Alaso-oke Iseyin* and returned to trading in Ibadan.

The continuing strength and long life of the *Egbe Alaso-oke Iseyin* is largely due to its links with the largest and most dominant cloth market in the region: Oje market in Ibadan. Founded at the end of the nineteenth century, the Oje cloth market is a specialized periodic market for cloth that meets every 16 days and attracts thousands of traders from the region. Cloth sold at Oje is carried to secondary markets throughout Nigeria and many parts of West Africa. While the *Egbe Alaso-oke Iseyin* is an indigenous organization which arose to meet local needs, its links with Oje market assures the Iseyin weavers a place in the wider regional trade network.

Recent research done at Oje market (Ogunsanwo 1985; Okuwa 1989) reveals that the *Egbe Alaso-oke Iseyin* is part of a much larger indigenous marketing organization. An *Egbe Alaso-oke*, founded in Ibadan in the late 1890s, meets regularly with representatives of 'sister associations' from 26 towns that take part in the Oje cloth market (Ogunsanwo 1985: 41-3). Iseyin is one of these. The 27 local *egbe* make up a larger association, *Egbe Awon Alaso-oke* (The Association of Aso-Oke Sellers), with representatives weavers-traders from the major *aso-oke* weaving towns including Iseyin, Shaki, Ilorin, Ogbomosho, Ede and Oyo (Okuwa 1989: 52). Okuwa estimated there were over 5000 members of this association in the late 1980s. The *Egbe Awon Alaso-oke* as an organization has little formal structure, no entrance fees or dues, no appointed officers, and no regular meetings. If group decisions need to be made, the officials of the local *egbe* co-operate to instigate action (Okuwa 1989: 53). Despite the lack of organization, each individual member of the *Egbe Awon Alaso-oke* is issued a membership card that acts as an entrance ticket to sell in Oje market and is said to help 'to sustain a friendly, peaceful and co-operative atmosphere among weavers, especially when they come to trade in Oje market' (Okuwa 1989: 53). While the *Egbe Awon Alaso-oke* appears rather benign, it has the potential of being mobilized for action when needed. For example, in the 1970s, when inflated prices for the thread used in weaving meant that indigenous strip-cloth could not compete with the prices of imported cloth, the *Egbe* stepped in and acted as an agent to get thread in bulk for members at a lower rate. At that time most cotton thread being used in the manufacture of *aso-oke* was being imported from India. The weaving associations of all the 27 towns of the *Egbe Awon Alaso-oke* joined in contributing money to send representatives to India to purchase thread directly for the joint association, thereby bypassing the middlemen who had kept the price of thread high. In 1977, they dealt with another crisis. In that year, the importation of thread was banned by the government. The association was able to redirect their bulk purchasing to newly established Nigerian thread factories in Ilorin and Kano (Ogunsanwo 1985: 44). Much of the thread used today is still purchased and resold through the sister associations of the *Egbe Awon Alaso-oke*.

In recent times a number of different associations has emerged alongside the older *egbe*. Such organizations have been less focused on marketing, and have concentrated instead on the needs of the producing weavers and their financial and technological requirements. Most have taken the form of co-operatives

organized with the aid of the government. They have failed largely because of their lack of indigenous organization.

Government-sponsored organizations

The broader background. Craft production has been a focus of government intervention programmes in Nigeria beginning in the colonial period and extending to the present. Early attempts to organize indigenous craft production occurred in the period between world wars I and II. This period between 1920 and 1940 was a time of economic stagnation in European countries and in their dependencies (Crowder 1962: 235). In Nigeria, the colonial government focused its efforts on increasing agricultural development for export, and to achieve this set up co-operatives. The British attitude towards Nigerians' ability to organize themselves for production is expressed in its most extreme form in a speech made by Lord Leverhulme, the head of Lever Brothers, at a dinner held for Sir Hugh Clifford, then Governor of Nigeria, in 1924. Leverhulme, who was hoping to set up plantations in Southern Nigeria, made the following statement:

I am certain that the West African race have to be treated very much as one would treat children when they are immature and underdeveloped. We have excellent materials. I don't know better materials anywhere for labour in the tropics than the natives of West Africa, but they are not organized . . . Now the organizing ability is the particular trait and characteristic of the white man . . . I say this with my little experience, that the African native will be happier, produce the best, and live under the larger conditions of prosperity when his labour is directed and organized by his white brother who has all the million years' start ahead of him!

(Crowder 1962: 236)

The plantation system proposed by Leverhulme was never imposed upon Nigeria, but a certain amount of paternalistic policy was evident in the programmes implemented to increase the efficiency of agriculture and craft production.

In 1933, the British colonial government commissioned an expert on co-operatives in India, C.F. Strickland, to examine the possibilities of establishing such organizations in Nigeria (Koll 1969: 60). While Strickland was primarily concerned with agricultural co-operatives, he called attention to preserving and expanding handcraft production (Koll 1969: 60). Noting that craftsmen were no longer training their children and apprentices in the skills of their trades because of the declining market for indigenous arts, he recommended the following. Not only should craft co-operatives be organized, but, in addition, local technical industrial schools should be established 'to teach a genuinely African art, while improving technical methods and multiplying African designs' (Strickland 1934 quoted by Koll 1969: 61). School-leavers, trained in advanced forms of a craft, would become core members of co-operatives. Local co-operatives were to promote sales of their craft products by building sales shops on main roads, appointing representatives in major cities such as Lagos to publicize and sell their products, and distribute illustrated catalogues with price lists. This would all be done with financial aid from the Native Authority (Strickland 1934 in Koll 1969: 61). Such a programme would, he argued, make the products of the co-operative societies competitive with foreign imports. For the success of such projects, Strickland recommended:

The task of the co-operative organizer is to discover what improvements of any description the more reflective of the people theoretically desire, and then to organize them in a joint effort to secure the improvement

(Strickland 1934: 3-4 quoted in Koll 1969: 61)

The Co-operative Societies Law, passed as a result of Strickland's recommendations, took a paternalistic stance. State-controlled co-operative societies were to be supervised closely so as not to make mistakes and should not be exposed to 'the risks of independence' (Koll 1969: 69). Strickland's perception of co-operatives was a European concept to be transplanted to the Nigerian context which was seen as 'an empty bowl waiting to be filled' (Koll 1969: 68).¹² Strict regulations regarding the by-laws and structure of the new co-operatives did not take into account pre-existing indigenous societies (Koll 1969: 69). 'A co-operative understanding and spirit will need time to grow' (Strickland 1934: 3, quoted by Koll 1969: 69). In 1935, a national Co-operative Department was set up following Strickland's advice (Koll 1969: 62). A government-appointed registrar was given authority to direct the development of co-operative organizations and see that they conformed to the regulations stipulated by law. In colonial Nigeria of the 1930s, this meant that the registrar had to satisfy the needs of an export economy by concentrating on the production of raw materials for European markets. The focus, from the beginning, was on agricultural co-operatives. Almost no action was taken on craft co-operatives until 1938/39 when the first survey of native crafts was carried out. K.C. Murray and A. Hunt-Coke, working in the Yoruba area, suggested that already existing indigenous craft societies should be encouraged to:

eliminate the inefficient and redundant worker, to regulate prices and prevent cut-throat competition, and to guarantee to the public some measure of quality. (Murray and Hunt-Coke quoted by Koll 1969: 62-3)

Murray further suggested the need for additional exclusive 'Guilds of High-Grade Workmen' to set the standards for a craft (Murray 1938: 13-114 quoted by Koll 1969: 63). These recommendations were 'filed and forgotten' (Koll 1969: 63).

The first officially sanctioned craft co-operatives to emerge—the Ikot-Ekpene Co-operative Raffia Marketing Society in eastern Nigeria and the Benin Co-operative Woodworkers' Society in south-central Nigeria were reported in the 1944 Report of the Co-operative Department. They were oriented towards public service and the production of utilitarian materials—raffia for export and European-style furniture (Koll 1969: 63). The government's lack of interest in craft organizations continued, so that between 1945 and 1951 only eight craft societies were registered with the Co-operative Department (Koll 1969: 64). Only four additional co-operatives for crafts were registered in 1952, seven in 1953-4 and 14 in 1960-61.¹³

Government-sponsored organizations in Iseyin. Government efforts during the colonial era to organize hand-loomed textile production focused on introducing new technologies. In 1937, Murray and Hunt-Cooke, who had described Iseyin as 'the chief stronghold' of men's narrow-strip weaving in their survey of indigenous craft industries in southwestern Nigeria, proposed that European broad-loom weaving be introduced through the Iseyin Native Administration school. The immediate goal was to provide cloth for uniforms for Native

Administration employees. Through instructing the sons of weavers, Murray proposed, the Iseyin weavers would be encouraged 'to develop their craft and keep in step with the general progress of Nigeria by taking up some improvements on their present methods.' He further added, 'The co-operation of the local weavers would be essential to the success of the scheme.' Despite several attempts over the next 25 years (the latest in 1963) broad-loom weaving never replaced the indigenous technology.¹⁴

Government attempts to organize the Iseyin strip-weaving industry also met with indifferent success. In Iseyin, the first co-operative society for weavers was founded around 1958 with headquarters at Oke-Oja, one of the busiest quarters for weaving and marketing of *aso-oke*. It was called the 'Co-operative Weavers' Thrift and Credit Society' (Wahab 1980:23). The commercial importance of cloth production was reflected in the fact that the society was registered as a 'Thrift and Credit' co-operative rather than an 'Arts and Crafts' society.¹⁵ The society's major function was similar to that of the indigenous *esusu*. Members contributed fixed amounts of money out of which loans were given to members who had investment needs and who paid the money back with a fixed interest (Wahab 1980: 23). The society also attempted to increase members' profits by acting as a marketing organization, selling cloth woven by members in bulk outside Iseyin. An additional money-raising strategy involved giving contracts to non-member weavers to weave *aso-oke* which was marketed for the profit of the society (Wahab 1980: 23). Unfortunately, the contractors to whom they loaned money did not always produce the promised cloth. The society collapsed in 1966, when they went bankrupt as the result of 'bad loans'. In retrospect, it was felt that 'the society failed also because of the uncooperative attitude of some members who showed no sense of direction and dedication' (Wahab 1980: 23).

In 1966, Bray observed four weaving co-operative societies in Iseyin that had been registered with the government since September 1963 (Bray 1968: 277). Although Bray remarks that 'weavers' co-operative societies are now a conspicuous feature in the production and marketing of traditional cloth in Iseyin', only 126 weavers were members of the four societies (Bray 1968: 277). Membership was tied to lineage membership and residence so that three of the societies drew their weavers from single quarters and group of families related through kinship, while the fourth larger co-operative catered to a wider range of weavers (Bray 1968: 277). Like the earlier Thrift and Credit Society, these organizations played roles similar to the indigenous *esusu* societies, but with government-monitored funds. Membership entrance fees and regular dues were deposited in the Co-operative Bank in Ibadan and members were issued shares in the co-operative. Loans were made to members for weaving purposes only, particularly to buy thread. Loan applications were discussed by meetings of the full membership. Each co-operative functioned as an independent organization although representatives had to report progress at monthly joint meetings of all such trade co-operatives in Iseyin (Bray 1968: 278). In addition to acting as a loaning agency, three of the four co-operative societies functioned as buying and selling organizations for their members. Two societies had accounts with expatriate trading companies and were able to buy and sell thread cheaply. One society, in fact, set up a shop on the main street of Iseyin where it sold thread, charging slightly lower prices to its own members (Bray 1968: 278). Three or four members of each of these co-operatives belonged to older well-established *Egbe Ero Ibadan* and *Egbe Ero Eko* in order to have access to the major cloth markets to the south (Bray 1968: 278).

In 1993 the co-operatives described by Bray were defunct. Interviews with master weavers revealed that co-operatives had low visibility and seemed of little concern. Only one new co-operative, the 'Weavers' Association', was mentioned. It was organized to aid weavers in Koso Quarter where weaving had only recently challenged farming as a major economic activity.

Other government-sponsored weaving organizations have emerged in Iseyin as new needs arise. For example, the 'Nigerian Native Clothes Weavers' Association', was observed in Iseyin in 1980 (Wahab 1980: 24). The main goal of the association was to re-establish cotton growing in the region, so that the raw materials needed for thread could be produced more cheaply. Established in 1974, the association was regional in scope with branches in 20 other towns cutting across Oyo, Ogun, Ondo and Kwara states. There were 52 members in Iseyin. Members contributed money to the accounts of the association as well as sold cloth in bulk and diverted the profits to the society (Wahab 1980: 24). This association was not mentioned by weavers in 1993. This is not to say that there is a dearth of weaving organizations in Iseyin at this time.

Master weavers interviewed in 1993 mentioned a number of weaving-related groups. The 'Weavers' Brothers and Weavers' Sisters', which recognizes the growing number of women who have turned to strip-weaving in the last decade, is said to be challenging the older *Egbe Alaso Oke*. Two other associations, with weavers as members, seem to be akin to *esusu* societies. The 'Amuludun Society' and the 'Ifesowapo Society' were organized 'just to help each other in the business'. A 'Junior Weavers' Club', established in 1986, is very active. The goals of this organization seem very similar to indigenous age-grade *egbe* associations. The club assists members 'having misfortune', protects the interests of members from outside interference and provides representation to the government. Members assist the local authority in the case of provision of local amenities, and 'rally round each other during ceremonies' and in times of trouble or difficulties.

Iseyin weaving organizations seem to be most successful when they emerge spontaneously to band together for mutual aid at times of perceived need. The *egbe* that incorporates indigenous leadership structures and administrative arrangements and is built on the bonds of friendship as well as shared occupation is as successful today as it was in the past. Government intervention programmes that ignore such pre-existing indigenous organizations seem doomed to failure. An example of government intervention in craft production provides us with a cautionary tale. This is a story of a well-meaning government-sponsored weaving project in Iseyin that failed because of the lack of indigenous input.

In 1963, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Trade and Industry (without the Co-operative Department) launched an Integrated Rural Development Scheme. A White Paper on Integrated Rural Development was issued by the Western Nigerian government, presenting a scheme to provide employment for school-leavers which would keep them in the small towns of their birth through establishing farm settlements and rural industries. Weaving was a focus for a co-ordinated programme involving several ministries.¹⁶ Locally grown cotton, obtained through the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, would be spun into thread in small factories set up by the Ministry of Trade and Industry and sold to Training Centres for Weavers and Co-operative Weavers' Production Units, also organized by the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The final link in the chain was to make it compulsory for local schools

to buy the cloth for their school uniforms from the weaving co-operatives and patronize Co-operative Tailors' Production Units. It was calculated that this scheme would provide approximately 20000 new jobs in the region (Koll 1969: 86). The scheme failed.

The Iseyin Weaving Centre, established in 1963¹⁷ and closed two and a half years later, provides an example of the experience. The Western Region government built the Weaving Centre at Iseyin with the aim of modernizing the narrow-loom weaving industry. It provided 50 'modern' looms and equipment and the capital to cover the cost of initial expenses. The Iseyin District Council chose 50 students (46 males, four females) who were sent to train at the Oyo Weaving Centre which had been established earlier. After six months of training, they returned to Iseyin to form the Co-operative Textile Weavers' Society which was registered with the government and was eligible for government monetary incentives.

The Iseyin Weaving Centre was not a true co-operative. The young newly-trained and inexperienced weavers were under the control of salaried administrators appointed and paid by the ministries. There was one Higher Textile Officer, one Textile Officer, two Demonstrators and a Supervisor. The officers went to the schools in the area and collected the patterns to be woven for the school uniforms. The weavers at the centre, who were given a monthly stipend, were allocated these patterns to produce. On completion, the officers would collect the cloth, sell it to the schools and deposit the money into the co-operative's account. The monthly stipends paid to the weavers were based on the total amount of cloth each produced.

At its height, the Iseyin Weaving Centre produced school uniforms for four primary schools and two secondary schools, along with napkins, towels and women's wrappers, as major products. However, the centre and co-operative society collapsed in less than three years. A number of reasons can be mentioned.

- The quality of the product was poor. The schools complained that the uniforms, now compulsory for students, lasted only a few months.
- The new technology introduced, that is, the new loom types, was perceived as having no advantage over the indigenous narrow-strip looms in use in Iseyin. The technology was not considered appropriate by the local weavers, and the weavers complained that weaving on the new looms was more strenuous than using the older-style looms.
- The income of the centre weavers was low. While the new looms provided wider cloth for 'modern' uses, the weavers produced fewer yards per day than was possible on the narrow-strip horizontal looms used in the town. The weavers, paid by the yard, complained that they did not make the equivalent of independent weavers.
- The government offered no further financial aid beyond the initial start-up costs for the centre. Once the start-up fund was finished, the centre got into financial difficulties. Customers were often slow to pay for goods, and in some cases defaulted. In addition, stockpiled goods sold slowly. With a lack of available capital, the centre had difficulty purchasing thread and other materials needed for the production of further orders.
- The lack of funds also meant that often the weavers were not paid promptly for their work. For example, at one point, the weavers did not receive their

stipends for four months and were unable to meet their domestic and social responsibilities.

- The government's focus upon organizing co-operatives and training opportunities primarily as a measure to provide employment for school-leavers was inappropriate. The youth and inexperience of the weavers was a factor in an area where weaving was well established and value was placed upon age, seniority and experience.
- Finally, the government policy of keeping government ministry employees in the position of decision-makers for the co-operative prevented involvement and acceptance by the larger weaving community of Iseyin.

Thirty years later, the basic distrust of those in control of this experiment in co-operative production was voiced by weavers who remembered the centre. Reasons mentioned for the failure of the centre included: 'financial mismanagement and politics', 'bad administration, financial inefficiency', and 'lack of incentives by the government'. Further statements sum up the local attitude—'It failed because people lacked co-operation. Some people went against the idea while some supported the idea.' 'Failure was due to the fact that the weavers believed that to run their business independently is better than being under government.'

It is, perhaps, this final reason that gets at the heart of the problems that beset the Iseyin Weaving Centre and prevented its success. The government planners ignored the fact that in Iseyin weaving production and marketing were already organized and regulated by functioning organizations that were accepted by the people and that had been in place for a long time. It has been said that to be successful co-operatives must be self-supporting grassroots developments generated through local efforts and profitable to members. Members must also be self-governing and self-policing so that ethical standards and product quality are maintained. The indigenous lineage-based production groups and *egbe* weaving organizations of Iseyin fulfilled these criteria. Rather than build upon these roots, the government planners chose to introduce new technology and products, change the structure of the work force and take almost total control of production and marketing. This is why the Iseyin Weaving Centre failed.

In contrast, it is possible to blend the indigenous organization with the government-registered co-operative. The *Egbe Alaso-oke Iseyin* was registered as a co-operative with the Department of Co-operatives in 1967. Already well organized as an indigenous *egbe*, it merely expanded its functions when it became a co-operative. Its major goals, today as in the past, are primarily concerned with the marketing of Iseyin *aso-oke*, to keep production prices low, and to regulate market prices and competition. Besides controlling cloth trade, the *Egbe Alaso-oke Iseyin* as a co-operative has added the further functions of educating weavers by advising them on production, materials and prices; giving technological and financial assistance to members; and advising them on how to relate to the government.

Conclusions

Aso-oke, the popular Yoruba textile, has stood the test of time and has retained its value as a status symbol and an expression of Yorubanness in the face of stiff competition from modern fabrics and technologies, as well as unfavourable government policies. The Iseyin *aso-oke* industry has not only survived but

grown in the modern era. This is in large part due to the strength of the indigenous organizations that regulate production and marketing through both kinship structures and *egbe* organizations that cross-cut kinship ties. The economic character of the industry in which production remains in the context of the lineage and marketing in the hands of local trading organizations has guaranteed that price and quality of products remain competitive in the modern market.

Marion Johnson, the economic historian, in a discussion of the competition that local hand-woven textile industries had to face as textile imports from Europe and Asia flowed into West Africa, attempts to explain why local hand-woven cloth industries survived and successfully met that competition (Johnson, 1978). The West African market for cloth is huge. While textiles can be considered a luxury because they are not essential for survival, they have become 'conventional necessities' (Johnson 1978: 266). Throughout West Africa, with the rise of cash incomes and the new 'middle-class' élite that accompanied colonialism, consumption of cloth, once the prerogative of the indigenous leadership élites, began to rise. To this day, increases in population and living standards continue to widen the market for all types of cloth (Johnson 1978: 267-8). Clothing from hand-woven indigenous types of cloth, in particular, has been adopted by the contemporary élites as a visible symbol of prosperity, status and pride in ethnic heritage.

The *aso-oke* weaving industry of Iseyin, along with Ghanaian *kente* weaving industries, are mentioned by Johnson as examples of 'the most successful of the modern industries' that have expanded as a result of the patronage of these new élites and 'the loosening of many old restrictions' surrounding textile use (Johnson 1978: 267). Ultimately, according to Johnson, they are successful because they can price their products to be competitive with other prestige textiles.

An élite demand depends partly on fashion, partly on political and religious attitudes, and very little on price; indeed, any attempt to reduce prices might prove self-defeating, since part of the demand depends on the expensiveness of the product. For all but the wealthiest consumers, however, price is important. Only if the local weaver can produce cloth whose price, in terms of attractiveness and durability, can compete with imported cottons, can he hope to stay in business (Johnson 1978: 267).

For Johnson, indigenous textiles such as *aso-oke* can successfully compete in the market-place with machine-loomed cloth because the price is right. She attributes this to the fact that the costs of production are low because the average weaver works in the context of the family residence, often farming and relying on the labour of other family members. 'Under such a system the marginal costs of production are virtually nil' (Johnson 1978: 267). This is true, as we have shown. The strength of the Iseyin weaving industry—and that of other weaving towns—is that production is located in the context of kinship group compounds. The compound provides a safety-net for members. Weaving and related craft skills are learned by most children in the context of family. It is an occupation that can be picked up as a full-time adult occupation or something to fall back upon if other professional opportunities do not emerge, or terminate.

Johnson's argument that home production keeps the cost of producing cloth down is sound, but cost of production alone does not explain how Iseyin has gained its fame as 'The Home of *Aso-oke*'. Despite the individual weaver's supposed freedom in the production and sale of *aso-oke*, indigenous organizations and the leadership and support they provide continue to exert tremendous influence on every aspect of the weaving industry. Without the localized trading

egbe that collaborate in the marketing of Iseyin cloth throughout the region, the industry could not support the level of production it now attains.

In Iseyin, *Egbe Alaso Oke*, in particular, is very active in regulating every aspect of production and distribution of *aso-oke*. Various smaller *egbe* complement the role of *Egbe Alaso Oke* by assisting members in acquiring start-up and production costs, but also link members together in networks of friendship and meaningful communal activities. These indigenous organizations have operated successfully, have demonstrated their ability to adapt to changing social and economic conditions, and are still growing stronger. Government attempts to supersede this arrangement and introduce new forms of weaving production and marketing have failed, because they did not take into consideration the existing indigenous organizations and administrative structure. The indigenous *egbe* remain strong because membership forges strong social and economic links, and members recognize and have confidence in their leaders who are usually appointed on the basis of age and experience.

Outside agencies must recognize that there is little to be gained by replacing a functioning system of indigenous organizations that has proven its ability to succeed in the competitive arena of textile marketing such as we see in Iseyin. In terms of future development, it is clear that the value of working with existing indigenous weavers' organizations must be recognized. Such indigenous organizations not only provide local leadership acceptable to the producers and consumers of an important cultural commodity, but also provide opportunities for individual members to participate in the development process. Efforts should be made to encourage every weaver in Iseyin town to be an active member of these important organizations which are pivotal to the continued vitality of the indigenous textile industry. Government at all levels (especially the state and local governments) are implored to pay attention to and support the weavers' organizations. Easy access to grants or loans by the weavers' organizations as a body would be worthwhile, because these organizations are unlikely to have all the financial resources required for effective operation and to offer incentives to their members. With government financial support added to the 'know-how' of the indigenous weaving and marketing *egbe*, the textile industry of Iseyin can grow even stronger.

Despite a few ups and downs of demand and the effects of inflation, the *aso-oke* industry has survived and has come to stay. For a very long time to come the strip-woven cloth weaving industry of Iseyin, which has demonstrated that it operates best using indigenous technology and marketing techniques, will remain unbeatable as a major supplier of *aso-oke*. As long as there are Yorubas, *aso-oke* will remain a symbol of prestige, affluence and cultural pride, and Iseyin will remain 'The Home of *Aso-oke*'.

Notes

1. Strip cloth is woven on the 'West African narrow-strip loom', defined by John Picton as a horizontal double-heddle loom in which the warp is attached to a wooden sledge weighed down by a heavy stone (Picton 1992: 20). The strips in the Yoruba area are usually about four inches wide with a warp length of 15 yards.
2. Interviews with weavers and traders were carried out in Iseyin in 1980 and 1992 (Wahab). Iseyin as a focus also offers the advantage that a series of field studies over the past 40 years provide us with basic data on the history of indigenous and external influences on the weaving industry (Dodwell 1955; Bray 1968, 1969, 1974; Lamb and Holmes 1980; Wahab 1980, 1992; Robinson 1982; Sanni 1989).
3. It was feared that such factories would drain away the cotton resources of the area

- that were essential to the textile industries in England, as well as compete for the markets in West Africa (Bashir 1986: 90).
4. The exceptions are the new workshops which have been set up in towns such as Ibadan by entrepreneurial weavers who practise open apprenticeship under government-sponsored programmes (NISER 1990).
 5. Thanks to LaRay Denzer of the Department of History, University of Ibadan, for calling this to our attention.
 6. 'Egbe,' according to Lloyd, is used to refer to craft guild organizations among the Yoruba. In this chapter we are avoiding the term 'guild', which has been used in a number of ways. Nadel (1942) uses guild to refer to craft organizations based on kinship ties of extended family or lineage among the Nupe. Lloyd (1953: 36) equates guilds with Yoruba craft organizations where the apprentice-journeyman relationship is typical. Ben-Amos (1980: 10), describing the craftsmen who work for the *Oba* of Benin, uses the term for craft groups under the control of a ruler.
 7. In this same decade it was estimated that 59 million square yards of imported cloth were sold in a single year (1950/1) in the Western Region of Nigeria which encompasses Yorubaland. In that same period, about 150 million square yards total of cloth were imported into Nigeria as a whole (Galletti *et al.* 1956: 246-52).
 8. Bray observed that 76 per cent of the entrepreneurial weavers at that time supplied cotton yarn to members of their own compound group alone (Bray 1968: 273).
 9. Alhaji Shittu is referred to as the *Alaga (Alaga) Aso Oke* by Lamb and Holmes who interviewed him in 1978. *Alaga Aso Oke* is the title given to the head weaver who presides over a council of master weavers who have gained their position on the council on the basis of seniority (Lamb and Holmes, 1980: 29).
 10. Bray identified these organizations as 'Egbe Ibadan' and 'Egbe Eko' (Bray, 1968: 276). The addition of *ero* (which translates as 'passenger' or 'traveller') underscores their commitment to long-distance trade.
 11. Unlike many Western artists, Yoruba weavers are 'often eager to share' their innovation and designs with other weavers (Okuwa, 1989: 24).
 12. The 'empty bowl' concept was proposed by early critics of colonial and Western development agencies.
 13. For an extended discussion of the early development of government-sponsored co-operatives into the first decade of independence, consult Koll (1969).
 14. Documents on early attempts to establish broadloom weaving education in Iseyin are found in 'File 372, v.1. Weaving—Oyo Province' at the Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan.
 15. See Koll (1969: 71) for a summary of co-operative types recognized by the Department of Co-operatives.
 16. The Co-operative Department concentrated on initiating craft co-operatives which built on indigenous crafts, but not weaving. It focused its efforts on leather workers, goldsmiths, and calabash carvers with the goal of providing art and crafts for customers interested in the local culture (Koll, 1969: 78).
 17. Additional weaving centres were established in the same year in Ikire, Ayedade, Oyo and Ogbomosho (Wahab, 1980: 22).

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