

POST-CIVIL WAR TRADE IN SECOND-HAND CLOTHING IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract

The reliance of Nigerian masses on second-hand clothing both as a business and as a supplement for their clothing needs predate the Nigeria civil war. Government ban on the trade at the end of the civil war had a colossal effect on the Igbo who were the major dealers on second hand clothing. The Igbo feel the ban was an attempt by the Gowon led government to frustrate their attempt to revive their shattered finances and economy. Determined to conquer the odds, Igbo traders who were reluctant to pursue another line of business resorted to smuggling. This study argues that it was the federal government post-civil war ban on second-hand clothing that led to smuggling; it was smuggling that brought about the resurrection and survival of the second-hand clothing business in post-civil war Nigeria.

Keywords: Second-Hand Clothing, Igbo, Nigeria Civil War, Smuggling, Traders, Okrika

Introduction

Second-hand clothing was an important source of clothing well into the nineteenth century. Trade in used clothing was a product of necessity. Its origin in Europe and North America could be traced to a time in history when mass production was low and poverty level high. But even when mass production of clothes and growing prosperity enabled more and more people to purchase brand-new rather than previously worn garments, the importance of second hand clothing still did not diminish.¹ Instead, the trade became more export

¹Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Second-Hand Clothing Encounters in Zambia: Global Discourses, Western Commodities, (A Publication of the Augustinian Institute)

oriented. This new dimension, according to Amubode and Braide was the solution of developed countries to their environmental problem of waste.² Since the World War II, second-hand clothing trade has grown considerably globally. Established charitable organizations are the largest sources of the twenty-first-century global trade in second-hand clothing.³ These charitable organisations supply second hand clothes to both domestic and foreign second-hand-clothing markets through their collection efforts.

Before the civil war started, Nigeria had depended on imported second-hand clothes to supplement the clothing need of its teeming population who could not afford the cost of new apparels.⁴ Igbo traders started importing second-hand clothing from Europe and North America into Nigerian the 1940s. The first set of second hand clothing consignment landed in Port Harcourt. Some of the first customers were the people of the village of Okrika.⁵ It is therefore not surprising that Okrika is the name by which second-hand clothing has come to be known in Nigeria.

Second-hand clothing trade is indisputably beneficial for consumers in developing countries. It gives them access to far cheaper clothes than they would obtain from domestic production or from imports of new garments. In Nigeria, different governments have consistently banned the trade for varying reasons, the most pronounced being that it negates the growth of the Nigerian local textile industry. The most painful of government's bans to second-hand clothing trade was that imposed immediately after the Nigerian civil war in 1970. This ban was a big blow to the entire Igbo people. The Igbo business men were the main importers and retailers in the second hand clothing trade. Many Igbo people who were not in the business had been pauperised by the war; they had lost clothes and valuables in the course of the hasty migrations caused by the bombing of

and Local Histories" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 69, No. 3, (1999): 343-365.

²A.A. Amubode and O.O. Braide, "Revisiting Second-hand Clothing: Market for Clothing and Textile Practitioners in Yoruba Land," *Nigeria Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts* 5(2) 2010, 60.

³M.O. Areo and A.B. Areo, "Okrika Morphology, Marketing and Consumer Attitudinal Evaluation of Second Hand Clothing" *Academic Research International*, 6 No. 4, (2015): 64-82

⁴ Paul Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland, 1970-1983* (Nsukka: Great AP Express Pub. Ltd., 2009), 114.

⁵Olumide Abimbola, "The International Trade in Second-hand Clothing: Managing Information Asymmetry between West African and British Traders." *Textile*, vol. 10, no. 2, 184-199.

their communities. The rest who had survived the war with little capital were financially crippled by the vicious economic policies of the Gowon administration. The result was that majority of the Igbo could not feed themselves and their families. With such pressing need as food for most of the Igbo, clothes, whether new or second-hand were luxuries. The ban was perceived in many quarters as a vengeful act aimed at punishing the Igbo and slowing the pace of economic resurrection of war-ravaged Igboland. The ploy hit the war-losers of Biafra where it hurt the most.

History of Second-hand clothing in Nigeria

Trade in second-hand was pioneered by the indigenes of Abiriba, a village in Ohafia Local government of Abia state Nigeria. Overtime, Abiribans moved from the centre of their trade network in Igbo hinterland to Port Harcourt and Aba where they were involved in the trade in different products. Aba held a two-fold attraction for the traders. The first was that it lay on the railway line which the British constructed in order to transport coal from Enugu to Port Harcourt⁶. The second attraction was that it had earned a reputation as a clothing and textiles market by the late colonial period. Part of those clothing were second-hand. For indigenes of Abiriba in particular, the proximity of their town to Aba was an added advantage. Indeed, Abiriba is only about 100 kilometres from Aba. Port Harcourt was another city that was important for the trade in second-hand clothing. It was the place from which the first consignment of second-hand clothing was procured. Port Harcourt's rise to prominence was due to the fact that it was a spot chosen to house the port through which the coal that was mined in Enugu would be transported out of the region.

According to Tom Forrest, the trade in second-hand clothing was started by I. Onwuka, an indigene of Abiriba, who bought Army surplus stock during and immediately after the second-world war. He trained a number of apprentices. 'Between 1946 and 1963, the proportion of stall frontage devoted to second-hand clothing in Aba main market rose from 1 percent to 27 per cent'.⁷ The clothes were obtained from ships berthed in the port at Port Harcourt. Some of the

⁶ Ofoegbu, R., *Urbanization and the Rise of Modern Igbo Enterprise*. In A. Afigbo, (ed) *Groundwork of Igbo History* (Lagos: Vista Books, 1992), 576.

⁷ Forrest, T., *The Advance of African Capital: The Growth of Nigerian Private Enterprise*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 178.

(A Publication of the Augustinian Institute)

clothes were sold to the people of Okrika. The remaining ones were transported to Aba where a big section of the market dedicated to the sale of second-hand clothing existed.

By the late 1950s, the trade had increased in volume and intensity. For one, thing, it required little start-up capital.⁸ Many of the traders became directly involved in the importation of second-hand clothing from Jewish merchants in New York. By the early 1960s, Abiriba traders would buy the clothing directly from their kinsmen who were importers and then take them to Aba. There, the clothing would either be retailed or wholesaled to Igbo people from neighbouring communities who would then take the goods to their own communities to retail. This further developed the trade and the network reached further into other parts of Nigeria.

The business was so profitable that enterprising Igbo traders soon decided to take the second-hand clothing business to other parts of West Africa. The Tarzan Transport Company was instrumental to the success of this new business venture. Second-hand clothing was transported from Aba to Lagos. From Lagos, the Tarzan Transport Company conveyed the clothing to Benin republic, Togo and Ghana. This was how the trade which started in the 40s evolved through the 50s and 60s until the Nigerian civil war started in 1967. Thus, before the civil war of 1967, second-hand clothing business was thriving; Nigeria relied on imported used clothes to supplement the clothing need of her teeming population.⁹ These clothes provided a cheaper alternative for vast citizens of Nigeria most of who lived below the poverty threshold.

Clothing and Lifestyle in Nigeria

Nigerian society varies greatly between urban and rural areas, across ethnic and religious borders, and with levels of education. These variables are also reflected in the clothing preferences of the people. Clothes are an important part of any society. It confers status on individuals and sets them apart in societal groupings. Generally, people in Nigeria like to wear western clothes like suits, shirts and trousers as well as skirts and blouses. But these items have become

⁸A.A. Amubode and O.O. Braide, "Revisiting Second-hand Clothing: Market for Clothing and Textile Practitioners in Yoruba Land,"61.

⁹ Paul Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland, 1970-1983* (Nsukka: Great AP Express Pub. Ltd., 2009), 114.

increasingly expensive. Consequently, those who still preferred to wear them resorted to buying them as second-hand clothing.

Women are the number one patrons of second-hand clothing in Nigeria.¹⁰ Second-hand clothing which is variously called bend down select, used clothing, tokumbo (Toks), okrika (Ok), were at the outset, viewed as the exclusive preserve of the low and medium income earners.¹¹ However, overtime, patronage has grown and now cuts across every social strata; the reason for this range from quality to cost. It is important to mention at this point that second-hand clothing are grouped and sold according to grades; the higher the grade, the higher the price. Those in the first grade category are of the highest quality and are the most expensive second-hand clothing. However, it is also pertinent to note that the prices of first grade okrika are relatively low when compared to brand new clothes. This, perhaps, is the reason why the trade enjoys a high level of patronage in Nigeria. The fact that many markets in cities like Lagos, Kano, Aba, Ibadan, Enugu and Port Harcourt are devoted to the sale of second hand clothes testifies to the lucrative nature of the business. In some major markets like the Onitsha main market, okrika lovers are acquainted with days when new bales of okrika arrive the market. They come on those days to select quality second hand clothes from the new arrivals.

Causes and Effects of the Ban

After the long and bitter civil war, Igboland was in ruins. It was badly in need of basic necessities like food, water and clothing. Missionaries had accounted for the bulk supplies of food and clothing to Igboland during the war. However, the aftermath of the war ushered in a policy of hostility and embargo on missionary works in Igboland by the Federal government of Nigeria. The reason for this hostility stemmed from the assumption by the government that relief materials from these foreign charitable organizations had prolonged the civil war and had worked against its total blockade of Igboland.¹² Thus, when the war ended, the

¹⁰M.O. Areo and A.B. Areo, "Okrika Morphology, Marketing and Consumer Attitudinal Evaluation of Second Hand Clothing," 74.
[www.savap.org.pk/journals/ARInt./Vol.6\(4\)/2015\(6.4-08\).pdf](http://www.savap.org.pk/journals/ARInt./Vol.6(4)/2015(6.4-08).pdf)

¹¹ Kennedy Bienose, "Second Hand Clothes: The Boom, Gains and Pains," *The Pointer*
<http://thepointernews.com/?p=26594>

¹²Paul Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland, 1970-1983*, 19.
(A Publication of the Augustinian Institute)

federal government of Nigeria barred a number of humanitarian organizations from entering the country and rendering help to the victims of the war.¹³ Instead, the federal government, through its National Commission on Rehabilitation and the Nigerian Red Cross Society undertook the task of providing food and medical supplies. These supplies were inadequate. Clothing supplies, on the other hand, were non-existent. Therefore, some Igbo businessmen who had hitherto engaged in second-hand clothing business before the war sought to re-establish links with their foreign trading partners, but the ban stiffened any hopes of that happening.

The ban on second-hand clothing in 1971 by the federal government of Nigeria was not only ill-conceived, it appeared to be deliberately instituted to slow the post-civil war economic recovery of Igboland. It was also to act as a reminder to the Igbo people of the federal might. It is worthy of note at this point that the war between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Igbo secessionist state of Biafra was won by the federal side through a combination of superior weaponry, International support and a total blockade of Igboland. It must also be mentioned that after the unconditional surrender of Biafra, the military government of Nigeria led by Yakubu Gowon made the magnanimous and humanitarian declaration that the war had “No victor, no vanquished.” Yet, later events proved this statement a mere tactics to douse the concerns of the international community regarding any backlash that might emanate from the federal government towards the surrendering Biafran Igbo people. If the Igbo people had thought that the “No victor, no vanquished” rhetoric of General Gowon was meant to reassure them of the preparedness of the governments’ to reintegrate them into the mainstream of the Nigerian society,¹⁴ that thought soon gave way to one of total gloom. The federal policies unveiled during the so-called reconstruction were all meant to “keep the Igboman down.” These sets of anti-Igbo policies included-the ban on second-hand clothing, stock fish, bank withdrawal limits and the indigenization policy.

¹³ *ibid*, 19.

¹⁴ “Gowon’s post war policy, a failure” Alex Ekwueme in Vanguard Newspaper October 13, 2010 by Hugo Odiogor, etal
www.vanguardngr.com/2010/10/gowon's-post-war-policy-a-failure-ekwueme/

Brainchild of the ban

Chief Obafemi Awolowo is idolized by the Yoruba people for a number of reasons. The most important reason is that he transformed the South West into an educational and industrial hub in Africa. Awolowo understood the value of education and he made it free and affordable. He offered a lot of scholarships to Yoruba to advance academically to the highest level. Chief Obafemi Awolowo was also the brainchild of the post- civil war ban on second hand clothing.

Before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, Chief Awolowo was in prison in Calabar. He was released from Calabar prison by the Biafran leader, Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.¹⁵ This act of Col. Ojukwu created a rapport between them. In the tenuous and unjust circumstances the Igbo found themselves in, the Biafran leader, Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the West had 'a gentleman's agreement. The terms were simple; if Biafrans were forced out of Nigeria, Chief Awolowo would declare Oduduwa Republic and lead the West out of Nigeria.

However, when Col. Ojukwu proclaimed the Republic of Biafra on 30th May, 1967, Chief Awolowo reneged on his agreement with Col. Ojukwu to lead the West out of Nigeria. A number of factors may have been responsible for his decision. The first is that the Western region was not militarily prepared for secession. The second and perhaps the most important factor is that the British, the main ally of the Federal Government of Nigeria, recognised the pivotal position of the Yoruba in the standoff between the East and the North. Even though, the British considered Chief Awolowo vacillating and devious, they also acknowledged the fact that he commanded widespread support among his Yoruba people.¹⁶ After careful consideration, Gowon's master planners, the British, came up with the idea of making Awolowo, the juicy and irresistible offer of Federal Commissioner of Finance and Vice chairman of the Federal Executive Council as a means of securing the loyalty of the West to the Northern side. As expected, Gowon accepted the plan of his advisers and the offer was made to Chief Awolowo who accepted. If Ndigbo, considered Awolowo's acceptance of Gowon's appointment, disappointing, they were in for a rude shock. Awolowo took his new position seriously; his policies, strategies showed

¹⁵Emefiena Ezeani, In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot Second Edition (London, Veritas Lumen Publishers, 2013), 72.

¹⁶The National Archives (NA), POWE 63/238, Note for the Records: Nigeria 1967, Nigeria: British Policy towards Nigeria.

that he had no sympathy whatsoever for the secessionist Biafra. In fact, one can safely say that his policies were his way of proving to the Federal Government of Nigeria that his loyalty lay with them and of course, with the Yoruba. As anticipated, he encouraged the Yoruba to support Gowon's government.

As Federal Commissioner of Finance and Vice chairman of the federal executive council, he was second to the Head of State. The position of Commissioner of Finance which he also occupied was the most important office in war time. Awolowo's new position also meant that he had the ear of the Head of state and members of council. It was his advice that helped Nigeria win the war. He advised the Gowon Cabinet to block all food supply to Biafra. He believed starvation was a legitimate instrument of war. In his words,

All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder.¹⁷

Members of Gowon's Cabinet adopted Awolowo's horrendous policy. It proved to be very effective too. The policy not only led to the starvation and death of over one million Biafran children, it effectively and efficiently terminated the Biafran dream. Another Awolowo policy which frustrated Biafra's ability to import food and arms was change of currency and nullifying bank accounts operated by Biafrans. Awolowo later explained the reason for this:

we did that to prevent Ojukwu taking the money which his soldiers has stolen from our Central bank for sale abroad to buy arms...So I decided to change the currency, and for your benefit, it can now be told the whole world, only Gowon knew the day before the change took place.¹⁸

¹⁷<http://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2009/jan/222.html> accessed 14/2/09 quoted in Emefienna Ezeani, In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot Second Edition (London, Veritas Lumen Publishers, 2013), 74.

¹⁸ Obafemi Awolowo: Hero of Yoruba, Killer of Biafra, Betrayed by the North"

http://www.nigeriamasterweb.com/Masterweb/MasterwebMobileNews.php?rss_id=MTYz accessed 22 December 2016.

This statement clearly proves that Awolowo was the propagandist whose post war economic policies was geared towards slowing the pace of post-civil war economic rehabilitation of Igboland. With this change of currency policy, he ensured that every adult Biafran who managed to survive the starvation onslaught was given 20 pounds to start life afresh irrespective of amount of money in the person's bank account before the war started. The implication of this policy was that the Igbo were not able to participate in the indigenization policy that followed the war. As Achebe wryly remarked of this policy, "if there was ever a measure put in place to stunt or even obliterate the economy of a people, this was it."¹⁹

Chief Awolowo also ensured a ban of stock-fish and second-hand clothing. The Igbo dominated these two trades. The resumption of trading links with their clients would have provided some respite for the Igbo economy. Awolowo, however, introduced the ban to ensure that Igbo economy was not easily resuscitated. Further pronouncements of Chief Awolowo seem to suggest that he saw the policy as a popular one. He mentioned to ban second-hand clothing again (it was unbanned by the Murtala Mohammed regime in 1975) during his campaign trip to Aba in preparation for the 1979 presidential election. Suffice it to say, he barely escaped with his life after making that campaign promise for he ignited the anger of Igbo people who were reminded of the hardship they suffered following the ban.

The Ban on the Importation of Second-Hand Clothing, 1970-2010: Ingenuity in the face of Ban

As has already been mentioned, the end of the Nigeria-Biafran civil war saw the enactment and implementation of several economic policies which were aimed at punishing the Igbo people who had lost the war. These policies which range from giving twenty pound to each Igbo person in exchange for whatever amount of money they owned in banks before the war, to placing a ban on importation of some items like second hand clothing that have been the exclusive preserve of traders in Igboland constituted a direct threat to the quest for economic survival of Aba second-hand cloth traders in particular and Igboland in general.

The reaction of Igbo traders to the new threat to their business, demonstrates a classic example of Toynbee's idea of response to challenge. The traders found a

¹⁹Chinua Achebe, *There was a Country* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 234.
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way to deal with the threats and challenges placed on their economic survival. While some of them adapted to the prevailing economic situation by changing their line of trade, others responded to the ban by finding new ways of importing second-hand clothing into Nigeria. The mere fact that the trade in second-hand clothing still thrives in Igboland and different parts of the country today is a testament of the resilience and effective response of the second-hand clothing traders to the threat posed by the federal government. The practical response of these businessmen to the prevailing situation of the country proves Thomas Homer Dixon right when he said that a given problem can be understood as a particular requirement for ingenuity. Similarly, a given solution is a product of a particular amount and type of ingenuity supplied.²⁰ Problems and solutions, therefore, are reduced to independent and objective yardstick of comparing ingenuity. The ban on second hand clothing business in Nigeria after the Nigeria civil war gave the second-hand clothing dealers in South-Eastern Nigeria the opportunity to showcase their ingenuity. They came up with innovative ideas that saved their trade.

Following the ban on second-hand clothing in 1971, traders began to devise new methods to re-establish trade networks. First, relief came from Igbo second-hand traders in Diaspora. Some of them were on business trips in neighbouring African countries of Cameroun, Togo, Benin and Ghana etc when the outbreak of civil war forced to stay put in their business locations. The ones in Togo and Benin got UN refugee passports and continued their trade. These sets of traders gave their brothers, friends and partners in Igboland a lifeline to continue their trades.

The main idea that led to the revival of the trade was smuggling. Some Igbo traders moved to Lagos and started receiving goods from their relatives in Togo or Benin who smuggled second-hand clothes into the country through the Nigeria porous Seme border. These clothes were sold in Lagos, Aba, Onitsha and other big cities in Nigeria. In some cases, the goods were marked as those in transit to Nigeria's neighbouring countries of Niger or Chad. Once the goods reached these locations, they easily found their way into states in Northern

²⁰ Thomas Homer-Dixon "Ingenuity Theory: Can Humankind Create a Sustainable Civilization?" *Address to the Royal Society of London*, October 2nd, 2003, 12

Nigeria through the porous borders of Nigeria. Smuggling was not an easy venture. Its fuel is poverty, hunger and the desperate desire to earn a living. After the civil war Igbo traders in second-hand clothing had the aforementioned stimuli. So, smuggling thrived and sustained the trade in major cities in Nigeria. It was so effective that so many consumers and buyers were ignorant of the fact that there was an existing ban on the importation of second-hand clothing.

Since the 1971 ban on the importation of used clothing, there have been calls from certain quarters for ban on tokumbo (fairly used) articles. Several governments since the Gowon administration have continued to ban the importation of second-hand clothing and appliances. When the Gowon regime was overthrown, the Murtala Mohammed administration lifted the ban. The Buhari administration of 1983-1985 placed severe restrictions on imports. The penalty on smuggling was stiff. In 1989, almost ninety-six percent of tariff lines were subject to import prohibition regimes.²¹ In 1995, the Standard Organisation of Nigeria (SON) and the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) called for the ban of used clothing and appliances on the ground that they posed health and environmental hazards. However, Nigerian government's quantitative import restrictions on second-hand clothing, which are largely aimed at protecting domestic manufacturing, have not been implemented effectively. The result is that 75-80% of used clothing imported to West Africa ends up in Nigeria. The fact that Benin and Togo have no restrictions on used clothing imports and cross-border smuggling explains why the Nigeria flea market is never in short supply of contraband. However, the bans have not stopped the influx of these contraband commodities into the country through her porous borders. Traders who specialise in the sale of these articles bribe custom officials at the borders and checkpoints to ensure that their customers always get their regular supplies from the flea market.

Conclusion

The second-hand clothing trade is a network that ensures the provision of clothes at affordable rates to the members of the society. Today, the second-hand clothing business still thrives in Nigeria in spite of the incessant ban placed on it by several governments in Nigeria. With the massive decline and closure of most

²¹Oyejide, A., Ogunkola, A. and A. Bankole, Import Prohibition as a Trade Policy Instrument: The Nigerian Experience in P. Gallagher, P. Low and A.L. Stoler (eds.) *Managing the Challenges of WTO Participation: 45 Case Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 440.

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textile and clothing industries in the post-civil war Nigeria, the business continues to offer employment not just to the Igbo who were the pioneers of the trade, but to thousands of other Nigerians.

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