

## **IRONWORK AS A VEHICLE FOR PROMOTING ART IN AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*It has been observed that ironwork faces so many problems that limit its objective of providing jobs and producing item that could serve the needs of the populace. In contemporary society, people seem less interested in Ironwork while patronage has also reduced. This study investigated the origin and history of blacksmithing in Awka, examining the trends, and issues in the industry. The study also examined the current state of blacksmithing in Awka as well as its future. Descriptive survey was used for the study while the study area was Awka, Anambra State. The population of the study was all the registered members of the Blacksmith Association in Anambra State. They are 34 in number. The grounded theory approach was used in the analysis of data for the study. The result of this study showed that blacksmithing originated in Awka when a man from Ezeagu, in the present day Enugu State called Nebechi Uzo, visited Awka as a professional smith. It was also found that blacksmithing in the area has under gone many changes. Learning is done through apprenticeship method and it is also transferred from father to children. The result of this study also showed that blacksmithing is still being practiced but at a reduced rate. Finally, the result of this study showed that the future of blacksmithing in Awka is under threat as those who are currently in the trade do not have confidence in it. They are willing to abandon it if they get other opportunities. This suggests lack of interest on their part. The researcher recommends, among others, that the government of Anambra state should provide modern tools for blacksmithing in Awka and make them pay back in terms of tax.*

**Keywords:** Iron Work, Awka, Anambra State.

### **Introduction**

The study area is Awka town and capital of Anambra State of South Eastern Nigeria. It is relatively a large town located about 20 kilometers east of the commercial city of Onitsha. The town lies along roads leading from Owerri,

Umuahia, Onitsha and Enugu. It is the traditional home of the Igbo blacksmiths and the town's artisans are still noted for their metalwork. According to Nwanne, (2015) in Igboland, communities that are known for blacksmith include Awka in Anambra state, Agbaja Udi in Enugu state, Abriba in Abia state and Nkwere in Imo state. These are the known smithing communities in Igboland and one cannot do without them during the pre-colonial time. In Awka, blacksmithing is one of the trades that defines its people. People from Awka are reputable for blacksmithing skills. A practicing Awka blacksmith Ogbuefi Anagor and a retired smith: Ogbuefi Nwanemeke Nwanna (Personal Communication, 2016) agree that despite the enviable contributions blacksmithing has made in traditional Igbo society in particular, the industry is now being relegated to the background.

Awka, the Capital of Anambra State is renowned for blacksmithing. Okwu (2010) opines that Awka, Abiriba and Nkwere are noted iron workers throughout Igbo land. Okwu adds that their technological superiority and monopoly of the smithing profession throughout the area that later became Eastern Nigeria attracted the attention of both the pioneer missionaries as well as that of the early colonial administrators. Onwuka (1991) avers that ironworking, one of the most valued skilled craft industries of Igboland in pre-colonial Nigeria has attracted substantial attention from archaeologists of Igboland. The attention given to blacksmith in literature underscores its importance in Igboland generally. Ezenagu (2014) reveals that the iron technology of pre-colonial Nigeria was an advanced technology which included the art of smelting and smithing. According to Ezenagu, the former was a method through which bloom (iron) was extracted from iron ore on the other hand, the latter focuses on the actual production of iron implements. Ezenagu (2013) posits that the importance of the smith technology in producing crafts for public consumption, though not free from aesthetic beauty is the reason for its continuous existence. Hence, blacksmith industry is one amongst the range of indigenous technologies that flourished in pre-colonial Nigeria. Blacksmithing in Awka is one of the oldest craft industries that have survived in the communities from generation to generation. Blacksmith from Awka were renowned for their skills that they travelled from place to place, plying their trade and making money. Ezenagu (2014) avers that it is based on the popularity of Awka smith that the word 'Uzu' (smith) is a household name amongst its residents such that the present day traditional ruler of the community is named after the trade 'Eze-Uzu' (King of smith). Basden (1960) corroborates that the Awka smiths practically took over the occupation and they hold a leading place in the profession throughout Ibo country and in many places outside Igboland. According to Eze-Uzomaka (2011) in pre-colonial times the people of Awka were famous for metal working and their blacksmith was highly valued throughout the region for

making farming implements, guns and tools. Okpoko and Okpoko, (2002) add that this partly explains why Awka and Nkwerre people in Igboland are known as masters in blacksmithing. Although Awka blacksmith used to be mixed with ritual practice, Ezenagu, (2014) argues that the influence of modernity has diminished the ritualistic nature of the industry which previously prohibits a stranger from smithing in Awka blacksmith workshop. Nwanna (2011) notes that Awka metal work is almost as old as the town itself. He further stated that “it is their proficiency in metal work that gave them the prominent position which they had held among their fellow Nigerians and even beyond.” Indigenous technology especially blacksmithing, was a flourishing profession among the people of Awka in Anambra State. The significance and influence of this industry were pronounced within and outside the community. Omolewa (1986) pointed out that, “There is evidence of more advanced technology in various parts of Nigeria during the bronze and metal age. Indeed, one of the most active periods of technological efforts in Nigeria was around 500BC to 200AD”. Field (1940) notes that although the Awka people are known to have done a little metal casting, it is practically certain that the Igbo never reached the degree of skill required to fashion any objects. Bobo (1983) averred that: “Technology is spread by man and that man lives by technology. This assertion is more relevant when the technology is indigenous (endogamous) often referred to as internally generated methods of learning and expressing initiatives or traditional technology.”

Through this indigenous technology, the people developed various means with which their economic as well as military needs were met. According to Onwuegbuna (2012) “In Awka community, the concept of art is physically based in the sense that artistry is first recognized in the psyche of the individuals whose cognitive sphere is charged with creative imagination (onwelu uche nka)”. Consequent upon Awka blacksmithing ingenuity, the people bagged the sobriquet: “*Awka okpu-uzu*.” Burtle (2013) notes further “The Awka area in earlier times was the site of the Nri civilization that produced the earliest documented bronze works in sub-Saharan Africa around 800AD”. He further stated that: “Before the inception of British rule, Awka was governed by titled men known as Ndi Ozo na Ndi ichie who were accomplished individuals in the community.” They held general meetings or Izu Awka either at the residence of the oldest man (*Otochalu Awka*) or at a place designated by him. He was the *Nne uzu* or master blacksmith, whether he knew the trade or not, for the only master known to Awka people was the master craftsman, the *nne uzu*. The current *Eze uzu* of the town selected since 1999 is Gibson Nwosu. He was one of the first recruits for the Nigerian Air force.

Burtle (2013) observes that, “Each village had clearly defined trade routes. For example, people from Umuogbu village plied their trade in Benin, Urhobo and

Itsekiri areas; Umubele were stationed in the Igala areas in modern day Kogi State, Umuike and Umuonaga in present day Abia and Rivers States, Umunechi in the Kwale and Isoko areas of Delta State and Umudiana, Okperi, Ugwuogige stationed in Calabar area of today's Cross Rivers State. Considering the rich history of Awka people regarding blacksmithing, literature on blacksmithing in the area with emphasis on origin, its application in contemporary society, challenges and the way forward is still emerging. This, therefore, makes a study of this nature at this time very essential.

Changes in the society have resulted in fears among scholars (e.g. Tapper, & McLachlan, 2005; Ezenagu, 2014) who are worried that traditional technology may be facing extinction to the detriment of the society. One of such traditional technologies that is under the threat of extinction is the art of blacksmithing. As an art, blacksmithing offers a platform through which people can be gainfully employed, thus making them self-dependent. In this era of increasing youth unemployment, the art of blacksmithing could provide an alternative through which jobs could be created. In addition, blacksmithing has the capacity to supply the local needs of Nigerians in the areas of house hold items, farming tools as well as other iron-related implements. The central role of blacksmithing-both in the area of job creation and supply of essential tools-implies that iron work is pivotal to Nigeria's economy, hence empirical evidences are required on how to promote iron work. Although studies like those of e.g. Nworjih, 1993; Njoku, 2002; Ezenagu, 2014 have examined the challenges of blacksmithing, as well as its origin, there is still the need to examine the trends and development of blacksmithing in Awka. This was linked with what is happening at the moment and it was projected into the future, hence the need for this study.

This study sought to determine the current state of blacksmithing in Awka as a vehicle for promoting art. Specifically, it sought to achieve the following:

1. To ascertain the origin of blacksmithing in Awka with particular attention to trends and development in blacksmith industry
2. To examine the current state of blacksmithing in Awka.
3. To identify the art qualities found in Awka iron work.

The research examined the origin of blacksmithing in Awka with attention to trends and development in Awka blacksmith industry and how it can flourish as an art. The study also examined the current state of blacksmithing in Awka and forecasts the future.

The following questions are raised:

1. What is the origin and the history of blacksmithing in Awka with particular attention to trends and development in the blacksmithing industry?

2. What is the current situation of blacksmithing in Awka?
3. What are the art qualities found in Awka ironwork?

This study is relevant to the government, professionals and other researchers. First, the government will benefit from the result of the study especially as regard formulating policies that will drive blacksmithing in Awka and Nigeria in general. With this result, government will be better guided on how to improve blacksmithing to make it a job creation venture. Second, professional artists who may be willing to invest in blacksmithing will find the result of this study useful as its findings on the challenges facing blacksmithing will guide such artists in their planning. The result of this study on the ways of improving blacksmithing will also serve as a guide to policy makers and investors. Finally, the result of this study will serve as a reference materials for other researchers who may be willing to investigate similar areas. This will be made possible when the study must have been published online and also made available in libraries.

### **The Origin and the History of Blacksmithing in Awka: Trends and Development in Blacksmith Industry.**

The result of this study showed that blacksmithing originated in Awka when a man from Eziagu, the present day Enugu State called Nebechi Uzo, visited Awka. According to the result, the man was in Awka to ply his trade of blacksmithing craft. One of the respondents recalled: "Uzo came to Awka to buy and sell elephant tusks. He also built his blacksmithing workshop." The respondents reported that Uzo was well received by Awka people to a point that he married their daughter called Imedegwu. Another respondent recalled: "Imedegwu gave birth to a son which Uzo named Agulu." The result of the study further revealed that when Agulu grew up, he took to his father's profession, and became a trader and a blacksmith. It was through Agulu that blacksmithing started spreading in Awka as he (Agulu) started multiplying in number.

In the views of the respondents, Awka people, even before the coming of colonial masters were ambitious, hardworking productive, innovative and dogged. Therefore, the result showed that the respondents reported that blacksmithing began in Awka even before the colonization of Nigeria. One of the respondents notes: "Blacksmithing in Awka has a very long history, Awka people began working on Iron even before the colonial masters came into Nigeria." Another respondent said: "The history of blacksmithing in Awka is as old as Awka people. It is difficult to mention any exact year, the closet you can get is that, it started very long time ago before the white men came into Nigeria." When asked further why an exact date cannot be mentioned, another respondent said: "Except if someone wants to lie to you mentioning date is out of it but just note that it started before Nigeria was colonized."

Concerning the trends and development, the result of this study showed that the respondents were of the view that Awka people specialized in iron work , copper, brass and bronze and were skillful in the carving of wooden implements and ornaments. In this direction, a respondent added: "This enthusiasm made the smith industry to flourish and serve the needs of the public." Another respondent said: "The determination, skills, and creativity inherent in Awka people made the blacksmithing industry to grow in the area." The result of this study also showed that blacksmithing was initially reserved for the seven related villages in Awka. Among the seven villages, six were from Agulu while only Umuzocha was not. Those from Agulu were Umuogbu, Umudioka, Umuenechi, Umuoruka, Umubele, Umujagwo. During those days, only people from these areas were blacksmiths but as time went on, other people started joining the industry. When the respondents were probed further to explain why blacksmith was initially the prerogative of people from these seven villages, a respondent quip:

Blacksmithing in Awka initially had a spiritual connotation. You must belong to the smith family to learn and practice the trade but over time, the growing population and the need to meet the demand of blacksmithing products changed that. Also, Christianity and its wide acceptance in South- East Nigeria led to the change in attaching spiritual importance to smithing. Anybody can learn the trade now.

The respondents were probed further to explain why people from other villages started and it was found that the growing population led to increase in demand for blacksmith products continued to increase such that blacksmiths from the seven villages could not meet up with the demand, hence others started joining the trade, not only to improve their economic fortunes, but also meet up with the demand in the market. In this light, a respondent said: Awka population was increasing, and the demand for blacksmith products also continued to increase so other people had to join to meet up with the supply."

The result of the study also showed that the participants reported that blacksmithing played a critical role in driving agricultural activities by providing working tools needed for agriculture to flourish. In this direction, a respondent said: "When discussing trends in blacksmithing industry, we must also remember to add that blacksmithing played a critical role of supplying working materials without which, agricultural activities will not flourish."

Another trend that was and is still common in Awka blacksmithing is the development of apprenticeship pattern. During the interview, the respondents

reported that apprenticeship was adopted and practice as a strategy of sustaining the Awka blacksmith. The respondents reported that there was no generally accepted number of years for the apprenticeship because it was dependent on two factors. First, it was dependent on the master. Here, a respondent said: "Every master has the right to decide the number of years that someone can undergo apprenticeship under him. Nobody can force him, if you are not satisfied, you look elsewhere." Another respondent said: "The master has a very critical part to play in deciding the number of years for apprenticeship." The second factor is how fast the person is able to learn. In this direction, a respondent revealed: "You know that people do not have the same abilities. Some people learn within a very short time while others take a very long time to learn, this reality significantly influences the duration of apprenticeship." Nwachukwu (2017) revealed that the apprenticeship system spans over a period of years and they had a god called Ogadazu, that is the spirit of blacksmithing, which protects them.

Another trend in the blacksmithing industry as revealed by the study is the guild system. The participants revealed that based on the guild system, blacksmithing is not open for everybody; it is reserved for smithing families. The essence of the Guild system is to ensure that the integrity of blacksmithing is maintained such that only smithing families take part in it. Nwachukwu (2017) says that the guild system was initiated to protect the integrity of blacksmithing and to avoid non-smithing families from getting into the business because they believed that blacksmithing was a reserved craft which was a highly respected profession and spiritually inclined. The researcher probed further to determine if members of the families of a person who just graduated from apprenticeship were qualified to practice and the response was thus: "once a person completes the apprenticeship period, his family automatically becomes a smith family." The simple implication here is that, a person is not allowed to practice without due training.

Another trend in the Awka blacksmithing is the relationship between an apprentice and the master. Our result showed that the participants reported that there was much discipline in the blacksmithing such that an apprentice could not eat on the same table as the master at the same time. It was also obligatory of the apprentice to run errands for the master. One of the respondents revealed: "The apprentice is like a servant to the master. He takes instructions without complaining. The apprentice also takes instructions from the master's wife." Another respondent added: "The apprentice also keeps the blacksmith store very neat and ensures that the place is not untidy. He is also duty-bound for supply of icheku (charcoal from the inyi tree) for as long as he remains an under the master." In summation, therefore, the apprentice, according to the result of this study, must be completely loyal to the master.

The respondents were also asked to assess the Awka residents knowledge of blacksmithing and the result showed that the residents of Awka are very conversant with Awka blacksmiths since the blacksmiths produce farm implements like hoes, cutlasses, shovels and other household items like kitchen knives etc. moreover the blacksmiths workshops are within the neighbourhood. The respondents were of the view that residents are very familiar with blacksmith such that they send some of their children as apprentices to these blacksmiths. Also, the respondents were asked to explain the significance of blacksmithing in Awka and the result showed that it has helped in projecting the image of Awka to the outside world as a blacksmith town. The respondents also reported that blacksmiths serves as a source of income to Awka people. The researcher also asked the respondents to outline some of the blacksmith works in Awka and the result showed that their products include, hoe, guns, machetes, shovel, kitchen, knives, gong musical equipments etc.

### **The Current State of Blacksmithing in Awka**

The respondents were asked to provide narratives on the current state of blacksmithing in Awka. The result showed that blacksmithing is still very much practiced but at a reduced rate. Most of the respondents reported that there is a reduced interest in blacksmithing as the number of people who indicate interest to learn the trade through apprenticeship has reduced. One of the respondents said: "Although blacksmithing is still practiced in Awka, many people are not interested in learning the trade." Another respondent said:

The result of the study showed that the respondents were of the view that there is a declining interest among the younger generation in getting involved in blacksmithing. One of the respondents said: "All my children have refused to learn blacksmithing because it does not command respect and recognition." Another respondents said: "I will not even allow my children to join me in this trade because it is no more fashionable. How many people come here to patronize us? Just very few." The result of this study showed that most of the respondents reported that there is a general reduction in blacksmithing in Awka.

The respondents were further probed to ascertain if they face challenges in their blacksmithing practice and the result was in the affirmative. "Yes we face a lot of challenges which eventually make the trade unattractive and boring. These challenges play a vital role in discouraging the younger ones from getting involved in blacksmithing." Said one of the respondents. Another respondents said: "It is gradually becoming very difficult to ply the blacksmithing trade because of the enormous challenges facing us." The

respondents were probed further to provide insights into the challenges facing blacksmithing in Awka. A respondents said: "Our major challenges are space and patronage coupled with the dumping of foreign products into our markets at very cheap prices." The respondents reported that most people do not want to patronize them as it used to be. Another respondent said:

Government is also our major problem through the instrumentality of the police. They use the police to harass our members (blacksmiths) day in day out, some of our members where often killed because they produce guns. These guns were essentially made for hunters (hunting guns) and not combatant guns yet they were arrested. The Police said they were producing guns without license. Government on the other hand is not in the length ready to issue such license to blacksmiths.

The respondents were of the view that government forces were not encouraging them as members are at one point or the other made to contend with government forces over issues that the income of an average blacksmith from Awka cannot cope. In this regard a respondent said: "Where do you expect an Awka blacksmith to raise money for bail at the Nigerian Police Station over an alleged production of dangerous weapon? The situation, as it is, is terrible."

The respondents were further probed to determine if the challenges impinge on their performance and the answer was in the affirmative as one of the respondents said: "Of course they do. We are limited in producing basic items which in turns kills creativity and zeal. They make the trade look like a disregarded trade meant for never-do-well individuals." The respondents also reported that they face stigmatization as one of them said: "Nobody wants to be associated with this kind of trade especially the young ones. Unfortunately these are the ones that will take over from us." Another respondent described how it affect their performance thus:

You spent energy and time to produce something and you fail to dispose them. This non disposal of the items produced, destroys the zeal which one used to produce them. Creativity and enthusiasm are also destroyed. At a stage, one feels not going to the workshop any more.

To balance the interview, on patronage, some Awka residents were interviewed to determine their perceptions about the products of blacksmiths in the area and the result showed that most of the people patronized blacksmiths in Awka do so because they have no option. They do so because they are low income earners who cannot afford modern implements. One of the patrons reported: "If I must be honest with you, I patronize blacksmith

products because I do not have enough money. If my income improves today, I will say bye-bye to them.” Another one said, “the truth is that it is not a thing of honour to patronize the blacksmith products. What they produce has obviously gone out of fashion.” Generally, the most of the patrons were not interested in blacksmithing products.

### **The Aesthetic and Art Qualities found in Awka Iron work**

Awka ironworks are made up of different aesthetic qualities like balance which refers to the use of artistic elements such as line, texture, color, and form in creation of artworks in a way that renders visual stability. Also, the works reveal rhythm which is a show of variety and pattern as well as hierarchy which reveals the most important part of the work in order of importance. See appendix 1 for some of the Awka iron works.

This study found that blacksmithing pre-dates even colonialism. The result showed that blacksmithing was introduced in Awka through a migrant called Nebuzo Uzo. This result is somewhat consistent with the account of Okafor (2013) who revealed that Awka supplied their own needs of iron products and served others, but the era of the “traveling blacksmith” began with the coming of Agulu. According to Okafor, Oka’s internal markets could not sustain all the smiths practicing there; therefore, people moved out, and with their traveling organization into guilds took shape, and, also, the division into journey route of ezi ije or owali ije. This result is, however, inconsistent with that of Onuoha (2017) who revealed that “Awka people claimed that a chief god called Okanube came down from the sky and taught them blacksmithing (p.5).” From the submission of Onuoha, the origin of blacksmithing is completely unrelated to any human efforts but spiritual powers. Onuoha further revealed that there two schools of thought on the origin of iron technology in Africa generally. The first is the exotic or diffusionist school that viewed its origin from outside Africa and the autochthonous school that hold that it originated from Africa. Onuoha further proffers reasons for this disparity thus:

The cardinal reality on this controversy of origin is that due to lack of reliable data its origin is yet to be ascertained. In the same vein, the origin of blacksmithing in Igbo land was anchored on divinity due to the inability of the ancient men to transmit to the younger generation and as result of lack of scientific acceptable data (p.8).

From the assertion above, it can be seen that there is no consensus on the origin of blacksmithing in Awka and Igboland in general. However, the most important thing to note is that the trade is generational as it is transferred from father to children and from a master to an apprentice. There have been many trends in blacksmithing in Awka. Onu and Kwu-Ikeje (2015)

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corroborates that the blacksmiths of Awka predate colonialism and even recorded Western history because Awka people fashioned their armlets and bracelets with the same ease as they produced their hunting and agricultural tools or kitchen ware. Onu and Kwu-Ikeje add that in the modern era, the blacksmiths who learnt the trade from their forebears have been churning out almost anything one can imagine: their forges, blowers, anvils, hammers and the like have aided them in producing the earliest documented bronze works in sub-Saharan Africa. Onu and Kwu-Ikeje in describing the Awka blacksmithing added: "according to history. It is also said that Awka smiths are among the best in the country."

Nwachukwu (2017) argues that there have been trends and changes in blacksmithing industry especially with the coming of the Europeans as the blacksmithing industry in Awka has made some remarkable changes and developments in the areas of equipment and tools produced. Nwachukwu in stressing the changes in blacksmithing industry adds:

anything that has to do with iron is a product of blacksmithing; the door we have today is a product of blacksmithing. But because of modernisation and advancement in technology, they now modernise their product. The doors, windows and guns are all made by the blacksmith. So, it is not about making hoes and knives, no!" if not that we call them panel beating and iron benders, the blacksmiths are the ones that do all those things that have to do with iron. But as technology changes, some of the blacksmiths have had to adjust to the new technology. Hinges, locks, tools, and all sorts of useful articles are now sold at the factories at prices which must compete seriously with locally produced articles. The same principle of change is operating in almost every crafts.

The assertion by Okafor above provides insights into the changes in and trends in blacksmithing in Awka. Today in Awka blacksmithing, there is an association of blacksmiths that guide the activities of members. All registered members must conform to the set rules or be punished according to the union's rules For example, when a journalist visited Awka blacksmith for an interview, he refused to grant the interview because the union in Awka is against it. He was quoted thus:

Nobody wants to help us, even most of our elders in this community are no longer interested in what we do, so we decided to take our fate in our hands, and that is why we decided at our meeting that anybody who visits this place to consult us whether to interview us or any other thing, must pay a certain amount of money with a few other items before we talk (Onu & Kwu-Ikeje (2015, para 6)

Nwanne (2015,para 8) reported a similar situation of blacksmith complaining of being abandoned and insisting of payment before interacting with members of the public. Nwanne cited one of the Awka blacksmiths thus:

What you heard is the truth; we have stopped people coming here to interview us or take pictures. For years, they have been coming and we used to cooperate with them. But the way it is now, we have decided that, if you want us to talk to you, you must pay N10,000 to the union, with drinks and kola nut. That's the only thing we get now.

The submissions above has shown that the blacksmiths in Awka have adjusted to accommodate changing situations around them. From the submission also, it can also be deduced that the blacksmiths are feeling abandoned by the society, they are feeling cheated as people just rush to them and get information, after which, they are abandoned. Hence, the need to resort to self-help with a view to avoiding a continuation of the same scenario. In this regard, Nwanne (2015, para 5) notes:

they have abandoned us; we are on our own. Each time they come here, they make empty promises, but at the end, nothing will come from it. Look at me now heating these metals; that's all I get. But government will use our name to be promoting themselves, but they don't listen to our problems.

The current trends in blacksmithing reflect a complete contrast from what it used to be many years ago. Okafor (2013) holds that in 1925 Oka smiths were taken to an exhibition at Wembley, England. They demonstrated to the British how Awka smiths worked, and showcased what they made. Subsequently, the British flooded the African market with cheaper machine-made goods and this led to the fall of Awka and till date, it has become difficult for it to claim its pride of place. Okafor adds that Awka smithing was dying until the Nigerian Civil War, then Awka came back briefly into her own, in fabrication, foundry work, and so on. Awka flowered for a time, and then sunk back into ordinariness. Okafor adds that Awka blacksmiths had great honour wherever they went. Their usefulness was always appreciated such that in Yoruba land they were not required to do what others did. "Agbede" —the blacksmith, they said, "does not cut the path to the stream, nor cut the path to the farms, nor go to war. He is in his smithy fashioning the implements of war or of farming" (p.43). At the moment, the tempo of blacksmithing activities has reduced.

### **Products of Awka Blacksmiths**

The result of this study showed that though blacksmithing is still being practiced in Awka, the activities are no longer as they used to be. The smiths

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from Awka are still working and producing different items like dane guns, hoes, machetes and gongs as affirmed by Onu and kwu-Ikeje (2015). Others include metal traps, diggers for harvesting tubers, musical instruments, fetters, spears, metal gates, titular staff, spoons, plates, bangles, rings, necklaces and earrings, among others. Onu and Kwu-Ikeje add that the works of Awka blacksmiths are everywhere, decorating hands and feet, lifting the profile of living rooms, making the job of housewives easier in the kitchen, helping to secure homes and, among other things, helping motorists who damage their car keys out of their misery. Onu and Kwu-Ikeje (2015) paint a picture of the current state of blacksmith in Awka thus:

the smiths are barely grinding out a living, almost entirely nonexistent in the reckoning or psyche of state government officials, year after year and administration after administration. The master craftsmen of Awka do their business at a sewage site amid all manner of refuse. The air around the place is unhealthy and the workmen look cramped. They said the governments of the state have scarcely taken notice of them, giving them a sense that they are pretty much on their own.

The submission above showed that blacksmiths in Awka are currently in a state of abandonment. They are suffering from many challenges like poor patronage, non-recognition and harassment from government agents like the police. Anigbogu and Onyima (2014) revealed that as a result of the increasing security threat in Nigeria and the eventual proliferation of illegal arms, there is the possibility that blacksmith will be subjected to undue security checks. Ngboawaji (2011) corroborates that guns have been produced locally by unlicensed craft gunsmiths without corresponding information regarding the type, quality and scale of craft production. Ngboawaji revealed further that sporadic raids against craft producers and seizures of guns produced by local smith have featured prominently in Nigerian newspapers, an indication of the threat that illegal gun production posed to the Nigerian society. Ngboawaji recalled thus:

In June 2007, Nigeria's This Day newspaper reported the confiscation of 40 pistols from a local blacksmith in Niger State by the police while investigating a case of armed robbery. One of the arrested armed robbers had confessed having bought his gun from the craftsman. With this kind of business operating, it is thus difficult to ascertain the real number of arms circulating and how their proliferation and use could be curbed (p.8).

The import of the submission of Ngboawaji above on the current study is that it has revealed new insights on why blacksmith from Awka may continuously be harassed by the police. Onu and Kwu-Ikeje (2015) affirm on the current

state of grievances between blacksmiths and the general society thus: “given the insensitivity of government and even community elders, the workmen have grown somewhat disenchanted and are seeking what they can get out of the job, caring less and less whether help would come from anywhere or not (para 5).” Apart from abandonment, blacksmith from Awka face other challenges like poor patronage, lack of modern equipment and harassment from law enforcement agencies. Obhota and Olayemi (2016, para 3) reported different challenges thus:

The challenges I face are quite enormous but I will mention few. One of the challenges I face is getting the wood. The reason is because it’s difficult getting the right tree for the work. Secondly, it is even more difficult during the rainy season because the wood will be wet so we will have to wait for it to dry. The next challenge I face is getting the iron because it can be very expensive. The charcoal is also difficult to get too, so all these things make it a bit challenging for me.

Obhota and Olayemi appear to have differed from many others as they presented the positive side of blacksmithing even in contemporary Awka. This is because when Obhota and Olayemi inquired to know the achievement recorded in blacksmithing, an Awka smith reported “I have been able to build my house from this trade. I am married with children and they are all in school. One of them will graduate from secondary school this year.” This is in sharp contrast with that of Nwanne (2016 para 7) who revealed:

If you watch news on ABS, that blacksmith you see in the video is my father; they have been promising him too. Today, he’s old, yet nothing to show for it. This is what Awka is known for, but they are not paying attention to us; even our government..... The kind of leaders we have here, they are the cause of our problem. They only answer names; some of them answer ‘Uzu Awka,’ other answer ‘Eze Uzu,’ but they don’t maintain their names. Some of them will come here and use us to make money from the Whiteman. We are no longer waiting for the government; we eat from what we make here...

At the moment, blacksmithing in Awka is under the threat of extinction. Anigbogu and Onyima (2014) affirm that the status of traditional blacksmithing industry is best described as been ‘endangered’ as it is currently facing lots of challenges with the increasing discovery of new technologies, as such, its continuity in the next few decades is doubtful. Anigbogu and Onyima further revealed that this is associated with some overwhelming factors necessitated by socio-cultural change and other current realities that may not be easily ignored in the 21st century. Judging by the assertion of Anigbogu and Onyima, blacksmithing in Awka may go into extinction like dinosaur. Nworjih (1993) attributed the reduction in

blacksmithing activities to include: the modern technological advancement accompanied by the influx of foreign products; mass movement of rural community members to big cities; lack of government support, and the declining interest of youths in the profession.

The result of this study showed the existence of different aesthetic and art qualities in Awka iron work. Such qualities include balance, rhythm and hierarchy. This implies that the future of blacksmithing may still be bright as blacksmiths still devote their time to produce art work with attractive aesthetic qualities. This is contrary to the assumption of Anigbogu and Onyima (2014) who said that the occupational challenges being faced by traditional blacksmiths in Awka, are multi-faceted and that the trend portends even greater danger in terms of 'intergenerational deskilling.' Aesthetic and art qualities are essential in attracting people's attention to art work. When art work have aesthetic elements, they are likely to attract patrons than when they are lacking in aesthetic. Senam, Udoakah and Udoh (2015) in a study did an aesthetic analysis using aesthetic categories namely: balance, contrast, dynamics, focus, unity and proportion and found that most academics in South-South Nigeria are significantly familiar with the concept and principles of newspaper aesthetics; significantly motivated by aesthetic contents of their selected newspapers; and are attracted to most of the aesthetic elements used in the newspapers. Although Senam, et al did not examine iron work, aesthetic in newspapers are art work and their result has provide an insight into the role of aesthetic in the behaviour of others and possibly, their attitude to art work.

### **Challenges of the Blacksmithing Industry**

Blacksmithing is currently facing challenges. Nworjih (1993) identified various factors responsible for the declining conditions of the traditional art of blacksmithing in Southeastern Nigeria to include: the modern technological advancement accompanied by the influx of foreign products; mass movement of rural community members to big cities; lack of government support, and the declining interest of youths in the profession. Nworjih notes that products of the local blacksmithing industry remain indispensable to the people due to their socio-cultural, religious, economic and aesthetic significance to the living tradition of the society and their cultural heritage.

Perhaps, the singular greatest threat portending the extinction of the blacksmithing industry in Awka is the ebbing away of the apprenticeship system as the blacksmithing profession has lost its attraction in the eyes of the present generation of youths. Anigbogu and Onyima, (2013) hold that blacksmithing is one of Nigeria's cultural heritage that is facing challenges of survival. According to them, blacksmithing industry, brass-casting, bronze

works and metal-working industries practiced across Nigeria, terracotta; wood carvers constructed beautiful stools and doors, engravings on walls and rocks etc. All these skills served as good entrepreneurial and income yielding jobs have been abandoned for foreign ones in the quest for civilization. According to Aremu, (2008) after mining in traditional metal-working industries, the spongy mass of metallic iron known as the bloom is often sold to blacksmiths with which they fabricate several objects ranging from farm implements, hunting and fishing materials, palm wine tapping tools, weaving implements, household utensils, wood carving tools, ceremonial staff, military weapons, political royal swords, seats and scepter, among others. This implies that the blacksmithing industry permeated most sectors of the society and as such its relevance and significance to pre-colonial Nigerians was not in doubt. Often time, people blame the government for the challenges confronting blacksmithing, but Nwanna (2015) avers that government cannot be completely blamed on the challenges facing blacksmithing because no matter what people want the government to do, it should be understood that people are becoming naturally lazy, such that everybody wants to work in an office. According to Nwanna, even blacksmiths are beginning to lose enthusiasm from the trade as its income is meager. Nwanna notes: "This time of oil business, everybody wants to go into modern life and it's affecting the business of the blacksmith. Again, the blacksmith feels that after staying in his forge for a day and produced maybe 30 knives, how long will he do that to be able to buy a big car like others?" Modern technology has posed challenges to the sustenance of blacksmithing as most people prefer modern technology to the traditional ones. Tapper and McLachlan (2005) suggest that there is the need for conservation and modification of some technologies that are under current threat of extinction because of the threat posed by modern technologies. Ezenagu, (2014) argues that the colonial masters have left the African land and as such, it is time for African leaders to learn to solve their problems by themselves. One of such ways is to improve on indigenous technology and make it helpful for the overall benefit of Africans.

This study investigated the origin and history of blacksmithing in Awka, examining the trends, and issues in the industry. The study also examined the current state of blacksmithing in Awka as well as its future. The study reviewed relevant literature bothering on metal and its formation, identification and location of metal bearing rock as well as types of metal which were identified as Ferrous Metals which have elements like wrought iron, cast iron and steel. Also, non ferrous Metals were discussed in the study. The study also examined the evolution of blacksmithing beginning from 1000 B.C and from 4000BC to the 410 AD to the present day where blacksmithing has become a very essential part of the society. The study examined the products of the early smithing to the present day. Another area captured in

literature is the influence of technological advancement in the practice of blacksmithing. This has been explained taking into account the threat posed by new technology to blacksmithing. The study attempted an overview of blacksmithing in Awka. The smithing as an art has also been captured from the beginning to the finishing. The tools needed for blacksmithing have also been discussed in the study. These include closed furnace, heat treatment bath, forging machine, small hammer, fire tong, anvil, vice, electric blower and metal cutter. Apprenticeship in learning the art of blacksmithing has also been explained.

Descriptive survey was used for the study while the study area was Awka, Anambra State. The population of the study was all the registered members of the blacksmith association in Anambra State. They are 34 in number. The grounded theory approach was used in the analysis of data for the study. The result of this study showed that blacksmithing originated in Awka when a man from Ezeagu, the present day Enugu State called Nebechi Uzo, visited Awka. It was also found that blacksmithing in the area has undergone many changes but learning is done through apprenticeship. Also, it is transferred from father to children.

The result of this study also showed that blacksmith is still being practiced but at a reduced rate. At the moment, blacksmiths in Awka are feeling abandoned and ill-treated by the society and the government. Finally, in the result the iron work of Awka blacksmiths have aesthetic qualities like balance, rhythm and hierarchy.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the result of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Awka residents should improve their patronage of blacksmith Products as a way of encouraging those in the trade.
2. The government of Anambra State should provide modern tools for blacksmithing in Awka and make them pay back in terms of tax.
3. More and more young men and women in Awka should be encouraged to learn blacksmith trade as a way of reducing the rising unemployment rate in Nigeria.
4. Further studies should be expanded to cover more areas in Nigeria like Nsukka and other neighbouring smithing communities for better understanding and comparison.

In the process of conducting this study, the researcher was confronted with experienced some limitations. First, most of the blacksmiths contacted refused to speak insisting that the researcher must pay five thousand naira and also provide some refreshment items like kola nut and wine. All attempts to

convince them that the essence of the study was for academics failed. The researcher eventually had to comply before the interview was held. During the interview session, there was a language challenge as some of the respondents, especially the elderly ones could not speak English language fluently. The researcher had to conduct such interviews in Igbo and transcribed to English Language.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated the origin and history of blacksmithing in Awka. Based on the result of this study, the researcher concludes that blacksmithing began in Awka through a migrant from Enugu who visited the area. The researcher also concludes that at the moment, there is a significant reduction in the activities of blacksmithing in Awka as those who are still plying the trade are not enthusiastic about it. Also, at the moment, blacksmith in Awka are feeling abandoned by the government and elders in their communities as well as the society generally. This thinking is already influencing their relationship with the larger society as they now insist on being paid before granting any interview. This study also concludes that Awka iron works have aesthetic qualities. The basic contribution of this study is that it has provided evidence for understanding the origin of blacksmithing in Awka, which has different accounts, some of which are not based on empirical evidence. Also, this study has provided empirical evidence for understanding the current state of blacksmithing in Awka as well as its future. This understanding is very essential because it has provided a guide on specific areas of interventions in improving the fortune of blacksmithing in Awka.

### **Photographs of the Interview Sessions**



**Plate 1:** An Interview with Chief Anakweze, one of the Eldest Smith in Awka.  
Photo by Sculptor Chisom 2017



**Plate 2:** Smithing in progress. Photo by Nzoiwu, Azuka 2017

### **Some of the Awka Blacksmith's Works**



**Plate 9: Ngwu Nmanwu (Staff of Masquerade).** It is used to Indicate where a masquerade is, so as to scare People from going to the Spot. It is also used by the native doctor. Photo by Nzoiwu, Azuka 2017.



**Plate 12: Alo (Big Gong)** It is used for Musical Instrument Photo by Nzoiwu, Azuka 2017



**Plate 14: Ogene Mkpi na-abo (Twin Gong)** Used for Shrine activities, Masquerade dance and Traditional purposes. Photo by Nzoiwu, Azuka 2017

*(A Publication of Tansian University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies)*



**Plate 15: Ngwu Ana (Digger)** It is Used for Harvesting yam in the Farm Photo by Nzoiwu, Azuka 2017



**Plate 19: Nwangwu Ana (Small Digger)** It is used for planting vegetables, Seeds of plant Photo by Nzoiwu, Azuka 2017

*(A Publication of Tansian University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies)*



**Plate 20: Isiogu (Head of a Hoe)** It is Used for Farming Photo by Nzoiwu, Azuka 2017



**Plate 22: Ite Okpukpu (Casting Pot)** Used for Cooking Food Photograph by Nzoiwu, Azuka 2017

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