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Dynamics of Dida Loincloth Weaving in the Lôh-Djiboua, Divo Department (Ivory Coast)

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ABSTRACT: This study addresses the evolution of weaving techniques in Lôh-Djiboua by comparing traditional practices and adapted modern innovations. The aim of the work is to explain how Dida artisans adapt to new economic realities and manage to preserve their know-how. To do this, the work combines the historical method and ethnography with a material base in the form of tools and an impact of transmission of knowledge and skills. Thus, it emerges from the study that the Dida artisans of Lôh-Djiboua continue to adapt their traditional weaving techniques to specific economic requirements, ultimately integrating developments such as engines. However, they retain certain initial practices, in particular the use of raffia and organic dyes. On a final level, the transmission of knowledge is also done orally despite the modernization process.

KEYWORDS: Weaving, Lôh-Djiboua, Tradition, Innovation, Transmission

1. INTRODUCTION

In Africa, artisanal skills occupy an essential place in the social, economic and symbolic organization of many societies. Whether it is weaving or basketry techniques, more than technical gestures, they implement forms of cultural identity and social structuring inherited and transmitted through generations (Lemonnier 1992; Gosselain 2000). Long considered fixed, these practices are facing significant upheavals due to globalization, urbanization of populations, the disaffection of younger generations for learning this knowledge and the use of industrial materials and tools (Tabard, 2010; UNESCO, 2003; Hauenstein-Swan 2004).

In Côte d'Ivoire, these dynamics are particularly visible in rural areas where traditional craft activities have long been the economic basis of households. Examples include the Senufo of the North, who are adept at hand weaving, or the Akan and those lagoon peoples who produced basketwork, both large and fine, for sale or use (UNESCO, 2003; Kouadio, 2016; Ahui , 2019). The way in which technical know-how and skills have gradually been incorporated into local products and discursive practices provides an impressive insight into the importance of these activities for the identities of the communities concerned. But changes in habitat, increased schooling, rural-urban mobility, and the increased presence of cheap imported manufactured goods have completely transformed the conditions under which these skills can be reproduced.

Thus, the study of weaving techniques is of particular interest today, since local societies face contradictory needs to safeguard their cultural heritage and to integrate into modern industrial economies. In many cases, the transmission of this technique is threatened with interruption, so that a very detailed analysis of both its ancient forms and its recent developments is essential. In a context where all techniques are the product of a social and cultural environment, technical mutations or transmissions must be understood as expressions of broader social dynamics (Leroi-Gourhan, 1943).

It is in this context that the present research is situated, which focuses particularly on the evolution of artisanal weaving techniques in Lôh Djiboua (Divo). By analyzing what this reveals about the relationships of the communities studied with tradition, modernity and innovation. More precisely, it is part of a perspective of describing traditional manufacturing processes, to analyze current innovations. In this respect, the question that emerges is the following: How have weaving techniques evolved over time? The objective of this present article aims to show the evolution of weaving techniques in the department of Divo.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a methodological approach combining the associated historical method and the ethnographic method. This approach consisted of the analysis of craft practices in a local context. Indeed, the historical phase is based on the approach of Le Goff (1996) who conceives cultural history as a means of understanding mentalities, gestures, and knowledge that are incorporated in everyday objects. To this end, it was necessary to collect various data on techniques , in particular ancient production techniques

(materials used, instruments and processes as well as the methods of transmission) and current ones (**evolution** of materials, modernization of tools). and transmission methods). This collection of documentary data also involved the analysis of the ecological framework and plant resources available for study by using the tools of human geography (Claval , 1995).

This historical exploration was combined with an ethnographic survey, understood as capturing the logic of actors, according to de Sardan (1995). The semi-directive interview was formalized in qualitative method by de Singly (1996) and by Kaufmann (2011). Rich and contextualized stories were thus collected from artisans, elderly people, and members of the community who had a memory of the gesture or a proximity to the knowledge in question.

Oral tradition, taken as the main source of historical and cultural data, is based on the approach of Vansina (1985) and consisted of collecting life stories, testimonies and narrations of experiences linked to weaving, with the aim of preserving knowledge threatened by disappearance.

Data collection also included interviews with former craftsmen, relatives who held memories, and residents who had encountered or learned, even briefly, the techniques observed. The observation of technical gestures, in line with Leroi-Gourhan (1943, 1965), allows for a detailed description of the operations of transforming materials, the tools used, and the interactions between the actors.

The cross-referencing of the analysis between historical sources, oral accounts and observational data finally made it possible to structure an analysis around the material and symbolic dimensions of weaving, its possible combinations and additional or satellite dimensions identified as such. This structuring made it possible to highlight the transformations and continuities.

3. RESULTS

This study aims to analyze the evolution of weaving techniques, emphasizing the interdependence of ancient and modern methods in the weaving profession. Focusing on both traditional practices transmitted through intergenerational inheritance and new innovative solutions such as the modernization of tools and the introduction of new materials, this study examines the avenues that weaving has taken to modify the quality, duration, and transmission of knowledge. The results show an example of relationships between respect for traditions and new economic realities.

3.1. Ancient techniques of the weaving trade (textile)

This section explores ancient weaving practices, including traditional materials, tools, and processes, as well as how expertise is passed on. Natural materials, such as roots and leaves, among others, play a fundamental role in the painting process, while ancient tools ensured the transmission of skills to artisans and the quality of the work. Moreover, transmission methods based on observation and learning within the family help preserve this expertise.

3.1.1. Materials used

The materials used in traditional Dida weaving techniques are directly derived from the same natural environment and, specifically, from the palm species common in their forest ecosystem. Examination of the respondents' verbal materials reveals an almost taxonomic knowledge of the variation in these species, acquired through observation and repeated use. The artisans interviewed indicate that there are several species of palm race, but one species is generally used: the *raffia branch* , which they use to make a loincloth. The raffia branch is a young palm extracted before maturity from the rachis, valued by the artisans for its malleability and used in fine crafts.

"We have several types of palm trees in our bush, but we don't use just any palm tree to make the loincloth. We use raffia. It's longer, more flexible. When you scrape it well, it makes a good thread. It's what our parents always used, and we say it's good."

This distinction suggests both the ability to differentiate species based on empirical botanical criteria and knowledge of the technical properties of each raw material.

"We have several species of palm tree. To make the loincloth, we use raffia branches, which are another species of palm tree. This one is a little different from the others, so that's what we use. If you take another species and grate it, the thread breaks or it doesn't look pretty."

As can be seen in the analyzed statements, the artisans interviewed are able to distinguish *"several species of palm tree"* . However, not all species can be used to make the loincloth. They specify that only one is ideal to use: the raffia branch. On the one hand, this material is selected according to its technical qualities: it must be as flexible as it is durable.

Furthermore, they also mention the knowledge transmitted as explained here in the previously reported remarks: in this sense, the choice of material is not only a rational choice, but also a choice linked to quality. The craftsmen strive to find a thread that would appear to be both strong and flexible and that serves their objectives. This is what is meant in the extract from an interview conducted with a craftsman. This interview extract also mentions a kind of local expertise integrating knowledge, the demand for quality and the cultural tradition that are carried out in this act with a coherent meaning.

"It's about first extracting the raffia, the raffia branches which will then be processed to extract the threads. And these threads will then follow several processes to produce threads capable of being woven.

Ultimately, by emphasizing the specific choice of this type of material, the artisans highlight its proven technical qualities. They mention that by opting for another variety, *"the thread breaks or it is not pretty,"* proof of a distinguished know-how built on feedback and oral tradition. There is therefore no coincidence in the choice of raffia but a judicious combination of technical performance, quality of execution and cultural perpetuation. It is an integrated expertise that is combined around ecological knowledge, the duty of excellence in craftsmanship and traditional heritage.

However, after gathering the materials, it is also necessary to have the techniques and instruments needed to transform the fibers into thread that can be used in weaving. Thus, the entire weaving production process depends on specific muscle movements and the use of traditional tools. These elements are key characteristics that fuel the creativity of Dida artisans. Furthermore, it is worth studying in more detail the precise techniques that are used and the instruments used.

3.1.2. Instruments and procedures

Data analysis reveals that traditional weaving among the Dida is based on a set of technical processes that are complex but simple in their execution, exploiting collective human skills as well as rudimentary but ingenious techniques and tools. These processes, although they seem ingenious in their elaboration, reflect an arrangement of work, works, and the knowledge system in general inherited and transmitted orally. It is an oral technicality based on experience, repetition, and coordination of communities. From another point of view, the artisans show how work is organized and shared while revealing the social communication of the artisans. The organization of the work fits well with an intergenerational transmission perspective, since the practice of the elders remains a very present reality and taken up by the younger generations. Beyond the instruments and processes clearly observable in the photography and description, some craftsmen evoke other processes used in the past to treat raffia, which is in danger of disappearing, but which appear to be contextually ingenious. This is also what is reflected in this interview extract quoted below:

"Otherwise, before, for those who weave by hand, we don't dry it, we smoke it. Our mothers made granaries for the rice, when they cut the raffia, when they extract it, they throw it into the granary so that the smoke can dry. And when it's dried in the granary, the raffia is still well made, is still very soft. What is dried in the granary doesn't bend. When you remove the leaf from the branch and extract the raffia, the fibers remain intact. It's as if it's always ironed. [1]. »

The interviewed artisans reveal different ways of drying raffia used in the past, such as drying the fibers used in this document, for example. Here, this method was combined with the smoking process. The artisans report that their grandparents dried the tufts of fibers near the smoke. This technique highlights the possible association of such technology with their daily living environment: the rice granary. The latter was adapted to process raffia in the past. In this setting, the raffia is smoked to allow the fibers not only to harden over time but also to preserve their softness. This method is not new, as it has been used long ago and passed down from generation to generation by their parents, according to them. Furthermore, smoking is also responsible for the general preservation of the fiber's shape. This gives it a soft and smooth appearance, made for the weaving process, as evoked by the words in bold below. Thus, the techniques used could alternate flexibly.

From the above, the practices exposed, older and attached to the domestic environment, had to adapt to local constraints. The latter could be considered as "evolving know-how" acquired through the experience of individuals and transmitted from generation to generation by experience and imitation. However, it is necessary to observe more closely how the transmission of these production practices actually takes place within the Dida craft communities of Loh-Djiboua.

Photo: Hand weaving technique

[1]Interview with Galé Dakoury Abel, op.cit.

3.1.3. Transmission methods

The data analysis extends the aforementioned artisanal practices, revealing the continuity of the forms of transmission whose lines of force refer to family and gender relations. Indeed, the way in which one learned to weave and process raffia was based on informal practice, on site, in the domestic circle and even better in a hermeneutist approach, that is to say, participation in daily activities. The women, equipped with this knowledge par excellence, gradually transmitted the skills on the job to those who were still young girls. In this context, multigenerational family relationships called for the grandmother to opportunely teach her daughter so that the latter could train, and later transmit these skills to her own daughter. This exchange of knowledge did not require formalization, based on availability, daily proximity and trust. The main characteristic is the direct interrelation, the repetition of gestures and collaboration. Such an intergenerational transmission framework guaranteed the preservation of the craft tradition itself, as reflected in the following interview extract:

"Before, our mothers learned from our grandparents, they showed them without any problem. Before, to learn, it was only women, that is to say our mothers, who learned from our grandmothers. They were always available to help our grandmothers in the different tasks they did. So that's how they learned and they too, in turn, showed us."

This type of transmission, which is based on the imitation and repetition of gestures, daily co-presence within the home and the intergenerational link between women, exposes, on the one hand, an apprenticeship presented in the context and incorporates on the other hand, a real inscription of artisanal know-how in the central core of the social and family structure. In this context, other working artisans refer to the weaving profession as a family heritage, emphasizing that:

"It's a family heirloom. Before, in the 90s, it was only women who did it; men didn't do this activity."

Furthermore, the term heritage implies an additional burden of symbolism and identity where history is not simply a technical division of tasks, but is also part of family memory. In other words, there is a cultural dimension that is not based on formalization, but is carefully preserved, valued and devolved as an act of social continuity and status within the group.

3.2. Current techniques

The traditional craft of weaving, particularly the Dida loincloth, has undergone a process of evolution driven by economic and social changes. The use of new materials and tools has significantly increased the speed and quality of production. However, this evolution has also led to changes in the ways in which traditional knowledge is transmitted. Today, traditional practices are exposed to contemporary challenges while being informed by the past, revealing a harmonious balance between innovation and the preservation of traditions.

3.2.1. Evolution of materials

The development of the materials used in the manufacture of a Dida loincloth is essentially based on respect for indigenous natural resources. Indeed, all the components used for dyeing, which is considered the decisive phase of production, are based on biodegradable materials, such as roots, leaves, shells, and aged wood, among others.

However, nowadays, we are seeing new materials being introduced into the Dida loincloth. In the past, raffia fibers were used exclusively in weaving the textile. Today, artisans use polyester-based threads in addition to raffia fibers to make the resulting fabric shine.

In addition, chemical colors are now used in dyeing Dida fabrics.

Indeed, some customers request other colors. As a result, to satisfy customers, artisans are forced to turn to industrial dyes. These industrial dyes are obtained through Malian women who dye their loincloths indigo. However, there is a difference between natural and industrial dyes. For those who know how, they can tell them apart at first glance. The brightness of fabric dyed with natural dyes is darker than that of fabric dyed with industrial dyes.

However, with the demands of modernity and technological innovations, the modernization of traditional tools used in this profession is also a relevant issue to study. In this way, it will allow us to understand how artisans reconcile the preservation of traditional knowledge of this profession and the need for creation with the demand of the market and modern technology.

3.2.2. Modernization of tools

The renovation picture concerns the tools of work, the skills and the hand at work, and finally the production power. Modernized weaving tools are a good combination of adaptations of the loom to modern work. Previously, it was a manual and handmade process, which allowed a weaver to spend weeks and months, even to produce a simple piece. On the other hand, the slowness and scarcity were due to the lack of strong commercial demand, and did not require rapid production.

However, with the development of the market and increased pressure from customers, artisans had to rethink their approach to produce on demand more quickly. Some therefore found new ways of weaving, inspired by other local craft methods. These made it possible to simplify and speed up the production process. In addition, the idea of adopting not only a modern approach, but even

technologies such as motors, emerged. This phase of evolution can therefore also be seen as the introduction of strategic changes, aimed at maintaining the heritage and fully meeting customer expectations, as can be read from the following verbatim:

"Our parents weaved by hand and it was slow and to weave a loincloth they could do one month two months. Because before they didn't market it so it was slow. But today when we market it and where customers put pressure on us, we have to find a slightly accelerated production technique and I adapted our parents' weaving there to the weaving of the Baoulé loincloth and so with the looms it's a bit fast. Today we are also thinking about modernizing it with motors, how we are going to satisfy the customers, that's what we are looking for. [2]"

Beyond this reflection on the modernization of tools and weaving itself, it is essential to note the impact of industrialization, particularly chemical dyes, on the quality of the final product. From this perspective, while products dyed according to traditional directions were extremely durable and appeared to be of exceptional quality, the use of chemicals radically changes the balance here. Thus, lending themselves to the question of the balance between innovation and the preservation of quality, the artisans note with disgust the difference between the loincloth treated with traditional dyes and these products, expressed by the craftsmen in the following way:

"What our parents had before, today, is still there. We, who did not see our parents weaving, and the loincloths they wove before, those loincloths still exist. And have always been well preserved. There you go, the shine is still there. But today, with industrial dyeing, if we add industrial dye to the loincloths, not only is the shine not there, and since the dye is chemical, it degrades the loincloth. This means that the loincloth rots quickly. The loincloth rots quickly because people put acid on it."[3]

The statements from this speech reveal a significant contrast between traditional techniques and industrial methods, and in this case, the industrial dyes used to weave the loincloth. Indeed, the artist believes that the loincloths woven by his parents in his time are still of excellent quality and have retained their original luster. This demonstrates the effectiveness of traditional methods with the use of natural dyes that benefited both the materials and the final product. In all fairness, this fabric has proven to be durable for years, something that now seems difficult to achieve with industrial dyes.

This trend demonstrates the tension between the artisanal heritage, which aims to preserve quality and inherited knowledge, and the benefits of using modern technologies, whose production efficiency does not preserve the quality and purity of the product. As a result, it raises the critical question of the compatibility of modernity and weaving tradition.

Photo: Loom technique

3.2.3. Transmission methods

According to the analyzed data, the nature of the transmission of the weaving profession, as indicated by several artisans, has been fundamentally influenced by socioeconomic factors. Indeed, as some artisans point out, the impact of economic constraints has influenced career choices in this activity. In the past, the craft of weaving the Dida loincloth was traditionally passed down from generation to generation, with mothers teaching their skills to their daughters. However, with changing preferences and the intensification of financial pressure, this process has been interrupted due to the changing economic preferences of young people.

Furthermore, other artisans emphasize that weaving is not their core profession, but that they have integrated it due to a lack of financial means to support themselves. The economic dimension of craftsmanship thus underlines the role of economic factors in changing the mode of transmission of knowledge, or, in other words, their adaptation to modern realities. Then, although learning

[2]Interview with the president of the Divo artisans, op.cit.

[3]Interview with Galé Abel, president of the artisans, Divo on March 14, 2025

through observation and experience remains integral, these new economic realities therefore change the relationship with this profession and also the modes of transmission in the past, based on kinship ties. This is explained through this interview excerpt:

" *Today you see, money often pushes us to certain things, otherwise it was our mothers who used to weave it. At one point the Dida loincloth itself had disappeared, there was no one to take over... I didn't come into this profession because I loved it, but it was because of a lack of means that I came into this profession."*

As can be seen, the preceding aspects of the analysis highlight the impact of a number of economic constraints on the career choices of artisans, as well as changes in apprenticeship itself. Thus, a redefinition of economic practices and preferences dictated by efficiency and economics has also led to a certain readjustment of these aspects. On the one hand, this reflects an adaptation to new economic realities. And on the other, a critical aspect of this adaptation is linked to the organizational change of work, as one of the artisans acknowledges through the following interview extract:

"When I go, I can go with a team of twenty people because one person cannot remove it. You have to go into the lowlands, cut, come, remove the fibers and then dry them. One person cannot do it like most of our parents before and we have to pay these people [4] *."*

The verbatim account highlights the change in the organization of weaving, which requires a greater amount of labor. Whereas previously a single artisan carried out the stages from spinning to shearing, it is now necessary to hire several workers to collect and process the fiber. This could be interpreted as a change in the nature of the craft itself compared to the materialist history counted in terms of reorganization and increased productive capacities, with the added cost of paying the team. This example of verbatim illustrates the transition caused by changes in the outside world, namely the need to adjust the craft to the increased productivity due to the economic necessity and modernization with which it must now contend.

These findings demonstrate the extent to which artisans face dilemmas in their current practices. The lack of intergenerational sharing and the obligation to practice the activity for economic reasons are examples of how financial practices have altered and restricted the means and methods of integrating and practicing the activity. With the new generation, however, the situation is different. However, this situation is evolving with the new generations. Another artisan evokes the aspect of more affective transmission and the reintroduction of the family dimension in training:

But the one who trained me, she was the one who gave me the most love for this profession. She told me: my son, today you are crying but tomorrow you will not cry anymore. It is the heritage of our family that I am leaving you. In 90, there were no men, it was only women. It was from 96, 97 that I began to train my first team, men and women.[5]

As can be seen from the interview excerpt above, the artisans emphasize that love for the craft and heritage are key factors to consider, despite economic difficulties and the loss of tradition. Furthermore, they highlight a significant contrast: the transformation of the craft with the increasing involvement of men, whereas, until now, it was exclusively dominated by women. Stories of men practicing crafts then began to circulate and made it a highly valued practice. Moreover, the training of novice artisans became more or less personal and familial, as the artisan was involved in the role of mentor and emotional bond, as he also played the role of transmitter of knowledge to aspiring artisans. Therefore, this case study explains how tradition can be modified and reinterpreted to meet the demands of a new economic context.

4. DISCUSSION

Ultimately, the study of Lôh-Djiboua weaving techniques revealed a highly dynamic process where traditional methods that are being rethought for current economic needs exist side by side with technical innovations and changes in transmission methods. The results obtained attest to the pace of adaptation to socio-economic restrictions and under external influences, making it possible to highlight the extent to which traditional crafts are facing major changes.

The evolution of weaving among the Dida, as well as the use of motors to accelerate the process, shows how techniques evolve while remaining linked to cultural heritage, a theme also addressed in the research conducted by Guchet (2008), emphasizing technique as an entity that is other than biological processes and is above all a human creation subject to social and cultural contexts. As for the model of Zarca (2013), taken in the example of Dida weaving, demonstrates a cooperative mode of operation, where a skilled employer, a weaver, works alongside his employees, transmitting the method and his specific knowledge. This horizontal organization allows for a natural transfer of knowledge, preserves social unity and maintains good personal contacts, while following the general rules of artisanal work in the community.

[4] Interview with Galé Dakoury Abel, op.cit.

[5]Interview with Galé Dakoury Abel, 47 years old, weaver, Thursday March 3, 2022 in Divo.

Akakpo's (2018) study of African orality highlights how traditional skills, particularly in crafts, such as weaving among the Dida, are transmitted orally and through a form of imitation. This practice is the main response that helps traditional knowledge escape the rapid pace of modernization and economic pressures. This work highlights the significance of orality as a vector of continued cultural existence even in an environment filled with various social and economic upheavals.

Leroi-Gourhan's (1936) approach, which emphasizes techniques as a continuous expression of social relations, is useful for illustrating the mechanisms to which traditional loincloth weaving and other artisanal technical formations are subjected from the outside. In other words, the dynamics of weaving are never static, but in most cases, manifest themselves through the conflicting relationships of traditions with human innovations. Therefore, the tension between innovation and conformity, between man, nature and technology, is fully applicable to the evolutionary context of the Dida loincloth weaving process.

Just as Gosselain (2021) advocates for documenting the indigo dyeing technique before it disappears, so too does the weaving of the Dida loincloth. Indeed, these skills and the lifestyle they entail must be preserved before they are completely erased by current modernization. Although documentation efforts focus on maintaining a record of the techniques, there is clearly a tension between the need to adapt them to modern economic demands and the desire to preserve inherited characteristics.

CONCLUSION

This study on the dynamics of weaving in the lôh-djiboua region of Divo Department was designed to understand how weaving artisans combine traditional tools and practices with modern innovations to remain competitive in the market and maintain the sustainability of their activity. The methodology used is a combination of historical and ethnographic analysis that specifically draws on the transmission of knowledge over time, through material artifacts and human informants. The results show that, although artisans incorporate elements, such as motors, to improve the efficiency of their production, they continue to use materials such as raffia and natural dyes. Moreover, despite the growing influence of modernity, the oral transmission of knowledge remains the most important means of preserving techniques. However, this study has limitations in terms of the many distinct practices that have evolved locally and the exact means of quantifying the impact of modernity on the knowledge retained by younger generations of artisans. For the future, it would be relevant to strengthen efforts to document this knowledge and integrate intergenerational training with modern tools, in order to preserve a balance between innovation and tradition in a constantly evolving context.

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