
USING RAFFIA AS COSTUME FOR THEATRE PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Raphia Palm has been known in many African Countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, Madagascar, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Republic of Zaire. Some species can also be found in Central/ North and South American countries like Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Mexico, Colombia and Brazil. Its genetic name derives from the Greek Raphis because of its needles and sting from its pointed fruits. They are mostly found along Africa's western coast, over woody marshlands or along river banks. The fermented Palm wine obtained from the raphia is used for the distillation of local gin used in many African traditional festivals and ceremonies like marriages, coronations, dedications, social gatherings and even for pouring libation by traditional rulers and traditionalists. The raphia leaves are used for the manufacture of raffia products such as shoes, bags, mats, hats and wrappers. Also, the piassava, the coarse, stiff, brown fibre obtained from the leaf-sheaths is used for rope making, construction of thatched buildings, production of local gun powder, making of brushes and fish traps. Infact, almost all parts of the raphia palm; the roots, the trunks, the leaves, the inflorescence and the fruits are of economic value. Despite the varied economic uses of the raphia palm and the expansion of its cultivation, not much has been documented on it in terms of its uses in the theatre. This paper seeks to discuss the use of raffia fronds, which is the upper cuticle of a young raphia leaflet, in creating, developing and designing costumes for theatre performance. The paper will however discuss other economic importance of raphia, raffia production, and raffia weaving in Akwa Ibom State, and the use of raffia as costumes.

KEYWORDS: Raffia Production, Akwa Ibom State, Raffia, Costume, Theatre Performance

Introduction

The raphia palm (*raphia farinifera*) grows widely in tropical rain forest zones and in western soils in Madagascar, Africa and the Philippines. According to Otedoh, "Scientific investigations have shown that more than 20 species of raphia palms exist in West Africa (1977:11). He mentions that *Raphia taedigera* is the only species of raphia palm found growing in the swampy areas of Central America and in South America. Since it requires high temperature, high relative humidity, and prolonged sunshine hours for adequate growth, raphia palm grows well in areas with a range of 1.500 to 1.400mm of rainfall per year. It is a tropical tree crop that requires a maximum temperature of about 29°C to 33°C and minimum temperature of 22°C to 24°C for adequate growth. This specie was probably introduced to these areas from West Africa during the slave trade era more than 480 years ago. Some species exist in isolated abundance, forming almost pure stands, and dominating the swampy ecosystem. Their crowns may form complete and dense canopy, making it difficult for other plants to compete with them (Ndon, 2003:21).

According to Otedoh (1977:12), "there are over 20 species of raphia palms and about 8 species are discovered in Nigeria". The raphia palms are found in nearly every state of

Nigeria, extending from the Rivers State on the South east to Sokoto State in the North West, and from Lagos State in South West extending to Adamawa State in the north east. The trunk grows up to about nine metres high and the upper part is conspicuously tangled with a mass of black fibres called *Nyang* by the Efik. According to Umoette, “there are about 80-100 leaflets, each measuring about 60-180cm long and 3-5cm broad, strapped in pairs along a very large midrib” (1985:44).

Almost all parts of the raphia palm are of economic value. They include: the roots, the trunks, the inflorescence, the fruits, the seeds and the leaves. The roots are of medicinal use by local farmers and traditional healers. From Ndon, “the young roots are ground with alligator pepper and placed around a swollen part of the body to stop further inflammatory swelling. They are also used in the treatment of abdominal pains and reduction of pains, as well as in healing of boils” (2003:16). The trunks are used as building materials, pulp for papermaking, fire wood, and breeding grounds for useful insect larvae. Various roof coverings are made out of its fibrous branches and leaves. The raphia inflorescence is tapped and sipped as palm wine, native or local gin. It is an essential drink in traditional ceremonies and festivals. The palm wine is a great source for treating measles in children and the bottled wine is sold fresh or refined in Nigeria and also exported to other countries. The fruits: a single palm can bear between 500 and 5,000 fruits, used as growth regulators, fish poison, human food, raphia oil and raphia seeds. The raphia leaves are very useful. A single leaf is subdivided into rafter, leaflets, shaft, which produces raffia, roofing mat, piassava, bamboo, broom, black fibre, all obtained from the raffia leaves.

According to Ndon, “the raffia frond is the upper cuticle of a young raphia leaflet removed and dried under the sun” (2003:10). The leaves of the palm tree are used for weaving baskets, mats, etc. It is also widely used for agricultural purposes to tie vegetables, plants in vineyards, flowers and floral ornaments. The raffia which is crowned with enormous leaves that may be as long as 65ft (19.8m) and composed of between 80 and 100 leaflets, is produced from the younger leaves of several species of raphia palms that grow throughout most of the forest regions in sub-Saharan Africa. Like jute and hemp twine, raffia is a natural fibre that can be woven like straw, tied like silk ribbons or packed like Styrofoam pills. Milliners, crafters and florists enjoy using raffia for a variety of projects and gifts. Raffia is a versatile product that can be crafted into such things as dolls’ hairs, ribbons, farmers hats, sun and winter hats, belts, sleeping mats, table mats, cover shoes, slippers and sandals, necklaces, bags, masquerades’ garments, decorative furniture and mats, hand fans, key holders, strap belts, hair packs/clips, wrist/hand bands, ropes, beach and modernized wears and cloths. They are also used as decorative items for tying a little bow around oil, jam, vinegar, wine bottle, soap packets, candles and boxes.

Newly removed raffia is yellowish to tan in colour but it can be dyed into other colours. The fibre, which is soft, pliable, strong, durable and non-shrinking when wet, is torn in thin strips. Elaborate patchwork costumes can be created with alternating squares of dyed and un-dyed raffia which are sometimes designed. In recent times, raffia has enjoyed continuous use in many parts of West Africa, such as among the Southern Igbos, the Ibibios and the Annangs of Nigeria, in Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, to mention but a few.

RAFFIA PRODUCTION

The raffia fibre comes from the leaves of a palm called raphia palm of the Arecaceae. Umoette says that it is regarded as a non-spun fibre and obtained from the tender leaf of raffia palm (*Raphia hookeri*) (1985:44). Its production is a multiple process, starting from the collectors going deep into the forest to harvest the raffia palm, to the climbing of the raphia palm with the use of bamboo ladder, and cutting of the young bamboo fronds with a machet. The strapping young leaves cut from the tree are then gathered home for processing while

still fresh. One leaf at a time is bent back, broken and pilled from the tip of the spiny edge to separate the fibre from the glossy side of the leaf. The fibre is soft, pliable, strong and non-shrinking when wet. The striped freshly cut pale green strand are then sunned dry. According to Ndon, "The raphia spear leaf which is at the stage of opening up the leaflets is always harvested for the extraction of raffia. The harvested leaf can be soaked overnight in water to facilitate the separation of the individual leaflets. The entire spear leaf can force open the leaflets by shaking it for several times. Each cuticle is peeled off starting from the leaflet apex to the base, such that each leaflet will produce two long raffia fibres. The extracted raffia may be washed with water and then dried under the sun for a day or two. They are tied together in large bundles in order not to tangle during further processing. (2003:132). The dried raffia fibers turn beige in colour to yield the natural colour known of raffia. This is characterized by flexibility and fineness and it is called *Ndam* in Ibibio, and the palm tree called *Ukot*. Umoette confirms that after being dried in the sun, the fibre takes a yellowish-tan hue (1985:44).

Raffia could be used dyed or un-dyed. It is often dyed with different colours, apart from the natural yellowish-tan hue used for weaving. Raffia is normally soaked in water to be wet so it would allow for easy penetration of the dye. The water also helps to split the fibre and separate them from each other so that the dye gets into the fibre very easily to produce good result. Warm water could be used depending on individual choice or public demand. To Umoette, "the raffia is dipped in a dye-bath (which could be local earthen-ware pots, enamel basins or plastic containers) until a good exhaustion is achieved" (1985:45). The raffia bundles are soaked in the desired colour dye for about 5 to 12 hours and thereafter removed and hung or dried in the sun for another 3 to 6 hours to drip-dry. Local dyes have been used by the Ibibio and Annang for dyeing of various colours (red, green, blue-black, black, yellow and purple) of raffia fibres. The dyeing is intended to improve the luster and aesthetic appeal of the product. These dyes are extracted, purified and sold even in the open markets. As mentioned by Umoette, "in the past, most of the pigments in the form of earth colours and vegetable dye were collected by women, since they knew the methods of preparation and preservation of the dyes and colours. Today, the cheaper, easily prepared and ready to use imported dyes and colours, have replaced the more difficult-to-extract traditional dyes and colour" (1985:45). The colours are mixed together to produce different effects, for instance, red and green; yellow and blue become dull brown and green respectively. Harmonious colours are produced as different dyes are mixed together.

The raffia strands are then brought into warehouses, where they are stored and separated according to their colour, texture, fiber length and width. They could be formed into curls or tightly twisted braids such that when opened and spread, leaves the fibres full bodied and curly. Each quality is then transferred to another section; it would be put into raffia hanks, bulls, braids, or spools. The processes of harvesting, to dyeing, and to packing are done manually by the local people.

Raffia Weaving in Akwa Ibom State

Raffia weaving is a traditional art of the Ibibio and Annang ethnic groups of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The indigenous people of Ikot Ekpene are the Annang and they are mostly farmers. They were and are still known for hand-crafts as carving and raffia weaving. Their artwork was originally made for rituals and religious purposes, but today with changes in the society, they have worked to improve and modernize the same for wider use by customers. Put differently, their artwork has been greatly influenced by modern trends and demands. Ikot Ekpene has a long history of transforming the raffia fibre into clothing for the body. Today, they are now used in making such things as shoes, hats, mats, handbags, table covers, deck-chairs, necklaces, blouses, skirts and wrappers. Umoette says that "the original

raffia cloth was called *Ipaya* and was in use before the Europeans first came to this part of Nigeria” (1985:44).

In Akwa Ibom State, raffia weaving was and is still a craft for boys to make money for their clothing, education and other needs. However, today a few elderly men and women who have nothing else to do for a living take to raffia weaving as a trade. The weaving of raffia is a small-scale industry in Akwa Ibom State, which had been adapted to modern demands. The weavers have their own Cooperative Society which organizes retailing in the nearby markets and the craft shops of Ikot Ekpene.

The weaving technology of Ibibio and Annang are extremely simple. The raffia weaving is done with the local vertical, slanting loom (*akpara epat*), made of lengths of palm midrib. It is a simple construction in a rectangular upright frame, with bamboo sticks called *Okokok* or any other type of poles which are light, but strong enough to withstand the strain and tension the loom encounters during weaving. They also make use of tools like hardwood beater or sword (*awat ekrat*); a shuttle (*okob ekrat*); a heddle (*nisang ekrat*) made from two lengths of palm midrib bark and raffia threads.

The loom consists of two main beams which are supported by two upright poles tied together. Within the frames, there is one additional beam or horizontal bar serving as the warp. Tension devices in the form of ropes are provided, and tied to the warp beam. The lower horizontal part of the frame itself also acts as a tension mechanism and stabilizes the loom. The 8-shaped ropes which link the warp and the *ekpat* beam at both inner sides of the vertical poles serve not only as tension mechanism but also as guide from warping sticks and for controlling the length and width of the *ekpat* to be woven (Umoette 1985:46). The size of the loom varies according to the weaver’s requirement, although each has almost the same basic apparatus and requires manual operations of the heddles by a heddle stick or heddle sword. The loom permits the manufacture of small pieces of *ekpat* as required, usually without a selvage and consists of a heddle bar and two horizontal bars between which the warp fibres are extended and secured in groups or hanks. The lower bar is fixed, suspended from the upper bar in a cross beam supported by two poles. The orientation of the loom is unusual in that the face of the weaving leans towards and over the weaver at 45° angle to the ground. The basic cloth unit woven on this loom measures approximately 26 x 28 in size. The sides after weaving are trimmed; the excess and uneven fibres and edges are also either hemmed off or joined together.

After the fibres are gathered and stripped by hand or with the aid of a stripping comb, the basic cloth unit is produced on a single heddle loom. The fabric is usually plain woven, although sometimes a hand manipulated pattern of weft and plain weave combined is produced. After weaving, the cloths are sometimes dyed and sometimes softened by repeated wetting and pounding in a mortar or using the hard-wood beater. Production of the finished fabric involves some basic technique; embroidery, appliqué and patch work. Crafters value raffia for being soft, durable and easy to dye. It could also be tied around packages for an organic, rustic touch. It could be used to braid together lengths of vegetables, such as garlic or onions in order to create hanging autumn decorations in the kitchen.

Raffia as costume for theatre performance

Raffia fibres have many uses, especially in the areas of textiles and construction. The products of raffia weaving include lengths of cloth used for covering car seats, seats of deckchairs, mattresses, etc. Also, a wide variety of hats, mats, shoes and even twine are made from natural raffia. It could be used as a Matte finish for the background of a framed photograph. Several examples of common applications show how versatile and creative raffia can be in embellishing gifts, centerpieces and seasonal projects.

In the past, raffia cloths were used as clothing. In today’s theatre performance, special wrappers with stripped patterns are worn on ceremonial occasions by traditional chiefs and

dancers, alongside masquerades of different kinds. Elaborate patchwork clothes are created with alternating squares of dyed and undyed raffia which sometimes are decorated with embroidered patterns. It varies in complexity and style.

Many types of finished costume components are produced from the woven units and used in theatre performances to depict a real traditional setting of the old. They include; women's skirts, women's overskirts, men's shorts, men and women's headwears – hats, hoods, caps, necklaces, earrings and bangles. The finished clothes are also worn during ceremonial events, primarily of a funerary nature. They are wrapped around the waist layer over layer, creating a voluminous appearance. Depending on the nature of the theatre performance and the performers themselves; boys, girls, men, women, and dancers, etc.; the designing and the colouring of the costumes are determined by the wearers and what they want to showcase. *Ekpo, Ekpe, Ibom, Ekong, Ntok-Odiodio*, and other masquerades of Akwa Ibom State, for example, use dyed raffia in various colours and styles as their traditional costumes. The colours vary depending on the type of masquerade. *Ekpo* masquerade is known for black raffia costume, while *Ekpe, Ibom*, and *Ntok-Odiodio* masquerades use beautifully coloured raffia costume. Also, beautifully coloured raffia costumes are found among the maidens, especially dancers.

According to Okpu, “the early skirt (Ubuluku) was made of raffia weaving done in one plain weave technique, with the use of a small, portable raffia loom called *Ewewe*. It was not a uniform but the type of textile material in vogue at that time and many participants had variations of colours with traditional dyes” (2015:103). This was applicable to the Isoko Local Government Area of Delta State, where raffia was used for Abame festival in Igbide. Even in Akwa Ibom State, the maidens use the costume on their upper bodies to cover their breast and the skirts on their lower bodies. Raffia costumes are also worn on the heads, waists, necks, wrists, ankles and legs of maiden dancers and other dancers as decorative items as well as for cultural identity. The typical Okuyi performer in *Bata*, Equatorial Guinea wears a large, loose costume that supposedly resembles the spirit of the ancestors. Okuyi costumes are made from the raffia palm. In the process of manufacture, the underlying outfit is produced using the woven fabric hessian and the thick woven texture of the raffia forms the skirt for the performer. After the design is complete, the material is covered by frills made from raffia palm which are woven into the hessian fabric.

Today's hats adopted from the western world cannot be used in theatre performance to showcase traditional farmers, hunters, fishermen and even chiefs. Raffia was used many decades ago for handmade and plaited hats used by farmers, hunters, fishermen and traditional title holders. They are still in vogue, and a typical example being the farmers' hats which are still popular today because of their good weaving characteristics. They are found everywhere and used for professional as well as cultural identity. Today, there are well designed hats which the wearer could use for any occasion, depending on when he or she wears it, and for what he or she wears it. In fact, raffia hats are made with modern machines and can be worn by both males and females, young and old, without gender discrimination. Theatre performers also avail themselves of the opportunity and make use of raffia hats which exist in different types, such as the sun hats, cowboy hats, couched hats, straw hats, bobble hats, and many more.

Fashionably designed bags made of raffia cloth are commonly found among the Ibibio and Annang groups of Akwa Ibom State. In the past, raffia bags were mostly used by farmers, fishermen, hunters, wine tappers, herbalists, market men and women. Today, there are still well woven and designed bags of various types, various shapes and different kinds and sizes for different purposes, not far from what was obtained in the traditional society of yesterday. The smaller bags are used as wallets by both males and females, while other sizes are used as gift bags, students and teachers bags for carrying books and other educational

materials, conference bags, phone cases and pauses. Travelers even use raffia bags as luggages. Elders, and in fact, palm wine tappers and oil palm fruit harvesters use raffia bags to carry their drinking horns, cutters (*Onun or Ofit-ibuo Ofit-ukod*), palm wine condiment (*Edat*) and snuff bottles, as the case may be. These are all available for theatre performance to showcase their work in line with what was obtained in the past.

Raffia cloths are used to design shoes of all kinds. In the past, raffia was not used in designing shoes, but with the use of modern technology and facilities, high quality shoes are made with raffia material. Raffia bracelets and necklaces are common in raffia shops and our local markets. Raffia mats, baskets and decorative gourds are also available in the shops and markets. These are all items that serve the purpose of showcasing the lives of the rural dwellers when putting up a theatre performance that has to do with the rural community. Infact, there are other numerous items which could be made from raffia materials in order to rekindle what was obtained in the past.

Conclusion

The economic uses of raphia palm have been well known in many West African countries and beyond. It is completely an environment friendly product. The extraction can maintain and regenerate a forest while providing income to local people. Palm wine and local gin are popular in the socio-economic life of coastal dwellers. The raphia leaves are used for the manufacture of raffia products. The raphia roots, the trunk, the inflorescence, the fruits and the seeds are equally useful, though the raphia palms grow wild in many parts of West Africa and beyond.

Raffia palm leaves, serving as raw materials have been processed into a more refined research value added form and produced into specimens which are then subjected to certain characterization. Only on rare occasions are raffia made for ritual purposes, but production now are mostly geared towards meeting the commercial demands of tourists. Generally, raffia is used for warp, but cotton is mixed in some cases. The designs are relatively varied and fairly complex. Any theatre performance that intends to showcase African traditional society in general and Ibibio/Annang traditional society without using raffia material is driven out of context. From stage decoration to body adornment, the raffia is very useful and cannot be avoided.

It is worth mentioning that as good as raffia products might be, one should not lose sight that the material are almost always damaged by insects or rodents if proper care is not taken. Infact, the materials have a short life and should be placed in a dry and open place to avoid being eaten up by insects or termites. Majority may be soiled and stained with food, water, drinks and other liquid contents during performance. Although the cloth can be washed, blocked, mended or patched, care must be taken to avoid damage. As they pass through regular usage and exposure, they may lose their original colours and forms. If patched, the beauty cannot be regained. Also, they easily drop off depending on how they are woven and thus must be handled with care.

In conclusion, considering the economic uses of raphia palm in general, and the raffia in particular, one would see the need for theatre artists, students, farmers, researchers and small scale industrialists to invest in raffia production to generate income for the country. This will attract tourists and investors to partner with them in the production of raffia for public use.

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