A Threat to the Socio-Economic Role and Significance of Arts and Handicraft Productions in Cameroon: The case of NWEH

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contribution of art and handicraft productions to the socio-economic development of Nweh people in the southwest region of Cameroon. These skills which have greatly helped in shaping the social, cultural and economic landscape of the Nweh people are so important that cultural manifestations, traditional rites and rituals would have been virtually impossible without products like masks, drums, statues, den guns, costumes, gongs, clay pots and other artefacts made by artists. These products of arts have remained a veritable source of income and have been very instrumental in poverty reduction because they are sold within Cameroon and also exported to the Diaspora. According to the paper though arts and handicrafts meet the socioeconomic, cultural and political needs of the Nweh, the skills are threatened by both environmental changes and technological advancements as well as the general preference for imported substitute items which are recently affecting the local skills of the Nweh people. The paper calls for official protection of these works of arts before they disappear in the wake of competition otherwise the people will have nothing to reserve for cultural exchanges, tourism, encouragement of future generations of artists and the safeguard of Nweh cultural heritage.

Key words: competition, Nweh, iconography, arts, handicraft, masks, artefacts.

INTRODUCTION

Handicraft, also known as craftwork or simply craft is a type of work where useful and decorative devices are made completely by hand or using only simple tools. Usually, the term is applied to traditional means of making goods (Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2008). The individual artisanship of the items is a principal criterion; such items often have cultural or religious significance. Items made by mass production or machines are not handicrafts. Usually, what distinguishes the term handicraft from the frequently used category art and craft is a matter of intent; handicraft items are intended to be used, worn, etc having a purpose beyond simple decoration. Handicrafts are generally considered more traditional work, created as a necessary part of daily life while arts and crafts imply more of a hobby pursuit and a demonstration or perfection of a creative technique. In practical terms, these categories have a great deal of overlap. Wright, (2006) for example finds no clear distinction between art and handicraft. Handicrafts are generally considered more traditionally created as a necessary part of daily life, while arts and crafts imply more of a hobby pursuit and a demonstration of a creative technique.

According to OTITE and OGIONWO, (1979: 311) there is hardly any society that does not have its own form of industries. There is a close connection between society and its environment (material resources) on one hand and artistic skills on the other. This view confirms the relationship between
culture and environment. This implies that any development efforts either on the culture of the people or their environment, must take into cognisance this relationship. This view reflects how the Nweh people have over the years developed their own skills and surviving strategies of using resources provided by their environment to meet their own needs. Materials such as wood, seeds and shells obtained from non-timber forest products like mbang (palm kernels), bessheh (njansang) Ricinodendron heudelotii, musanga seeds, raffia bamboo, etc are from their immediate environment. These materials are used in making statues, jewelleries and decoration of houses.

Joseph Marie Essomba in his book l’Art Traditionel au Cameroun, statue et masque (1982: 13) has seen art as the most sensibly dynamic aspect of the African culture. To him, art is a large popular encyclopaedia reflecting the wisdom of the past, the scientific knowledge, the concepts of humanity and universe, the religion, the everyday activities and trades, games and leisure and above all, the story of humanity creating its immortality through ages. According to him, through art works, man expresses the evolution of human intelligence (Essomba 1985: 19). He continues by saying that it is the function that gives art its satisfaction rather than its form or shape.

Over the years, arts and handicraft skills have greatly contributed to poverty reduction and in the socio-cultural and economic development of the Nweh people. Nweh has been recognized by many writers who have written on Cameroonian art as an area rich in artistic skills. Njeuma, and Essomba Joseph Marie, (1982) had the interest to show the Cameroonian public the most remarkable specimens of the sanctuary and of the masks of Cameroonian museum collection. Art objects portrayed are mostly gathered from Foumban, Bangwa (Nweh), Bandjoun, Babungo and Oku. Apart from contributing to the richness of the Cameroonian museum, art objects reflect the needs and value systems of the Nweh people. Thus, these artistic skills have led to the socio-economic development of Nweh people in various ways. They attach a lot of value to the art objects as these objects are used in exhibiting the rich cultural heritage of the Nweh people especially during cultural manifestations. Besides, arts and handicraft fetches them income.

It should be noted that the artistic productions of the Nweh people reflect their main occupations and their value systems. Agricultural, fishing, hunting and trading are virtually impossible without the arts and handicraft productions. This implies that the goods produced meet the basic needs of the people. In his book Development from Below, Pitt (1976) views basic needs framework as an approach through which the indigenous people make use of the resources they have to fashion complex things that help to improve their general welfare. In the same light, Baker (1982) and Baleet et al (1981) as well as Abasiekong (1982) stress that third world development will begin with the ability of its indigenes to produce and control those necessities of life that enhance their general wellbeing. Furthermore, Ekejiuba (1995) stresses that communities are encouraged to mobilize resources essentially for solving self-defined problems and that the basic needs approach emphasizes developing community’s competences and skills essential for providing their interests and needs. It stresses self-reliance and is based on the need for structural transformation that results from group mobilization, participation and even distribution of benefits of development. (Curriculum and course outline on culture and development 1997, model 11, page 5).

Arts and handicrafts are therefore, important aspects of sustainable development. According to the classical definition given by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, development is sustainable if it “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Article one of UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity stresses that culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, the various artistic productions that people have in various communities are the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.
This work explores and exploits the tripartite relationship among culture, environment and development. It recognizes the need to integrate environmental and developmental issues with culture and development of our communities giving the important role of culture in sustainable development. It is observed that the Nweh people use materials which are found in their natural environment such as trees, coconut shells, palm kernels, njangsang seeds (Ricinodendron heudelotii), rejected iron, raffia bamboo and other non-timber forest products in the environment for the production of valuable goods in the community. Thus, culture and environment could be enhanced if development is rooted in the cultural systems of people. Development therefore must take place within the possibilities and limits of the environmental setting of the community. Achieving this goal requires proper understanding and incorporation of cultural values, beliefs and heritage in the development projects.

LOCATION OF NWEH

Nweh lies between longitudes 9°75 E and 10°E and Latitudes 4°4N and 5°75N. It is bounded to the North-West by the Mundani people of Wabane Subdivision, to the West by the Bayangs of the Upper Bayang Subdivision of Manyu Division, to the south by the Mbos and Nkikwas of Nguti Subdivision of Kupe-Muanenguba Division and finally to the East by the Bamilekes of the Menoua Division. The population of Nweh is estimated at 95,317 inhabitants, evenly distributed among the nine fondoms that make up the area. Nweh covers a total land surface area of about 415 square kilometres with a population of about 100 persons per kilometre. Nweh is made up of nine autonomous fondoms, each headed by an independent Fon. These nine fondoms make up what is known as the Nweh tribal group. The Nweh area constitutes over 70% of the total population of Lebialem Division, with Fontem fondom having the highest population density of about 200 persons per square kilometre. This high population density may be explained by the fact that the first settlers in the area settled in Fontem. Also, the strategic location of Fontem on the pre-colonial trade routes linking the Bayang, Mbo and Bamileke areas greatly attracted settlers. The Nweh villages constitute a difficult terrain due to its topography which is characterized by rolling hills, rivers and waterfalls. Due to its difficult topography most of areas are high risk zones which are attractive to human settlements. As such human settlement is greatly dispersed and limited to areas which are habitable. The dispersed settlement patterns and the agricultural activities have led to deforestation and growing extinction of raw materials used for arts and handicraft productions in the Nweh community. Consequently, artists cover several kilometres in search for raw materials, thus incurring higher costs for their products.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected principally with the aid of the qualitative and documentary research. Our target population was the artists, title holders (notables and chiefs) and members of the royal families who are the highest consumers of art objects in Nweh as well as some users of art and handicraft objects. The techniques used in data collection were: in-depth interviews, life history (of artists), direct observation, focus group discussions and iconographic data. These techniques were used to reach informants in the various villages under study. The techniques were very useful in that we came to know why certain objects were made, where their skills originated and how these skills could be improved upon overtime. This technique also helped us to get information on how this sector has functioned over the years, difficulties encountered, the symbols and meaning of artefacts and what could be done to revitalize the artistic sector.

To obtain more information about the artists, where and how they got their skills, and how they have functioned through the years, we used life history as data collection technique. With the help of this technique, we were able to understand problems encountered by the artists, where they obtained their materials, how they acquired their skills, reasons for changes in materials used, and how they are coping with environmental changes resulting from deforestation which have resulted to the gradual extinction of raw materials, and competition with industrial goods. This technique also enabled the
researchers to know the personal experiences and stories known by the artists. One of the artist Pa Nkematabong popularly known as Mbe Tcho was among those who shared his life experience with the researchers. This respondent traced the origin of his smiting skill from a man who left the western region of the country to Fontem for trade. He has in turn transferred the skill to many youths who presently earn their living from the trade.

From direct observation, we noticed that artists spend just small part of their time on artistic work while a greater part is spent in their farms or in doing other jobs like moulding of bricks for construction, hunting, agriculture, etc. This is because money from the sale of artistic objects is unable to sustain the artists and their families. The technique also helped us to observe how artefacts are preserved and also the manner and way the objects were honoured. Value attached to the artefacts could clearly be seen when the researcher wanted to touch an artefact, but was politely told that only special people can touch or carry it. The style and manner in which artefacts were displayed in the homes visited was a clear indication that the Nweh man attaches a lot of value to works of art.

Also through direct observation we were able to notice the various artistic skills that exist in Nweh. We noticed that artists, especially of the older generation made art objects as a surviving strategy, which is creating or making an invention because it was needed by individuals and society. Consequently they looked at the environment and created what they needed out of the resources available in that environment. Today, most of their needs are met with the increase importation of industrial goods. More so, carving done in the past by the older generation carried with it history, symbols or meaning. Today, the younger generation is out for aesthetic beauty of the objects. They admire the beauty and decorations, paying very little attention to history, meaning or symbols. However, some of the objects are today used in criticising societal ills such as greed, while others demonstrate the activities of the Nweh people such as that of men carrying palm nuts, guns and hunting bags. Even though the young artists are still producing a lot of artefacts, we noticed a gradual decline in the creative abilities of the Nweh people.

It was also observed that there is a change in the types of raw materials used by artists. The jewelleries which were formerly made of ivory are now made with the use of seeds and shells obtained from the non-timber forest products.

Besides, some important trees that were used in the past are now facing threats of extinction because they are now used for a variety of purposes and also due to deforestation. As a result artists are gradually replanting trees or trekking to very long distant forests to look for them or use other alternatives. The search for raw materials has increased the work burden of the artists and led to a reduction of income given that fewer goods are made as compared to the past where raw materials were abundant. We also observed the attitude of the artists towards their profession. It was as if they were not satisfied with their working conditions and sales.

The researcher was able to take note of the art objects in the field with the help of iconography, and to verify all the details relating to these objects, so as to bring out the symbols, meaning and the history attached to them correctly. Through the use of iconographic data we noticed the difference between the products of the old generation artists with those of the young generation. The data collected from our informants was analysed with the help of content, iconographic and historical methods of analysis.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**i. Arts, Handicraft Productions and Poverty Alleviation**

Arts and handicraft productions have greatly reduced poverty in Nweh community. Blacksmiths for example produce objects such as hoes, knives, spears and cutlasses and sell to meet their own financial
needs and those of their families. Hoes produced in Nweh according to Pa Nkematabong Tcho, a respondent in this study are beginning to gain national recognition as they are sold in almost all urban towns of Cameroon. According to this respondent during the farming season, the blacksmiths are on constant production and supplying hoes and cutlasses in order to meet the needs of farmers. He went on to explain that many a times the demand for these objects always superseded their supply because fewer people are engaged in this activity when compared to the past. This is due to the fact that many young men prefer to get involved in formal education, while others who do not go to school migrate to the urban areas in search of greener pastures or wider opportunities. Businessmen and women travel from towns and neighbouring Bamileke villages to buy hoes providing the blacksmiths with a means to take care of their children’s educational needs, feed their families as well as meet the health needs of their families. Furthermore, many young men and women buy waste pieces of iron, car parts and saw, in urban areas and transport to the village for the production of hoes and other valuable goods. This practice does not only help to recycle waste iron materials, but also contributes in keeping the towns’ clean as well as mitigating environmental problems.

The jewellery making sector has also contributed to the alleviation of poverty. This sector that has existed for decades, contributes to the dressing needs of the Nweh people. Attracted by the local materials used in making jewellery, foreigners are beginning to develop admiration towards the products. According to Rasking (2009), a jewellery maker in Nweh, the greatest consumers of his products are foreigners and urban dwellers. He supplies thousands of pieces of jewellery to Canada, France and other countries. Thus, this sector alone brings in income to the Nweh community thereby boosting the economy and increasing the purchasing power of the artists. It is important to note here that the above mentioned artist works with many other members of the community who equally benefit from the proceeds of the activity. While some workers gather the raw materials, others are engaged in the tertiary stage of production. Those who gather the raw materials go far into the forest to collect the seeds, shells, and other items useful in the industry, while the artist prepares the seeds and shape the shells into desired shapes for the final production. Rasking testified that he has participated in several national and international exhibitions where financial awards and certificates were offered to him for his artistic work.

Figure 1 (a & b): Jewelleries made from a variety of seeds and shells of non-timber forest products.
The contribution of arts and handicraft to the socio-economic development of Nweh.

The weaving trade though largely seasonal has also contributed greatly in alleviating poverty in Nweh. According to Pa Ngalle a” 68” year professional weaver, weaving of baskets and mats during the harvesting season gives him a lot of money. These baskets are used by farmers to transport their crops to their homes and to the markets where the equally serve as instruments of measurement. At home, these baskets are also used for storage of food stuff like groundnuts, maize, and beans. These baskets are usually hung on strings above the fireside and this helps to keep the food away from rats and other pests. Weaved baskets are equally very useful in the harvesting and drying of coffee and cocoa which are the main cash crops in Nweh. The main materials use in weaving is rattan and Indian bamboo.

The carving sector is another sector that has contributed to the alleviation of poverty in Nweh. A number of processes are involved in the art of carving indicating division of labour: buying of raw materials, the cutting of wood into desired forms, and transportation to the carver’s workshop. In an interview with Asongayang Felix, a carver in Nweh, people can better appreciate the value of carved objects through the income made out of the sales, especially when they have customers’ resident out of Nweh who most often buy the products at relatively higher prices. Since the sculptors often lack the market, it takes quite some time for a carved piece of work to be sold, but once sold; they can make quite some money. Carved items like statuettes, masks, chairs and stools are often expensive but valuable. It is the value attached to them that makes people to buy the carved items. This explains why despite the high cost, people still buy them. People buy these objects for various reasons: while some people buy statuettes to keep in their shrines or places of worship, others buy them for their aesthetic beauty. Some notables and chiefs buy them because of the status they have in the society. The chairs found in the houses of the chiefs are well carved and look exceptionally good because of the position they occupy in the society. Some of these carved items are bought and offered to friends and visitors as gifts.

ii. Arts and Handicraft as Surviving Strategies

In Nweh, art objects mostly produced are in the struggle to meet the needs of the people. Even though, some arts are produced for their aesthetic beauty, some go beyond beauty but rather are symbolic, while others carry with them the history of the people. The artistic work of Nweh people reflects their everyday activities and in order to meet their needs, they look around their environment and get the materials which are used for their artistic productions. In the past, artists in Nweh enjoyed a high social
status in the society. Writing on Nweh arts and crafts, Robert Brain (1972) says most of the best art objects produced were offered as gifts to the Fons. In reward, some of these artists were awarded titles of notables (bekems) in the society. 

In Nweh community, the artists are creative enough to be able to fashion simple and complex items in order to meet their basic needs. Before the introduction of the "So called" modern household utensils like the food flask, enamel bowls, spoons and forks, the Nweh man already produced these items from wood. This was the case with the traditional flask used to store palm oil and wooden bowls. A wooden plane was made and used in the place of a planning machine. Worth noting is the fact that these objects did not only effectively serve the purpose for which they were made at that time, but are continuously being used today. According to Chief Fonembat Abel, a carpenter in Nweh, he produced a plane because of the absence of a planning machine and this plane is about forty years old. All this tie with Baker’s view that third world development will begin with the ability of its indigenes to produce those necessities of life that enhance their general wellbeing. (Baker, 1982). In the same vein, David Pitt (1976) views basic needs framework as an approach through which the indigenous people make use of the resources they have to fashion complex things that help to improve their general welfare.

Giving that Nweh is an enclave area with poor road and communication networks; the people are aware of their difficulties and have resorted to their environment for survival. However with the increase changes in the community, new and cheaper goods are being introduced in Nweh with the younger generation neglecting the local or traditional goods in preference to the imported goods. The goods produced in Nweh are often more durable than the imported goods and for that reason those objects are still being used today. The urban settlers from Nweh still buy locally made objects and take them to urban areas for home use. The picture below is that of some household objects which were made many years ago and are still highly used in Nweh.

Figure 2: Traditional flask mbuh(1) & wooden bowl lefvo(2), ntuh (3) used in the kitchen

Source: Norah Aziamin(2009), The contribution of arts and handicrafts to the socio-economic development of Nweh.
According to Ajong Rasking, a prominent artist in Nweh, art has contributed to the social and economic development of Nweh. He says the artistic work is very time consuming and needs a lot of patience if one actually wants to benefit from it. In order to use his skills to contribute to the development of his own community, Rasking has created a training centre for the youths. The objectives of this centre are to give birth to a new generation of youths qualified and capable of creating small production units or small enterprises which are income generating and job creating; so as to fight against poverty, and juvenile delinquency. The centre is made up of young artists who are willing to learn art as a means of self-employment, as they are engaged in the production of local earrings and necklaces from palm kernel, coconut shells, seeds etc. The centre also encourages the protection of wood species used in carving and the misuse of precious non timber products that had no use or importance in the past. The centre is environment friendly and is presently embarking on tree planting projects so as to guarantee future supply of wood for carving.

Planting of trees on its own is an aspect of development. This is because tree planting prevents landslides and soil erosion which are common in some parts of Nweh. The cutting down of trees especially along river banks, has caused many rivers to dry up, consequently the problems of scarcity of water and climate change. Planting of trees also falls within the action plan of the Ministries of Forestry and Wild Life as well as Environment and Nature Protection. These ministries are encouraging communities to plant trees as a means of reviving our environment and of minimising the unpleasant consequences of cutting down trees such as climate change. Some NGO’s based in Nweh are also supporting the tree planting exercise by making nurseries, educating the people on the tree species to plant and teaching then planting methods and how to care for the plants. An example of such an NGO is the Environment and Rural Development Foundation (EruDef).

Many talented and skilled people in Nweh have employed themselves and become self-reliant. From observations we noticed that Nweh people involved in various fields of art seem to be performing well, though they complain of many difficulties. Most of them are married with children and some depend solely on their skills for their livelihood. Though it takes long to sell an artefact, they eventually sell at high prices which help them in meeting financial obligations with respect to sustainability. The art and handicraft sector is promising and can employ many more people if the small production units are transformed into modern industries. From observation this dream is difficult to achieve because the people lack capital to embark on large-scale production and also because though raw materials are present, other factors like energy, communication, and good roads that support the establishment of modern industries are lacking in Nweh. This paper calls for government intervention to modernise the art industry in Nweh which is somehow declining due to competition from imported goods. For this industry to remain viable and competitive it is suggested that a package of incentives and motivations be granted to artists by the concerned Ministry while energy, transportation, communication be made available to the creative people of Nweh.

The jewellery making sector also needs to be promoted and actually transformed into an industry for more people to be employed; but because of the impediments already mentioned above this objective is unrealisable due to structural problem that hinder development in the area. The smiting sector which employs relatively more people than the other traditional industrial sectors has a ready market for its products and should be promoted through regular supplies of those raw materials which are scarce. This sector if supplied with tools and machines can enjoy economies of scale through large scale production. Like other sectors transforming smiting sub-sector into a modern industry will lead to large-scale employment, not only in Nweh but to the country as a whole.

1 Environmentally friendly because the centre is helping to prevent desert encroachment through deforestation by planting trees in the area.
iv. Arts and Handicrafts as Sources of Touristic Attraction

Though there is no properly organised museum in Nweh, tourist over the years have been attracted by the various artistic collections kept in palaces and in the homes of some notables not leaving out the natural touristic sites (such as) like the Lebialem waterfall, Nyi-tebong, Nyi-fongonkem, Shwat, etc. This touristic activity brings in income to the area thereby boosting the economy. The presence of tourists also boosts other businesses like restaurants, inns, bars, etc. It is regrettable to note that this area loses most of its valuable artistic works to foreigners who buy and take away. Most of these objects taken away by foreigners notably the United States, Britain, Germany and France to mention but a few might never be produced again either because the raw materials used in making them no longer exist or because the artists who made them died without handing down their skills. This study is of the opinion that the School for training of artists in Nweh should also be benefiting from government grants in order to develop and maintain a new generation of artists to replace the old. Unfortunately arts objects that were made of ivory have become difficult to produce due to wildlife protection; hence even when the younger generation acquires the skills some kind of goods may never be produced.

v. The Role of Arts and Handicraft in the Valorisation and Preservation of Nweh Cultural Heritage

The Nweh people enjoy a cultural metissage, resulting from their multiple ancestral origins. This culture makes them unique in the South West Region, with very little or nothing in common with the other tribes. A research carried out by Vincent Lockhart (1994) reveals that, there are many societies in Nweh, with the two most prominent being the Night society (Troh) and the Gong society (Lefem). While the Night society is concerned with the terrifying use of power, the feared arm of the law and the fearful weapon of chiefs in carrying out punishment for serious crimes, the Gong society is somehow relaxed. The Gong society known as Lefem, the same name as the secret forest where they meet is reserved for sub-chiefs and nobles. They meet to offer sacrifices to the ancestors, feast, and play their gongs and also to discuss matters of the community. Rituals of various kinds are also practised in Nweh. They include not only the various worships rites but also the rites of passage, atonements, purification rites, oaths of allegiance, dedication ceremonies, coronations and others. Rituals in Nweh usually have a symbolic value and are usually prescribed by the traditional religion or by the tradition of the community. It should be noted here that all these secret societies and rituals are only possible with the use of arts and handicrafts objects.

If there is a sector in which the Nweh people have excelled for years, it is the domain of a variety of traditional dances exhibited during cultural manifestations. Some of these prominent dances are: Nteh, Ngwe, Abin, Akoh, Assamba, Manjong, Alungachaba, etc. Though some of them are borrowed from the Bayang and Bamileke tribes as shown in the documented history of Nweh, the Nweh artists have been able to produce masks and other dancing instruments which are used for these traditional dances. Some of these instruments are: rattles (Begnang), and gongs made from smelted iron and drums made of goat skin and carved wood. Other instruments include weaved rattan, traditional fabrics, den guns and different kinds of masks. These instruments add much fervour to the dances and make the Nweh culture very unique among other tribes of the South west Region of Cameroon. Some objects found in palaces are as old as (that) the dynasty itself. This is because as it is the case with the talking drums, each Fon who ascends the thrown is supposed to carve his own drum during his reign. Besides, the beautiful objects that were made and offered to the Fons as gifts still exist in some palaces. The valorisation and preservation of the cultural heritage is a great step towards the sustainable development of every community. Nevertheless, some of these skills are threatened by extinction as some artists are dying without transmitting their skills to younger generations. The study identifies the following reasons for the decline and threat of extinction of arts:
• A general preference of grammar than technical education by the people;
• A limited number of technical schools and abundance of secondary grammar schools
• Curriculum of technical and grammar schools not fully adapted to social needs of the people
• Generalised apathy by youths
• Growing competition with imported goods
• Absence of innovations to the traditional industrial sector to fight foreign competition

Socially, artists have used their skills to facilitate communication and knowledge about the history of the people. Arts and handicraft skills represent everyday life of Nweh people. This sector is so important in the life of the people that one can say without fear of contradiction that Nweh people cannot do without art and handicap. According to respondents and notables Art and handicraft productions have been used to differentiate people’s status in Nweh. During occasions, carved seats are arranged according to status. For example the Fon’s chair, (which) is usually the biggest, is carved with special design which anyone will recognise once in a social gathering and only the Fon has the right to sit on it. This means that the traditional status attached to the Fon’s chair is not based on ones academic or social background.

Figure 3: Decoration of a royal throne with art objects during ceremonies

Source: Norah Azaimin (06/09/09) the contribution of arts and handicrafts to the socio-economic development of Nweh.

Again, the gong is used to herald the arrival of the Fon wherever he goes. During traditional dances, messages which are aimed at praising the Fon, his greatness and royalty are expressed with the use of a talking drum (foot note). These messages are usually understood by the Fon, other traditionalists and the drummers. Equally, carved objects found in front of the Fon’s palace cannot be found in front of any other compound. These objects have been in the fon’s palace for many years symbolizing, dignity, power and royalty.
vi. Arts, Handicraft and Religion

Artistic productions have been very important in the religious life of Nweh people. Objects made for religious purposes range from those that are used in the Christian churches to those used for traditional religions. In the Christian domain, musical instruments such as gongs, xylophones, drums, baskets for collection of arms, etc have been made by artists for the purpose of worship. Besides, Nweh people wear traditional fabrics and jewelleries to go to church. This aspect of enculturation has encouraged Nweh people to be more involved in church activities. Statuettes and other objects have also been kept in shrines and various homes for protection against evil spirits and witchcraft, for peace, health and swearing of oaths. Artistic objects are therefore very important in the religious life of Nweh people. In Nweh; it is a common practice to find people singing and dancing in the Nweh dialect carrying with them all sorts of dancing instruments made by the artists. Everything in church is fast becoming traditional. Apart from using weaved baskets to collect alms; some other smaller baskets are decorated and used in putting flowers during the celebration of Christian marriages. Some of these baskets are decorated and permanently kept in the church with flowers put in, as a way of decorating the church. Due to the increase in the use of weaved baskets for decoration; these baskets are continuously being modified in terms of design and shape. More so, the painters are now buying from the weavers, and paint the baskets in order to make them more beautiful. The study reveals that it is common to find such baskets on tables and on top of the cupboards in most households for the purpose of decoration. Some people use the baskets to keep small valuable objects that can easily get missing if not well kept.

Home-made baskets weaved out of rattan have also been used to carry out economic activities in Nweh. They have proved to be very useful for petty trading and hawking because they are affordable and easy to carry. Women and small girls use them to hawk bananas, pears, oranges etc. It is common to find people selling cooked items like fried fish, boiled eggs, groundnuts etc. using these baskets. An additional advantage of using these baskets is that they are porous and hold little or no moisture, thereby making preservation of food items quite easy.
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Art and handicrafts have contributed greatly in the social, cultural, economic and even political development of Nweh. However, much still needs to be done, to improve and valorise these skills if the much desired sustainable development has to be achieved.

Despite the international conventions and declarations on the protection of cultural property, most of the Nweh valuable and expensive works of art are presently found in the European and American museums. Writing on Nweh culture, Vincent Lockhart (1994) affirms that, many of the royal ancestral statues which formed a link with the past and which were essential feature of the main secret society (Lefem) were looted by the Germans during the colonial rule. Similarly, most of the valuable art objects made of wood and ivory by Nweh artists were exchanged for bottles of whisky and wine during the German colonial rule. To Price (1989), when African art objects are displayed in foreign museums without any explication of their cultural meaning, anthropologists have been severely critical. This deculturizing of the object seemed also dehumanizing as usually no attempt was made to identify the individual native artist as would have been the case with the western art objects. This phenomenon has continued especially as many foreigners visit Nweh for projects or as tourists.

Firstly, one of the most effective ways will be to guarantee that the bearers of art and handicraft skills continue to further develop their knowledge and skills and transmit them to younger generations. Therefore, artists have to be identified and given official recognition. Besides, appropriate training whether in formal educational institutions or through direct and traditional master/pupil apprenticeship is essential in order to ensure that the knowledge and skills are transmitted from the artists to the younger generations. In this light, community centres should be established in Nweh which could run both evening and day classes and workshops offering to teach basic art and craft skills in a short period of time.

Secondly, development planners, policy makers and professionals should consider integrating cultural values in the development process. That is, each local African industry should be allowed and motivated to develop and expand. In relation to indigenous arts and handicraft industries, our schemes of work in schools should be developed to integrate our local skills. This will make our educational system to reflect our local realities and experiences.

The government and Non Governmental Organizations should fund artistic activities in Nweh to enable the sector grow and create employment opportunities. This will improve living standards and skills will easily be transmitted to future generations.

Again, there is need to construct a museum in Nweh where art objects could be collected and kept. In addition, research and documentation is also necessary as through it will be possible to know the art and handicraft skills that had existed many years ago, those that are extinct and those that need to be valorised.

NGOs working in the area of conservation of wild life and forest should design programmes for training artists, and also how to nurse and plant tree species that are good for artistic work since they are getting extinct as a result of deforestation. This will guarantee a continuous supply of materials for the production of art and handicraft objects. A network of artists should be created to ensure that artists respect the norms of their profession and equally determine the prices of the objects produced. This will help the sector to function well and in an orderly and responsible manner. Besides, a network of that nature will help identify the real artists and those who are mere adventurers in the field. Through this network, objects produced could be advertised so that there will be a constant market for the finished products.
Finally, the artistic productions of Nweh people need to be valorised to permit youths in this region to stop their inclination towards western mode of education and strive to acquire skills that will access them to socio-economic insertion and active life.

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