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The Rise, Decline, and Potential Revival of Awka Blacksmithing: *A Centuries-Old Igbo Craft*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

An Ọka [Awka] blacksmith, nne ụzụ, and his nwa ụzụ, an apprentice blacksmith photographed by G. T. Basden, early 20th century.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Awka in Anambra State, Nigeria, is a big name for blacksmithing, which is the art of turning all types of things into iron; they are truly masters in iron works. Awka blacksmiths have been into it for hundreds of years, and they help shape how Igbo people, including other tribes, live. This is the full gist about their history, how they work, what they do in society, and the problems they are facing now.

Awka blacksmithing has existed for years; it also has a little connection with the people of Nri, who engaged in bronze work around 800 AD. It is said that their blacksmithing started from there. Awka is situated between Onitsha and Enugu, making it easy for them to sell their products and mingle with others. The first people in Awka were known as “Ifiteana,” meaning (people who came from the ground), they farm, hunt, and make iron close to Ogwugwu stream. This blacksmith work became a big deal to them, so much that their king, who is “Eze Uzu” (blacksmith king), and advanced men add “uzu” to their name to show that they are of higher levels.

How They Carry Out The Work Awka blacksmiths know how to turn iron into hoes, cutlasses, gongs (ogene), pots, keys, and even short guns called “Awka-Made”. They use charcoal fires inside clay ovens, blow with bellows that they make from animal skins, and when the iron gets hot, they will use a hammer, tongs, and anvils to shape it. They can make farm tools like “oji” and “ngwuagilija” for ozo men, and even brass anklets (ogba) that the women wear to show their class. Their gun work is top-notch. They carry this skill to places like Benin, Urhobo, Igala, and Efik, so people call them “The Moving Awka”.



The Contribution Of Blacksmithing To The Life Of Awka

Blacksmithing is not just a work in Awka, but also the backbone of their wealth and society. Before the coming of the whites, it was learned among families, from a father to their sons, or young boys learning from their masters. Young boys will start helping after school until they know it well. This way, the skill will not die down, and everybody feels like one big family. In terms of money, Awka Smiths produces tools farmers need, like cutlasses, hoes, and gongs that play music or call people for meetings. Their short guns are highly valued for hunting and fighting, especially before the colonial Era. Markets like Eke Awka are always filled with people buying their products from far and near. Blacksmithing gives them respect in societies, like the Eze Uzu and Ozo men, who are classy because of this work. Each year, they celebrate “Uku na Ije’ festival, which marks the end of the blacksmithing season, come back home, thanking God while planning their next move.

When the British came, they scattered many things among the Awka blacksmiths. Before now, their guns were selling well, even assisting in Ekumeku fights, which were (1883-1914) against the whites. But after the Nigerian Civil War(1967-1970), gun making was banned by the government, raided by the police, and fear stopped most smiths from working. The whites brought in their cheaper iron products, causing people to flee from Awka. This stopped them from producing guns and tools like gongs and farm equipment, but not as much money as before. Young boys also started running from work to school or office jobs.

Today, Awka blacksmithing is still struggling. In Timber Market near Works Road, you will find small old men, maybe 20 of them above 60 years old, working, with a few apprentices from places like Akwa Ibom and Cross River. Their workshops are old-fashioned, with hammers, tongs, and anvils scattered.

The government doesn't help them at all. They keep promising machines and money, but nothing is forthcoming. People like Obiorah



Okafor, head of the Blacksmith Association, are annoyed that if they had better tools, they could produce car parts or machines for big companies like Innoson Motors. Youths are running from work, as it is difficult without much funding. Schools and city life have carried everything, including the area around Awka, which is subject to erosion. But they are still holding on to it a little. The Association is fighting for them; students also usually come to study in these areas. Festivals like Egwu Uzu, which Eze Uzu Obi Gibson Nwosu celebrates every two years, show blacksmithing in dances and plays so that it won't be forgotten.

Eze Uzu Obi Gibson Nwosu is pushing in “Blacksmith villages” in Akwa, serving the southeast so the work won't fade. He said one Awka man by name, Chief John Uzoka from Umuogbu, made way in Buckingham Palace back then, so they can still do mighty things again. If it is sponsored by the government, giving them machines and open markets, they can make car parts, tools, or fine iron works that will be sold to the world. Scholars and smiths are begging for this revival, believing it will bring jobs while keeping the Awka name alive.

Awka Blacksmiths are better at ironwork than anyone in Igbo land. From ancient times when they traveled with their skills to the present day when they fight for survival, they show they are strong. Colonization and modernity have also brought them down, but their story will never fade. If communities, government, and even the people of Awka staying abroad join, the fire in their forge can burn bright again. For now, they are like a history of how iron and fire strengthen the people of Awka and Igbo.

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