

A History of the Raffia Industry in Ikot Ekpene

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ABSTRACT

Raffia-weaving in Nigeria represents one of the legacies of a rich past and dates back in history. Unfortunately, the study of this very old and vital industry has been relegated to the background -typical for Nigeria's traditional craft industries, as outmoded. It is perceived as a limitation to the modern capitalist society that places a premium on a knowledge economy, driven by innovation and creativity. Craft like raffia weaving by its immobility and intrinsic connection to tradition and locality is seen as not able to drive contemporary development. In recent times, the importance of craft is being re-visited, powered by the discourse on indigenous knowledge production and a rejection of linear development discourse. This paper looks at the history of the raffia industry in Ikot Ekpene, dubbed the 'raffia city', through the use of oral interviews, archival materials, and available literature. Employing a historical approach, this study demonstrates the importance of raffia in sustaining the local economy and argues for the need for a strong institutional support system to revitalize raffia production and enable a more robust integration of local content into development.

Keywords: *Raffia, Ikot Ekpene, Globalization, Economy, Craft.*

Introduction

The Raffia palm is one of the most versatile plants in Africa widely utilized for its economic and commercial purposes. Studies reveal about 20 species of raffia found predominantly in Madagascar and some parts of Central and Western Africa, particularly among the Kubans of Democratic Republic of Congo and the Annangs/ Ibibios and Igbos of Southern Nigeria. In Nigeria, raffia palms grow mostly wild along swamps and river beds although among the Ibibios, there have been attempts to domesticate it in farmlands [Udo, 1970]. One of the best-known examples of raffia products are the raffia clothes from Kuba. Raffia leaves are very long and some species such as *Raphia regalis* can have leaves which extend up to 25 metres long. Raffia is a plant with diverse uses and almost all parts of the raffia is productive. For example, fibre extracted from the raffia leave is processed into a strong string with various uses; the leaves are used as roofing for houses and other shelters; wax from the leaves are made into polish; the sap from the trunk is drunk as alcoholic beverage; and the leaf stalks form bamboos used in construction.

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relegated to the background -typical for Nigeria's traditional craft industries, as outmoded. It is perceived as a limitation to the modern capitalist society that places a premium on a knowledge economy, driven by innovation and creativity. Craft like raffia weaving by its immobility and intrinsic connection to tradition and locality is seen as not able to drive contemporary development. There is not much literature on raffia industry in Ikot Ekpene. Early perception of the craft by the Europeans can be gleaned from the works of anthropologists and geographers (Nicklin, 1977 and Udo, 1970). P. N. Nsugbe's article on 'cane and raffia work' in the Nigeria Magazine (1962) throws more light on handicraft in the early postcolonial era.

The 21st century has seen more scholarly attention on the raffia industry in Ikot Ekpene, and from diverse disciplines including environmental science, geography, information science, and the humanities (Eni et al 2021; Ntui and Otong, 2008; Uwem and Adetola, 2016). Generally, crafts and craft production is seeing a revival as issues around biodiversity conservation and increased awareness of environmental pollution from synthetic fibres has generated interest in natural biodegradable fibres such as raffia. Interest in raffia and other crafts is also powered by the discourse on indigenous knowledge production and a rejection of linear development discourse. The renewed interest in craft has prompted scholarly discourse on how to reposition craft for community development (Jones et al, 2021; Jakob and Thomas, 2017). Jakob and Thomas observe a renaissance in crafts in the United Kingdom (UK). The authors point to a revival in craft policy in the United Kingdom (UK), the focus of the study, which 'has seen craft re-emerging in the UK as a valued industry with associated cultural, educational, and economic development policy agendas' (2017:495). This is an agenda that seeks to transform craft through education and skill acquisition into a non-outsourcable sector of national and self-pride. In recent times, raffia has become a very popular material in craft and high fashion. Unfortunately, the raffia industry in Ikot Ekpene has not been able to successfully tap into this global interest and demand for raffia, losing out to countries like Madagascar, one of the biggest exporters of raffia; parts of South East Asia, and South and Central America.

This study examines raffia production in Ikot Ekpene through a historical approach. Ikot Ekpene is dubbed the 'raffia city' because of the thriving raffia-industry in the area. The paper draws upon extensive fieldwork carried out in Ikot Ekpene as part of a graduate study. Archival research was also widely utilised, which proved useful in the analysis of craft practices in the colonial era. Discourse analysis of intelligence reports, colonial government correspondences, and other government documents highlight the importance of raffia products to the British. The rich potential of the industry was harnessed by the colonial government in accordance with the requirements of the colonial economy. Archival evidence was substantiated by 30 qualitative interviews with raffia weavers, raffia traders, farmers, and community elders. Information on craft though scanty, was also gleaned from colonial newspapers and magazines. The researcher's personal knowledge as a local of Ikot Ekpene was of immense help and enabled a more insightful understanding of the nuances of local perception of craft production and the

difficulties faced. The findings present a need for a strong institutional support system to revitalize raffia production and enable a more robust integration of local content into development. The paper is divided into six chapters. Following the introduction, it gives a brief ethnohistorical survey of the study site-Ikot Ekpene to provide the context. Raffia production is then explored in three different phases-precolonial, colonial, and contemporary periods. This allows an observation of the trajectory of raffia production over the years. Raffia production as a form of craft is commonly perceived as lying on the margins of the modern development model. This will also be looked at; what are the arguments for and against raffia? Efforts will be made in concluding to point to some ways of revitalizing the raffia industry to be more strategically positioned for local and national economic and human development.

Ethno Historical Survey of Ikot Ekpene

Ikot Ekpene is one of the Annang speaking areas of Akwa Ibom State in the southern tip of Nigeria. The area is located within the Cross-River Basin, between latitudes 4° 25' and 7° north and 7° 15' and 9° 30' east. The area north and west of Ikot Ekpene is occupied by Abia State, the east by Ikono Local Government area and the south by Essien Udim Local Government area. Ikot Ekpene until its break up comprised of five clans – Obot Akara, Nto Edino, Ikot Abia, Amayam and Ikot Ekpene urban. Presently it has been reconstituted into two with Nto Edino, Ikot Abia and Obot Akara forming the new Obot Akara Local Government Area. Ikot Ekpene local government area, the political and cultural capital of the Annang ethnic group is now made up of Ikot Ekpene urban, Uruk Uso, Nkap, and Ikot Obong Edong (Daniel et al, 2017:203). Ikot Ekpene is the second largest city in Akwa Ibom State, after Uyo, the capital city, and the headquarters of the Local Government Area which bears its name. The city has a rich history as the first seat of local governance selected by the Colonial government to test run the local government system.

The people of Ikot Ekpene are predominantly subsistence farmers. A large number of people also engage in craft production but there has been a large reduction in the number of practitioners in recent times because of the perception of craft as a non-modern way of earning a living especially among the youth. This perception largely draws from the informality of craft production and its marginal position in development discourse. However, raffia production in the precolonial and colonial era was a major occupation. It is the people's proficiency in raffia production and wood carving that gave rise to Ikot Ekpene being known as 'the raffia city'. Forde and Jones noted that the people are the best producers of masks and carvings (1950:68).

Early Beginning – The Precolonial Phase

Raffia weaving in Ikot Ekpene dates back to the pre-colonial era. Its usage and subsequent importance in the people's socio-economic life according to oral transmission is incidental. According to oral tradition, a hunter stumbled on the fact that the whitish strand (that is the raffia) extracted from the raffia frond, was more effective as a tying

rope for his booty bag.¹ With this acquired knowledge the utilisation of raffia ropes gained prominence; palm-wine tappers wove raffia ropes to use in climbing the raffia tree; and hunters made use of it for tying their hunting bags. Indeed, it became an important feature in households. From its use as climbing ropes, raffia came to be hand-woven into clothes called '*ikpag*' that was tied by title holders around the waist as loin cloth. Raffia mats were also woven by women for use over their 'market baskets'. This covering known as '*aya-akpan*' was of such tremendous cultural value that it constituted part of a bridal dowry especially if the woman was '*adiaha*' or first daughter. The plain sheets of the raffia were also stitched with '*ubak ayop*' a sharp flat covering found between oil palm fronds that could be used as a needle, into a bag called '*isighe*'. These bags were mostly used by women as sieves in garri production. Another early use of raffia was its construction into carrier bags for bicycles locally known as '*ekpat-enangukwak*' literally translated as 'bag-bicycle' With the onset of colonial rule raffia weaving underwent a great change with the introduction of the vertical wooden loom which more or less revolutionized weaving and greatly enhanced the manufacture of more sophisticated raffia products.

The Production Process of Raffia: Extraction and Dyeing

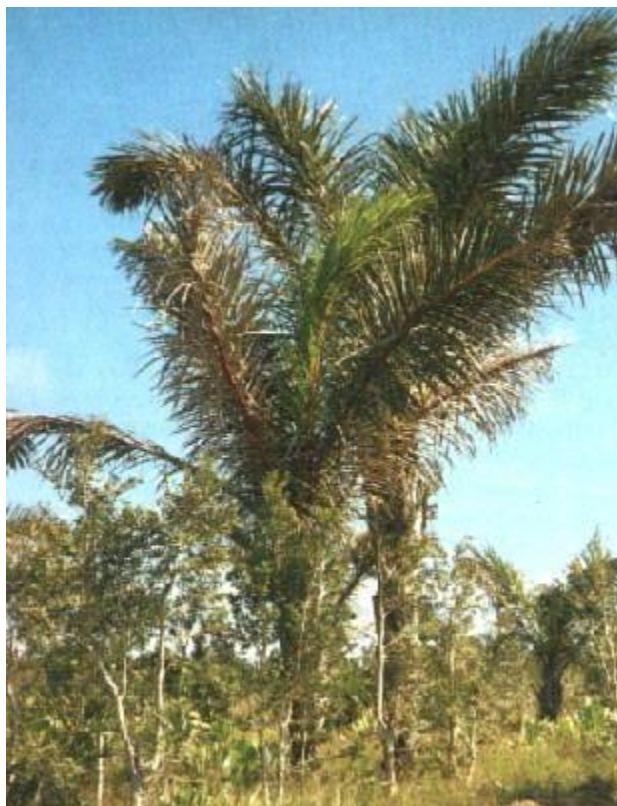


Fig 1: Raffia Palm

Raffia (*raffia hookeri*), otherwise known as ‘*ndam*’ in Annang dialect, is derived from the tender leaves of a palm wine tree-‘*ukot*’. This is distinct from oil palm trees. The raffia palm thrives in swamps and is common in the swampy areas of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, as well as the neighbouring riverine areas of Imo and River States. In Akwa Ibom State, the raffia is most abundant in the swampy forest of Obodio in Itu Local Government area, a few kilometres from Ikot Ekpene. Oral tradition account locates the germination and consequent proliferation of raffia palm trees in Obodio in the animals which inhabit the forest. The raffia palm which is a palm- wine tree bears fruit once the wine is tapped. According to oral tradition, the raffia palm fruits are eaten by the animals that spread it around in the course of their movements.

Extraction

Raffia can only be extracted at specific times, before the palm wine is matured for tapping or just prior to tapping the palm wine. In the case of the former, only fully-grown offshoots (indicated by the widening of the tip) are cut. In the latter, the offshoots are cut before the wine is tapped. To obtain the raffia, the leaves of the raffia frond are bent back at the base, one at a time. This exposes the fibre underneath the leaf. The leaf is then pulled back to the tip of the frond separating it from the fibre or raffia beneath it. The raffia on extraction is soft and fine but strong. It is then washed and the effect of water gives the raffia a yellowish tan and as well tightens it into strands which facilitate weaving. This yellowish tan is taken as the raffia’s natural colour often referred to as white. It can be woven in this natural state or dyed. The preferred colour is dependent on the purpose of the final product. ‘*Ikpag*’ or loin cloth was traditionally dyed red while ‘*isighe*’ or sieve was left white.

Dyeing

Dyeing of raffia prior to the European colonisation was locally made and limited to three colours – green, red and black. Green was derived from a wild tree known as ‘*Awa*’. The young leaves were cut, pounded and mixed with water and filtered to form a thick water-resistant green broth. This was used to dye the raffia. Black was obtained from ‘*nkaraafan*’ a black stone usually dug out from the soil. It is ground, and mixed with water and the black mixture used. Red dye was from ‘*ukpa*’ or the mixture commonly used by Annang and Ibibio women to decorate their hands and legs after childbirth or on a special occasion. ‘*Ukpa*’ is a multifunction tree, not only was red dye made from its bark but its trunk provides planks for building construction. Presently, locally manufactured dyes are being discarded in favoured of chemically produced dyes. This facilitates and enhances the dyeing process. It allows for versatility in colours. For instance, blue and yellow is mixed to obtain green. Nonetheless this is not to say the old method had been wiped out. It still continues to be practised and indeed preferred by some of the weavers.

The process of dyeing the raffia is similar to what obtains in the dyeing of textiles. The dye is boiled in a dye bath, such as an enamel pot and soaked with raffia. On

absorption, the raffia is removed and allowed to drip dry. It is then stored in a cool place. If the final product of the woven raffia is an article of clothing, prior to dyeing, it is made malleable and smooth through beating with a wooden hammer or scrubbing with snail shells. Sometimes, dye is applied after weaving. However, this occurs only if one colour is to be dyed. It is not a common practise because often uniformity is not achieved and the product comes out in patches.



Fig 2: dyed raffia fibres

Presently, the locally manufactured dyes are made use of for easy preparation and application. It also allows for versatility in colours for instance the mixture of blue and yellow produces green (fig 2). In spite of this, the traditional method of dyeing still continues to be practiced by some weavers.

Weaving

The next process in raffia-weaving is the actual weaving itself. The dyed or natural raffia is woven on a vertical loom about usually about 51/2 inches long. This is usually known as 'akpara'. Raffia weaving is not peculiar to Ikot Ekpene. Robert W. July (1975: 260) in his work notes the substitution of raffia for cotton in Dahomey. As he points out, it was in the Congo that raffia cloth reached the ultimate heights of sophistication. The palm leaves were especially cultivated and prepared to produce long fine threads that were woven on vertical looms into patterned damasks and brocades as well as materials with velvet finish on both sides. These fabrics range up to 3 or 4 feet in width, light weight yet remarkably impervious, so much so that visiting Portuguese utilized them as tents because of their resistance. Unlike the craftsmen in Nigeria, the Kubans have been able to weave raffia into clothes of intricate designs gaining global recognition as early as the 16th century. Its use of embroidery, appliqué and elaborate forms of patterning were reputed to have inspired the works of renowned artists like Matisse. There is presently no evidence to establish that the woven raffia clothes of the Congo influenced raffia production in Ikot Ekpene but the similarities in design patterns of woven raffia sheets in both places point to some form of exchange and necessitates further research. Local lore however points to an independent evolution.

Organization and Structure

The raffia industry gradually grew from subsistence produce to gain exchange value with Colonial rule. For a clear understanding, this will be looked at in three phases- the pre-Colonial, Colonial and post-Colonial era. The different epochs were not so clear cut and in a lot of cases often overlapped.

The Pre-Colonial Era

The extended family compound served as the unit of production and knowledge was passed from one generation to the next. The workplace was not distinct from the family compound and production was geared towards internal consumption and often involved the entire household. Division of labour was based on sex and women were mostly involved in the extraction and dyeing process while the men engaged in weaving the raffia sheets.

Raffia-weaving was practised hand in hand with farming, a practise that has continued till present time. It was, and still is not, in most cases deemed necessary to forgo farming for craft manufacture or trade. The latter were often undertaken on a part-time or seasonal basis. An agricultural surplus on the contrary, often made it necessary to finance additional types of productive enterprises.

The Colonial Era

Raffia weaving acquired economic value with colonialism. The introduction of money as a means of exchange intensified this trend. The increase in the scale of production further gave rise to the development of a corps of professional raffia-weavers. The Colonial government in reaction to war-time development became more dependent on the colonies for the supply of economic products and there was greater need to develop indigenous industries. The raffia industry was not excluded. Colonial government correspondences show that the produce inspectorate was directed to investigate the possible sources of raffia.² Samples of raffia products sent to Lagos proved encouraging. Renounced artists and craftsmen were subsequently brought together to engage in the mass production of raffia products, under the supervision of the government. It was this group that later grew into the Ikot Ekpene Co-operative Raffia Marketing Society. Under government auspices the Co-operative were able to get large orders for raffia products. In 1942 for instance, 1,600 toys were made by the organization and sent to Britain as Christmas presents for orphaned children of navy officers killed in the war. By 1943, the volume of sales had increased: 3,000 climbing robes were requisitioned for the rubber plantation at Ikom, north of Calabar, in the present Cross River State.³ In the same year, 600 raffia animals were sent again as Christmas presents to orphans of the 51st Highland Division in Abeerden, whose father had been killed in North Africa.⁴

This boom in the industry attracted a large number of people into the raffia craft, though most of them still operated on part-time basis as in the pre-colonial days combining farming with handicraft. For the first time however, production extended beyond the family and apprentices began to be taken on part-time basis. Payment for apprenticeship was mostly in-kind including household staples like yam, palm-oil and 'ukang' a local stew commonly used in ceremonies. In the few instances where there was the use of money as the medium of payment, it acted as a compliment to the food stuffs presented.

The boom in raffia trade aided to a large extent by government patronage saw the development of a corps of professional raffia weavers with a regular source of income. However, membership in the guild or co-operative might have meant money in the pockets of the craftsmen, but it also meant a loss of initiative and independence. They were obliged to follow the instructions of the foreman, a government appointed agent, to the latter. What was required of the weavers was their skills and not a show of their creativity.

The Post-Colonial Era

The raffia industry by the late 60s had grown in size and efficiency, though the form of ownership still remained sole proprietorship. Division of labour by this time had become more segmented as the production process got more complex. More apprentices as well as wage workers were being employed, thus you had weavers solely engages in weaving, different from those who crafted weaved sheets into bags, shoes and other finished products, as well as marketers. It has to be pointed out though that the demarcating lines were not so clear cut and often there was a blurring of lines in which weavers could also serve as marketers. The Post-Colonial phase witnessed innovations in the industry: letters were woven on raffia mats; the use of machineries was introduced enabling more diversified products tailored along the lines of leather products. Thus, raffia products came to include women handbags, hats, shoe racks, table mats etc.

The raffia industry was given a boost in the 1970s with the formation of Ndom-Annang Handicraft Co-operative Society by Chief Ekuinam Bassey, a prominent lawyer and son of a local Chief, made Warrant Chief in the Colonial era. Field survey shows that the height of sophistication attained by the industry in the 1970s and 1980s derives from the activities of Ndom Annang. Chief Bassey's privileged background and access to machineries from overseas enabled Ndom Annang to manufacture more sophisticated and highly marketable product.⁵ On the contrary the Ikot Ekpene Raffia marketing society, hampered by traditional modes of production was unable to match the successes of Ndom Annang. With a larger loom, Chief Bassey was able to produce larger raffia sheets and thus able to be more creative in his designs. Raffia half jackets which were favoured by the owner, corporate bags, and shoes were some of the new products introduced into the market by Ndom Annang. These products were purchased by shops like Kingsway in Port Harcourt, J. T Chanrai in Enugu.⁶ Widespread interest was rekindled in and it spread across national boundaries, Raffia portfolios became favoured as souvenirs and corporate gifts. Raffia products by the end of the 20th century had become a dominant feature of the artistic landscape in Nigeria and Ikot Ekpene a household name for raffia products. Beyond Nigeria, raffia products with its exotic beauty were widely demanded by tourists. Nsugbe (1962:66) argues that raffia products play an important role in projecting Nigeria's culture and in this way, "they have become one of the most informal, yet most powerful fronts of Nigeria's self-publicity abroad".

Importance of Raffia in the Nigerian Economy

As earlier noted, raphia is a multifunctional plant whose different parts serve an economic purpose. The raffia leaves are the source of raffia fibres which are used for ornamental weaving into different products evolving from the traditional raffia sheets used as coverings, to more sophisticated products such as shoes, bags, hats and picture

frames. Leaves from raffia are used as roofing sheets and waxy substance derived from it can also be used to make floor and shoe polish. Raffia leaf stalks or petioles made into bamboos are used in the construction of houses while brooms can be made from the ribs

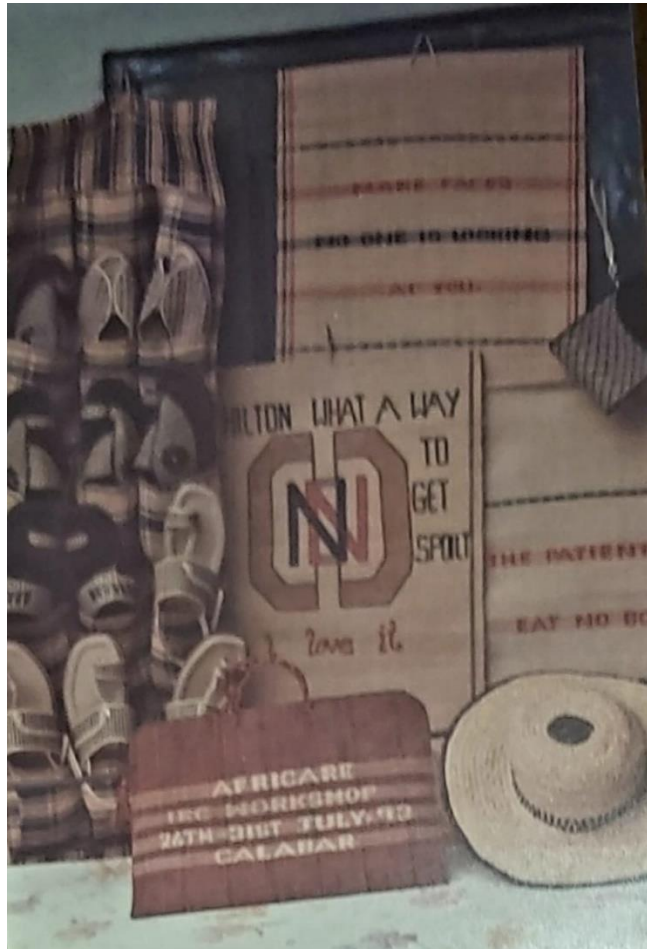


Fig 3: Variety of raffia products [Culled from Mike Bingham, 2007]

A notably derivative of raffia is the sap known as palm wine or palmy. Raffia palm wine can be consumed fresh in which case it is very sugary and sweet. On the other hand, it can be left to naturally ferment in which case the alcoholic content is increased. It can further be locally distilled into a stronger alcoholic drink known as ‘ogogoro’ or local gin. The fresh palm wine is scorned by a vast majority of men who view it as drink for children. Indeed, the Igbos call it ‘mmanya miri’ (water drink). In recent times, the fermented palm wine is rarely consumed straight especially by the younger men, but is mixed with other drinks in particularly stout beer and is fondly referred to as ‘bloody mary’ (<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/05/how-we-drink-palm-wine/>). Commonly consumed in large parts of Africa, the raffia palm sap has drawn scholarly interest from ways of preservation to its chemical and mineral contents and significance for human health (Okafor 1975; Esechie, 1978; Obiahiagbon and Osagie 2007; Obahiagbon and Oviasogie, 2007; Obahiagbon, 2009). Bassir (1968 in Obahiagbon 2009) in a study showed raffia sap to be useful in the treatment of malaria, jaundice and measles. In traditional Nigeria, raffia palm wine was used as a post-natal beverage to stimulate breast milk for nursing mothers. It was also used as a stimulant for increased appetite. Several studies of the physiochemical and mineral elements of raffia sap found it to be rich in carbohydrate, and a high mineral content of calcium, potassium, magnesium and sodium, as well as vitamins like riboflavin, thiamine and ascorbic acid. It can and often is, used as additive in food and pharmaceutical industries (Akpabio et al, 2012; Obahiagbon, 2009).

Recent research has shown the economic potential of raffia in the housing sector especially for low income earners who constitute a large percentage of the Nigerian population. In an analysis of dried palm leaves crushed into pellets, Ndukwe [2009] notes the cooling properties of raffia mats as roofs, which suggests an it possesses an “inherent property of screening off the near infra region [NIR] of the solar spectrum and thus provide a cooling effect. He points out that the refined pellets, with advantages over the traditional roof mats [with low durability and poor visual effects] can provide upon further research, roofing and ceiling materials even for “the interior lining of aircrafts. Based on its electrical properties, Ndukwe points to the potential of refined raffia as resistors and capacitors. Odera, Onukwuli and Osoka’s analysis of raffia palm fibre added to cement composites enhances its flexural strength [resistance to fracture]. He argued therefore that it could be used for reinforcing cement composites for more affordable roofing and ceiling materials for low-income households. The availability and low cost of raffia fibres, underscores its attractiveness as an alternative to the more costly imported components used for roofing such as galvanized iron and asbestos-cement (Odera, Onukwuli and Osoka, 2011).

Conclusion

The above has been an examination of raffia using Ikot Ekpene as a case study. It has investigated the historical underpinnings of an industry which in the 1990s had become a source of foreign exchange for a large number of Nigeria. The exotic beauty of raffia, not only drew the interests of tourists, but the varied raffia products served to

promote the Nigerian culture and image beyond national boundaries. In spite of its aesthetic value and multifunctional uses, raffia still remains highly under-utilised and its chemical properties unharnessed. In an attempt to redress this imbalance, several researches have been carried out, which point to the potential of raffia especially in the construction industry as well as in the food and pharmaceutical sectors.

Notes

¹ Interview with Sunday Nelson, (56 years) Raffia Weaver, Ikot Ekpene, 18th January 1997.

²GP 294 17/1/154Notes by District Officer F. R. Kay on Ikot Ekpene Industry.

³ibid.

⁴CAD 378 3/3/379 Post War Developments (Local Industries).

⁵Interview with Chief A, Umosu (81years) Justice of Peace-JP, Ikot Ebak. 15th November 1996.

⁶Interview with Sunday Essien ibid.

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