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2000

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Sumberg, Barbara, "Weaving and the World Economy or How Colonialism and Coffee Affected the Indigenous Weaving Industry in Zuénoula, Cote d'Ivoire." (2000). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 837.

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Weaving and the World Economy or How Colonialism and Coffee Affected the Indigenous Weaving Industry in Zuénoula, Côte d'Ivoire.

Barbara Sumberg

The Gouro people of Côte d'Ivoire are renowned weavers in the memories of Ivoirians. They are acknowledged as the premiere weavers of the past who possibly taught the premiere weavers of the present, the Baulé, their craft. Cloth production and trade were major industries among the Gouro from possibly as early as the 15th century until the late 1950s and locally produced cloth was crucial in many social and cultural situations. Weaving continues today but has withered away among the Gouro while it has thrived among the Baulé and other ethnic groups in the same country. In this paper I will discuss the changes through time that led to the present state of the local industry and will relate those changes to changes in the cloth actually produced. In visual terms I ask how the most valued cloth in a small scale society went from a hand spun and woven cotton indigo dyed, striped cloth with a few simple supplementary weft motifs to an elaborately decorated cloth made from commercially spun cotton and brightly colored acrylic yarns and in socio-economic terms how does a society go from a weaver or weavers in every household to a just few old men weaving.

To begin I'll briefly describe the people and the area I'm talking about. The Gouro are an ethnic group of about 220,000¹ souls who live in central Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa. The language they speak, Gouro, is classified as a Southern Mandé language. It is thought they migrated from Mali to within the borders of present day Côte d'Ivoire perhaps as early as the 12th century AD. After a series of shorter-distance moves they settled in their present day territory in the 16th century. The Gouro region covers an area of 16,000 square kilometers and is contained within four prefectures or administrative divisions. During the course of my research I found there are actually 3 centers of production in the geographic and cultural area known as the Gouro region. This paper deals with the northernmost division of Zuénoula where the most extensive cloth industry existed.

Before their conquest by the French in 1912 the Gouro lived in what is known as a segmentary or stateless society, that is to say that large, extended families were the political unit. There was no centralized ruling force. Kingship was unknown and there was no courtly tradition of textile production. Cloth was produced within the family for family use or for trade. Within these extended families the oldest male was in charge of managing production and distributing the produce. This included the cultivation of cotton and the production of cloth.

Cloth in Gouro Society

Tasks were assigned on a gender basis; female members planted and harvested cotton which was intercropped with food crops, prepared and spun the fiber, and dyed the yarn when needed. Male family members cleared the fields in preparation for planting, dyed yarn as needed, wove long strips on the small treadle looms that are common to West Africa, and sewed the strips together to

¹1. J. A. Olson, *Peoples of Africa: An Ethnohistorical Dictionary*. (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1996).

form cloths. Most men wove in conjunction with farming and hunting and some were more accomplished weavers than others. The family head could decide to spend all of his time weaving if he wanted, thus becoming more of a specialized weaver than other men in the family and producing the higher quality cloths needed for prestigious gifts and ceremonies. In addition to their cloth related tasks women worked in the fields, processed and prepared all the food, raised the children, and maintained the home. Women were also a crucial link in the long distance trade in kola nuts and cloth.

Many different cloths were produced in the Zuénoula area. Most were striped and the basic color scheme was very dark indigo blue, a lighter blue, and white with an occasional dash of imported red yarn. Each pattern of stripes has a **name**. Small designs were brocaded with a supplementary weft technique. Men and women used the same types of cloth but in different sizes. The two main kinds of cloth were that used everyday and that used for ceremonies. Some of these different cloths were **bia**, **kaludaane**, **vaudango**, **groninfies** ; and **da n**.

Besides being worn as clothing, cloth played an important role in social relations and was a crucial element of most ceremonies. Cloth was given at marriage and at death and as reparation by the guilty party in a conflict between individuals, families, and villages. It was used in the religious context and in masquerades. Cloth was an essential component of Gouro social life. Wrapped around the living body it protected and beautified. It described social standing and cultural belonging. At death it defined family relationships and community status. Cloth breached the gaps created by conflict. Literally and figuratively, it enveloped individuals and communities, holding them together and covering their failings.

Cloth and Trade

Cloth was also a primary item of trade among the Zuénoula Gouro. Zuénoula lies in a transitional zone between the dense tropical rainforest to the south and the dry savannah to the north. The area is perfectly situated to be a central link in the north-south trade route that supplied kola nuts, gathered in the forest, to the savannah dwellers in the north to whom they were an essential part of ceremonial life. Gouro women carried cloths produced in the Zuénoula area to the forests to trade for kola nuts. They carried the kola back to regional markets and traded it for goods from the north, one of which was cloth. Through this trade the Gouro, who were farmers, hunters, and weavers but not primarily merchants, met their needs for goods they didn't produce themselves. Zuénoula was thus a crossroads for cloth from a wide geographic region. This is evident when you look at cloth from northern Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. Many similarities in designs and motifs are seen. This also makes it difficult sometimes to assign a definite provenance to some cloths.

French colonization, beginning effectively in this area in 1912, changed all this. Every African over the age of 10 was compelled to pay a yearly tax. This required French currency which was introduced in the Gouro region at pacification—1912. The use of local currency called **broh** was prohibited in 1915² and barter was discouraged by the colonial administration.³ The kola trade

² Archives National de la République de la Côte d'Ivoire 1.QQ.42-V

was disrupted by the French and the Gouro were pushed out of the trade early in the colonial period. The basis of the traditional regional trading economy was thus undermined.

Despite all this, weaving for domestic use and trade continued well into this century. While the forest region to the south was being incorporated into the world commodity market with plantations of coffee and cocoa, Zuénoula was on the margins of the coffee belt and too far north for viable commercial production of cocoa. Cash was raised to pay taxes and buy imported goods that were no longer directly available through barter by the sale of cloth produced in the home. Imported cloth, available since at least 1912, was too expensive for the average Gouro to buy and wear, especially when it could be produced at home. And colonial officials noted that the Gouro seemed to prefer their own cloth to the imported varieties.⁴ During this period all the types of cloth mentioned above continued to be made and used. The colonial administration recognized that the weaving industry was essential to the new cash economy. One official in 1922⁵ went so far as to encourage the development of the local industry and noted that the cloth was highly valued by coastal people living nearly 200 miles away from Zuénoula.⁶

Changes in Economy, Changes in Cloth

During my interviews with older Gouro, I noticed a consistent inconsistency when discussing cloth production. Interviewees would never give a date or even an estimation of a date when asked. But when asked about the introduction of commercially spun yarn, which is the only yarn used today in Zuénoula, they always answered 1946. Upon further investigation I came to understand the importance of that date which signified the end of forced labor in the French colonies. At that time, Africans were finally free to, and encouraged by the colonial administration to, make their own plantations of cash crops of cocoa and coffee. Although there was initial resistance to the idea, the northern Gouro did plant coffee and began to be directly incorporated into the world commodity market.

Coffee plantations take a few years to bear a significant yield so it was in the early 1950s that their effects on cloth production began to be noticeable. You can see on this graph the nearly vertical line showing the rise in coffee harvested in the Zuénoula area from 1950 to 1955.

I'll turn now to the framework of analysis I use to discuss the larger problem of survival of local cloth production in the context of industrial production. Many different reasons have been offered to explain the vitality or disappearance of hand weaving traditions. John Picton lists three

³ Zamblé Bi Justin, "L'homme et la terre en pays guro du milieu de XIXième siècle à 1958." (Ph.D diss. Abidjan: Université de Côte d'Ivoire, 1992).

⁴ ANRCI 1.EE.167, 4th trimester report, subdivision of Zuénoula, 1922.

⁵ ANRCI 1.EE.167, 2nd Trimester report, subdivision of Zuénoula, 1922.

⁶ Ibid.

points to consider when thinking about cloth production. The first point is that “textile traditions will survive if the product has some continuing relevance. . . . This is . . . a matter of local perceptions of the status of particular forms of textiles.”⁷ This relates textiles and their production to matters of identity, status, cultural integration, and fashion. Secondly he points to the market and the relationship between weaver and customer. He reminds us that a weaver has to be able to make money in order to continue working. Thirdly, the internal dynamics of a particular tradition must be taken into consideration. Is there room for innovation and development or is the tradition rigid in its adherence to aesthetic demands and use? Picton states, “If weavers are within a tradition that presents no options, where invention is culturally inappropriate, that tradition will not have the capacity to survive unless it is specially protected for reasons of ethnicity and esteem that have a wide acceptance.”⁸

The first thing that happened with this influx of cash to the Gouro was that hand made cloth for everyday wear was abandoned. Some older women expressed to me that they felt a cloth scarcity before the 1950s. No one had more than two outfits and that wasn’t enough. With their husbands’ new ability to buy industrially produced cloth they and their families could have more cloth and clothing than ever before. Women who I interviewed also cited the comfort and ease-of-washing of factory-made cloth as a reason for its ready adoption. Without the need to produce quantities of cloth to clothe his family, the nonspecialist weaver stopped weaving. Although there was a definite social aspect to preparing and spinning cotton in the family and village context, with the heavy workload that occupied women’s days, spinning was gladly abandoned by most women.

Simultaneously, and I want to emphasize here that these changes did not happen overnight, it was probably a gradual process over a number of years, affecting different people in different locations in different ways, male weavers and clients were able to buy industrially spun yarn with their income from coffee sales. Now they didn’t need female family members to produce the yarn before they could weave. The reciprocal and gender complementary nature of family labor was changing.⁹

Claude Meillassoux, an anthropologist who was working in the Gouro region in 1958 and 1959 remarked at that time on the disappearance of weaving from many villages and the specialization

⁷ John Picton, “Tradition, Technology, and Lurex: Some Comments on Textile History and Design in West Africa.” in *History, Design, and Craft in West African Strip Woven Cloth*, (1992), 45.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 47.

⁹ This aspect of cloth production wasn’t the focus of my field research and more needs to be done in this area. The gendered division of labor might have started changing before this but in the context of my research it started here.

of a few villages in the production of prestige cloths.¹⁰ He notes that Gouro planters told him they “didn’t have enough time to weave.”¹¹ My interviewees reiterated this, saying it was easier to make money planting coffee than by weaving. But at the same time there was a fluorescence in the weaving of expensive prestige cloths by specialist weavers. With the income from coffee Gouro men had disposable cash with which to commission cloths for themselves, family members, and for social obligations. Some weavers remembered the 1970s and early 1980s as being a busy and prosperous time for them as weavers. The weavers who continued to weave moved from being specialists among many weavers to professionals, weaving primarily for money.

New materials brought about the most dramatic changes in handwoven cloth in the Zuénoula area. Working weavers who I interviewed seemed to be happy to use industrially produced yarn because they found it to be stronger and more consistent. They were also able to incorporate more color into their cloths by using commercially dyed cotton and acrylic yarns. You can see in these slides the differences that are apparent. The incorporation of words as a design motif, now a fairly common sight on Baoulé cloths, seems to have started with the Gouro. One of the oldest weavers in Gohitafla, a village near Zuénoula with the largest number of weavers today, claims to have been the first to incorporate words, specifically names, on cloth in 1963. Although illiterate he wove in the name of Modibo Keita, the first president of Mali, on a cloth to be presented to him. Since then, this innovation has been associated with Gouro cloth and has also been appropriated by other weavers in Côte d’Ivoire.

All of this evidence points to an inherent flexibility in the weaving tradition, Picton’s third point. As for the ability of weaving to be an economic activity, his second point, that potential seems to be there presently. Two basic kinds of cloth are now being woven. Highly decorated prestige cloths are commissioned by the customer who pays anywhere from \$70 to over \$200 for a cloth, depending on the style, the weaver, and the customers’ bargaining ability. The other kind of cloth made is a small, simple, and inexpensive cloth called **kaludaane**, used in religious practice and in medium demand. Weavers will make this and sell it when needed rather than working only on commission, since it doesn’t require as big an investment in materials as the other cloths do. Most weavers are still farmers and divide their time between the two activities. The youngest weaver I found, a man of about 60 years, estimated that he made more money from weaving than he did from farming.

It is in considering the first assumption, the assumption that the product has some continuing relevance in the lives of the people concerned, that things get a little sticky. Cloth is still thought to be essential in many realms of Gouro life when discussing normative ideology. But the reality of practice is more complex. Cloth is still given at funerals, for example but according to my observations, cloth made elsewhere is frequently substituted for locally made cloth. When I

¹⁰ Claude Meillassoux, *Athropologie Econonique des Gouro* (Paris: Mouton and Co. 1964), 194.

¹¹ *ibid.*

asked if that was because the local types were more expensive I was told no, the others that come from Ghana are more expensive and therefore more desirable to show off wealth. At the other extreme, less expensive factory woven and printed cloth is sometimes substituted for hand made.

The situation now with weavers in the Zuénoula area is bleak. As I just said, the youngest weaver I found is in his 60s and the rest are considerably older. No young men or women are learning and the art seems destined to die out in this area. Using Picton's three points as a reference--1) cloth continuing to be relevant to social life, 2) weavers making money, and 3) the flexibility of tradition-I would expect the opposite. Ideologically, cloth is still highly relevant to Gouro life, the tradition is flexible and allows for innovation, and weavers seem to make money at their work. Why then does it seem to be on its death bed in the Zuénoula area?

I believe there's an important, almost psychological, factor that is not explicitly mentioned above but is contained in the first assumption, that the product has some continuing relevance and this is a matter of local perceptions of the status of particular forms of textiles. It is also a matter of perception of the occupational status of weaving and spinning by young Gouro people. Spinning, weaving, and the wearing of hand made cloth is perceived as old fashioned and out of date. I base this statement on observation of the existence of strong weaving industries in other parts of the country, other towns of equal size where locally made cloth is worn regularly, and on the use, in the very cosmopolitan city of Abidjan, of hand woven cloth to make fashionable outfits worn to 'cultural' events such as theater and concert performances. The Gouro, due to their geographical location far away from the railroad, which historically was the most important axis of transportation, or the main highway axis, were historically isolated until fairly recently from most of the most wrenching modernizing trends. Due to their unwillingness until recently to give up their own religion and convert to Christianity or Islam, they have been perceived as somewhat backwards in the eyes of their compatriots. I think I can infer a desire to participate in the wider world of Ivoirian and West African fashion as an aspect of modernity, as a motivation for the abandonment of hand made cloth for daily wear, even while hand made cloth is valued in other parts of the country. They have given up many of their 'old ways' with a vengeance, including all hand craft production except the carving of masks, for which there's a large commercial market in Abidjan and abroad. This perception of modernity, of how to relate to new economic conditions not faced by their parents and grandparents, has most strongly affected the survival of cloth production among the Gouro.

In conclusion, I'd like to emphasize two points. The first is that although factory woven cloth was available in West Africa from the nineteenth century on, that fact alone wasn't enough to overpower local hand woven cloth industries. Weaving industries exist today all over the region and in some places, quite strongly. The economics of production, while an important factor as noted in my findings, are not the sole variable and the availability of cheap manufactured goods, while important, cannot be viewed simplistically as the only determining factor. But when considering the survival or demise of a particular local industry, other factors that are perhaps more obscure and therefore more difficult to assess directly, such as attitudes about identity, modernity, and perception of self and others, have as strong an impact on a culturally rooted tradition, such as weaving, as other more discernible points.