

WALK IN THESE SHOES

When it comes to what they put on their feet, Nigerians tend to seek out prominent international brands, but there's a sophisticated and growing leather shoe manufacturing operation in Nigeria's large South Eastern market town of Aba that's making all the right steps.

by
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On a sunny afternoon in Aba, a large commercial town in the Igbo-dominated area of South Eastern Nigeria, the Shoe Plaza in Ariaria market buzzes with activity. Abba Ugwu, who is over six feet tall, sits head bowed and bare-chested, humming local gospel tunes while he works, attaching straps to a batch of unfinished leather shoes. He lifts one after the other from a large pile to his right and gently lays on glue like a dedicated gourmet chef garnishing a new dish.

He is not alone. There are many like him in the hundreds of similar shops that make up Power Line Street and Shoe Plaza here in this busy Nigerian commercial node. Their dedication to the work is extraordinary, with many toiling from dusk till dawn, pulling all-nighters and even staying for days at a time in the market without going home just to beat production deadlines.

A short distance away is Bakassi Line, where an experienced haggler can purchase a pair of leather shoes or slippers for less than a hundred naira. But according to Ugwu, a seasoned cobbler who talks in a mix of English and pidgin, “Bakassi do work in quantity, not quality and their price is anyhow.” In other words, you get what you pay for. “In Bakassi, there are many amateurs and people wey no sabi work there. You fit, buy shoe 100 or 500 naira there. If you carry 100k go that side, you go buy plenty. Those from interior villages come and buy to go home and be the talk of the town.”

Traders in this section of the market were the founders of the infamous “Bakassi Boys” vigilante group that exercised quite a bit of clout in South Eastern Nigeria between 1998 and 2002. Initially set up to keep peace and restore order to a high-crime region, the group eventually evolved into a collection of mercenaries that hired themselves out for extra-judicial killings. It was disbanded in 2002.

Generally rowdy and unruly, the marketplace is host to a mass of people and motorcycles moving at unreal speeds

through food sellers and wheelbarrow pushers. In the rainy season, puddles of stagnant water are a common sight. Here, everything can be bought and sold despite the market’s lack of infrastructure and persistent grime and grit. “Anything that you can’t find to buy here doesn’t exist,” Ugwu brags. There is even a joke in certain parts of Nigeria that a desperate bachelor can walk into Ariaria market and, for the right price, obtain a wife constructed from scratch and to perfection.

A REGIONAL MARKET

The Ariaria market began as an offshoot of its forerunner, the now defunct Ekoha market, just before Nigeria’s Civil War. When the Ekehoa market burnt to ashes in a fire of mysterious origin, the regional government of the time relocated shoemakers to a different part of the city. Now they work alongside timber merchants and leather traders. The market – which reportedly has in excess of 30,000 stores – has created a steady stream of employment that keeps many from falling into poverty while catapulting others into Nigeria’s growing middle-class.

The 2014 rebasing of the Nigerian economy saw the manufacturing sector leapfrog past the telecommunications and oil and gas sectors. Manufacturing grew to 22 percent of Nigeria’s GDP in 2013, increasing from 14 percent the previous year. There are no official figures for Ariaria market’s contribution to Abia state’s Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) as the government is yet to update its records with the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) as at 2013. However, unofficial estimates suggest it contributes almost 60 percent of the state’s \$10 million (N2 billion) monthly IGR.

Today, aided by the Enugu-Bamenda Road, part of the Trans-African Highway, traders come from all over the continent – Ghana, Cameroon, Liberia, Togo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Ivory Coast – to buy Aba-made goods for resale. This is the





inspiration for the craftsmen. Every few metres there are bare-chested men wearing little more than jeans or knee-length shorts as they make shoes for the rest of Africa.

The craftsmen themselves are a geographically diverse bunch. Ugwu travelled the 230 kilometres from the university town of Nsukka in Enugu state in 1993, after completing his secondary school education. He apprenticed for one of the more experienced craftsmen, serving for four years before starting his own business.

His fellow shoemaker, Martins Inyang, moved to Aba eight years ago with his family of four from Ikot Ekpene in Akwa Ibom state. He is now the leader of his line in the market. Light-skinned and about the same height as his 5-foot-4-inches, 14-year-old son who helps out after school, he has an exceptional eye for detail. Inyang begins work at nine in the morning and, together with his four apprentices, makes over 250 pairs of office shoes each week, buoyed by the music from his transistor radio. Then there is lanky Emmanuel Ikeagwu, a university graduate who migrated from Port Harcourt where he had tried and failed at other businesses before deciding on shoemaking. He is now in his sixth year of business. "Frustration made me learn fast," he recalls. "I was determined to prove that I'm not a total failure. It doesn't matter how long you have been doing it. It's determination and destiny that make you succeed."

Now in his mid-thirties, he has a wife and two children who he can support thanks to his trade. He can also save to fund

other businesses. "If you keep on drinking and having fun with all of your profits, you won't be able to save," he said.

PRICE AND PROCESS

For these entrepreneurs in Aba, shoemaking is more than just a means of generating income; it is an intricate, multistep process controlled by men and women with a creative vision and dedication to detail. Some of the shoemakers like Emmanuel draw patterns on paper "out from my head or I see it in a vision". Others like Ugwu, who specialises in female shoes and bags, have other sources of inspiration. Ugwu gets his designs from a China-based friend through the popular messaging platform Whatsapp. "This is the one in vogue," he said, proudly revealing a set of designs he has just received.

Kano, the largest city in northern Nigeria and historical centre for leather tanning, is the cobblers' main source of leather. China is also an important supplier of leather, though some of the shoemakers, including Ugwu and Emmanuel, insist that Kano leather is the best. Other raw materials including shoelaces are imported from Italy and other countries.

The shoemakers work on different aspects of each shoe. First, one of them cuts the leather into long strips which he then glues together. Most of these strips are then sewn and coupled with the shoe base – which is itself made by wrapping leather around a shoe shaper made of wood or plastic before being cut to different sizes. The rest of these leather strips become the shoe straps, which are given to a shoe tailor such as Nkechinyere Obioma, who works all day using a normal sewing machine to neatly thread and sew them together. "I am a shoe tailor, not shoemaker," she said. Obioma sews a pair of straps to the shoes in three minutes or less, depending on the design. She can sew up to 150 pairs a day. Generally she charges \$0.05 (N10) a pair.

According to Emmanuel, as a last step, cobblers apply wood lacquer after scoring tiny abrasions on the sole to help attach it to the shoe top. Afterwards, this is taken to a machine that hardens the leather while smoothing away all of its creases. This also costs \$0.05 (N10) per pair.

The cobblers attach logos or crests to the finished products using a stamper. They match the requests of their bulk-buying customers. The price for this process is fixed regardless of whether you want a company logo or a customised name. Quite a number of bulk buyers who know the Nigerian preference for foreign-made goods will sometimes request popular brand names like Versace or Prada, or phrases like "Made in Italy".

"We just make according to demand," says Ugwu. In the process, there are the inevitable spelling mistakes that provoke jokes nationwide. It is one reason why some shoes and handbags are branded "Guchi" rather than Gucci or "Prado" in place of Prada. The more eccentric cobblers create brand labels that bear their names or a unique phrase pertaining to their identity. "I am a citizen of Biafra, not Nigeria, so I use my work to show my identity and pride," says 27-year-old Kelechi Orjinta, whose white singlet is stained by the sweat brought forth by

his constant hammering. He is known at Shoe Plaza for branding his work “KC Best” and “Made in Biafra” unless his customers ask for alternative labels.

Prices are arbitrary and depend on both the skill of the craftsman and the bargaining power of the buyer. Ugwu points out, “I am my own boss so I can sell for N2000 (\$10), N3000 (\$15) or even N5000 (\$25). Any price I want.”

At his door rests an order of 2,000 pairs of shoes for a Cameroonian reseller. Making them took him a week but he could have saved time if he sublet the work to other craftsmen, as he sometimes does. He bought each sole for \$1 (200 Naira) from a colleague within the market and the total cost of producing one pair is \$2.76 (N550). Add to that the cost of his time and craft and it comes to a minimum of N600 (\$3) as the selling price. When he is in his element, Ugwu can make up to 4,000 pairs in a week, sometimes working through the night to the next morning.

DISTRIBUTION

Every Saturday, wholesalers come to load containers of shoes onto lorries and trailers. The wholesalers pack their purchases into large sacks and then pay market touts \$15 (N3,000) per bag to load them onto the trucks. They pay the drivers who then begin their journey westward to Lagos and neighbouring West African countries or east towards Central Africa. The usual routes are to the Lagos, Port Harcourt and Enugu airports or directly to the Nigerian town of Ikom on the Cameroon border, where the goods then follow the Enugu-Bamenda road further

inland.

Lagosians reportedly have disdain for locally made goods. For youngsters in Nigeria’s commercial capital, social clout can sometimes be a function of the number of recognisable quality brands in one’s possession. Ugwu disputes this, stressing that “Lagos people buy from us a lot – leave that shakara,” he says using a local word that means “posing”. “Oshodi [a section of Lagos] get trailer. Many places have their own trailers.”

He shows his catalogue with a picture of a matching pair of bags and slippers made from ankara material. “A Lagos woman came and ordered 1,000 pieces for her to buy. A woman can bring big head-tie and we take it and turn it into other products then supply to Malabo and even Togo.” On a nearby wooden table scarred by marks from his mallet rests a letter from Togo detailing the colour and size specifications for a new order of shoes.

CHALLENGES

Despite the high, Africa-wide demand for their products, the profit margins seen by these craftsmen are still low because of the many challenges they face in their line of work. From its inception, Nigeria has experienced epileptic power supply. The entire Araria market is hooked up to the national grid but they see almost no electricity. Egemba Ogbonnaya, a 49-year-old shoemaker, laments that this has been so for the duration of his one decade of operations in the business. “Most times, we only get light two hours in the day and another two hours at night,” he said, wiping his hands on his faded denim shorts. He





and the others share a work space and split the cost of a \$75 (N15,000) “I Pass My Neighbour”, a small, 5KW amp generator so named because the noise it makes alerts the neighbourhood to its presence. They spend just under N1,000 (\$5) daily for 10 litres of fuel. Smaller shops have neither light nor electrical wiring, and it is not uncommon to find some shops totally dark even in the day, especially those whose owners cannot afford generators.

The craftsmen also suffer from competition with the rising tide of imported goods. During the Olusegun Obasanjo administration, Nigeria supported its indigenous manufacturing industry by introducing high tariffs for many imported goods. Successive governments have strayed from these policies, increasing the presence of foreign goods to the detriment of indigenous craftsmen and their products. “Government allows Dubai products to saturate the market, which reduces our sales because Nigerians like foreign goods a lot,” Ogbonnaya lamented. “My shoes last for years unlike Dubai products that last for only one week.”

Unlike the state governments in the neighbouring Anambra and Enugu, the Abia state government does not specifically support local industries, and its promises of building an Aba Industrial City seem but a mirage. Ugwu is blunt about the neglect. “Government doesn’t offer any form of help to us,” he said. “In my home state, Enugu, Innoson Motors makes cars from scratch in the state and you see the government rushing it up and down. If they were helping us, you would’ve seen a lot of machines here.”

As it is, five or six craftsmen pool funds to buy machines

and rent the shops. The costs, which can range between \$600–\$650 (N120,000 and N130,000) per annum, make it cheaper to work cooperatively to boost profit margins. The cost of materials is also high, especially with increasing transportation costs for leather from northern Nigerian states affected by the Boko Haram insurgency.

The state government collects several taxes from the craftsmen, but there is little or no access to loans and other credit facilities that might help their businesses grow. The market and its surrounding areas suffer from a lack of infrastructure that reduces accessibility and increases the cost of transportation. The rainy season is especially bad because floods take over the market, Ogbonnaya said. “They are always asking us to pay N1,000 (\$5) infrastructure levies. So last year when the agents came, we refused and said government should come and collect the money themselves and no one has come since. We pay all manner of levies from different agencies and union dues too but nobody is doing anything for us,” he added. Some craftsmen have been so frustrated that they have left the business and are now commercial motorcyclists or rickshaw operators. “I don’t know any government within this country. Iwa ta go [‘you understand’ in Igbo],” says a shoemaker who refuses to have pictures taken because “reporters have come before, about three years ago and nothing happened.” He and his two apprentices will not be voting in the forthcoming elections. “Government no dey work for us, so I am government unto myself.”

The passion that Ogbonnaya, Uwu and the rest of his cohort in Shoe Plaza embody is palpable. Their backgrounds may be diverse but there is a similarity in purpose; they know where the shoe pinches and they are unrelenting in their resolve to make the world one step at a time.

