

MAT-MAKING AMONG UTURU WOMEN: A HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION 1999-2024

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Abstract

Mat-making, one of the oldest and most enduring forms of traditional household craftsmanship—akin to the use of calabashes and earthenware—holds both utilitarian and cultural significance in many African communities. In Uturu, this artisanal practice, primarily undertaken by women, serves not only as a means of livelihood but also as a channel for cultural expression and intergenerational continuity. This study explores the socio-economic empowerment of women through mat-making in Uturu, adopting a feminist narrative research approach to foreground women's voices and lived experiences. The findings demonstrate that mat-making provides a sustainable income stream, enabling women to make meaningful contributions to both household welfare and community development. Beyond economic gains, the craft reinforces a sense of cultural identity and social cohesion among women. Anchored in feminist political economy, the paper argues that traditional crafts, such as mat-making, are not merely economic activities but also forms of resistance and agency in patriarchal settings. It concludes by recommending policy support and institutional investment in indigenous crafts as pathways to gender-inclusive and culturally rooted sustainable development.

Keywords: Mat-making, Craft, Uturu women, Cultural Identity

Introduction

Mat-making is an ancient craft deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of communities around the world, and it holds significant historical, social, and economic importance, having been

practised by human societies for thousands of years¹. This traditional technique involves the interlacing of natural fibres to create functional and decorative textiles used in various cultural contexts. Thornton Peter, apart from mentioning that in the 16th century, matting was the earliest form of fitted carpeting, made from plaited strips that could be customised to fit a room, also made mention of a beautiful African mat found in London in 1666, suitable for use as a carpet.²

In Africa, evidence of the craft can be found in Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso, where, in 1623, mats were used as a form of currency. Specifically, in the Djibo area in Upper Volta, Sieber Roy documented that mats were made of reed and dried bulrushes by women to create tightly woven mats that were impervious to wind, light, or rain and these mats were primarily used for sleeping, but had other uses such as festivals, ceilings, carpets³, Mat making in Nigeria existed for at least 500 years before Europeans arrived. This is evidenced by excavations at Igbo-Ukwu in Eastern Nigeria, where the floor of the burial chamber, dating back to the 9th century, was carpeted with mats. Additionally, in 1641, mattresses were often placed on mats supported by ropes for sleeping⁴. The uses of mats are summed up thus: "Historically, mats served various purposes beyond mere utility; they symbolised status, spirituality, and social cohesion"⁵.

¹ M. Subbiah and V. Venkat. Economic Importance of Mat Weaving Industry in Pattermadai of Tirunelveli District: An Overview. *Shanlax International Journal of Commerce*, 1(2), 2014, p. 20.

² T. Peter. *Interior Decoration in England, France and Holland*. (Yale: Yale University Press), 1978, p. 23.

³ S. Roy. *African Furniture and Household Objects*. (Indiana: Indiana University Press), 1980, 4.

⁴ S. Roy. *African Furniture...* p.4.

⁵ A. Well and G. Well. *Appledore Rope Mats: A History and Explanation of Mat Making Techniques and Memories of an Appledore Maid*. (New York: F. W. Publishers), 2009, p. 12.

As an enduring legacy from ancient ritual objects to modern fashion textiles, the art of mat-making continues to inspire creativity, foster cultural identity, and connect communities worldwide. Despite the historical significance of mat-making among Uturu women, there has been limited documentation of this practice. The paper aims to document the role of mat-making in empowering Uturu women, a craft whose decline over the past three decades is threatening their economic mainstay.

In the discipline of history, narratives remain an essential component of oral histories, defined as "the recording of personal testimonies delivered in oral form"⁶, particularly for researchers employing qualitative methods to explore experiences. Feminist research's support for diversity in extending the methods of qualitative traditions is one-way feminists have found to express more fully the insights arising from transformations in research practice⁷. Feminist methodologies facilitate more interpersonal and reciprocal relationships between researchers and the individuals whose lives and experiences form the focus of the research⁸. This is similar to the in-depth and open-ended interview between the interviewer and the interviewee in historical research, which suggests that "people spontaneously tell stories in their lives and also makes sense of their experiences"⁹ and "it resembles a conversation"¹⁰. Thus, by bringing a multi-perspective

⁶ T. Akanbi. "Economic Empowerment and Political Participation of Women in Rural Nigeria". *Journal of African Political Economy*, 17(2), 2005, p. 100.

⁷ M. L. Devault. "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategist for Interviewing and Analysis". *Social Problems*, 37(1), 1990, p. 96.

⁸E. J. Lawless. *Holy Women Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries of Wholeness through Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography*. (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania, 1993), p.45.

⁹ S. E. Bell. "Becoming a Political Woman: The Reconstruction and Interpretation of Experiences through Stories". In A. D. Todd, and S. Fisher, *Gender and Discourse: The Power of Talk*. (Norwood: Ablex, 1988), p.123.

¹⁰ G. L. Riesman. *Narrative Analysis*. (Newbury: Sage, 1993), p. 3

approach to history, feminist, and qualitative research methods to represent and interpret these women's stories, the paper considers it a form of feminist narrative interpretation¹¹. The women are located in the Uturu community, which serves as the headquarters of the Isikwuato Local Government Area of Abia State.

Origin of Mat Making

The origin of Mat making in Uturu, a traditional practice passed down through generations, is shrouded in oral tradition; there are variations in testimonies¹². According to the first variant, the art of Mat making originated in Amaokwe and Umuezeala, neighbouring town of Lopka, now Katsina-Ala, in Benue State¹³. The introduction of Mat weaving into Uturu was made by a man named Ucheaya from Umuezeala, who Eze A. Ibe invited to teach the people of Uturu. Ucheaya is, therefore, considered the pioneer of mat-making in Uturu, and the mats he created were the first seen in the community¹⁴.

The second variant traced the earliest origin of mat-making in Uturu as far back as the migration of the people from the Cameroons region¹⁵; the new settlers of Uturu found a lot of reed, rush, and sedge vegetation in the area, which was ideal for mat-making¹⁶. This second variant is

¹¹ O. A. Irom. "Mbembe Women and the Nigerian Civil War: Interrogating a Minority Narrative." *The Calabar Historical Journal*, 10(1), 2021, p. 116.

¹² I. Nwokocha, personal communication, February 4, 2024.

¹³ R. Andema, M. June, and J. Uguyan. "The Mat Weaver Legacy: Preservation and Promotion of Culture." *International Journal of Research Publication*, 92, 2023, p. 15.

¹⁴ U. J. Okenwa, et.al. "Archaeological Resources as Signature of Early Human Civilization: Contributions from Igboland" *Journal of African History and Archaeology*, 1(2), 2023, p. 25.

¹⁵ C. Oko-Otu and D. Ajaegbo. "Geography and the Political Economy of Pre-Colonial Ehugbo". *Studies in People's History*, 10(1), 2023, p. 21.

¹⁶ C. Oko-Otu and D. Ajaegbo. "Geography... p. 22.

consistent with oral sources from neighbouring communities, including Uturu and Ihite people. In the words of Madam Nkechi Emeto, "In the olden days, we used mats for everything – sitting, sleeping, and even as walls to divide the room."¹⁷ Another source noted that "my grandmother told me that they used to sit on mats and sleep on mats. They would even hang mats to create separate rooms"¹⁸.

The versatility in defining spaces within homes, as demonstrated by the two testimonies above, highlights two important aspects. Firstly, mat-making has been an integral part of the cultural life of the Uturu people. Secondly, and most importantly, it has always been an economic activity carried out by women alongside other domestic and farm responsibilities assigned to them. The origin of contemporary mat-making in Uturu can be traced to the mid-1930s when a skilled craftsman named Akum Ukwu arrived in the community¹⁹. Before his arrival, mat-making was considered a form of art practised by women. Akum Ukwu's renowned *Ochichi-Makondo* (mat centre) is located in Uturu, where people engage in the traditional art of mat-making.

Women and Mat-Making

The traditional art of making mats is a significant aspect of Uturu women, who have been the primary weavers of mats due to their practical and functional uses within the home. Due to its importance in the house, the knowledge of the craft has been passed down from generation to generation. For instance, as part of a new bride's status, she was expected to weave mats as a sign

¹⁷ N. Emeto, personal communication, February 10, 2024.

¹⁸ N. Emeofor, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

¹⁹ C. Emerole. "Supplementing Incomes from Farms with Incomes from Rural Crafts: The Case Study of Mat Weaving in Utury, Abia State. *International Journal of Tropical Agriculture and Food Systems*, 5(3), 2011, pp5-6.

of respect for her in-laws²⁰. The processes the new bride and other women undertook to make mats involved a series of stages, including *nchikota* (gathering), *ogwugwo* (de-moisturization), *nkwado* (preparation, including colouration), and *okpukpa* (weaving) or mat-making. Since informal education was more concerned with understanding the procedures or activities involved rather than assigning specific names to the stages, these stages are named here for clarity.

Nchikota involved the careful selection and harvesting of *mpisa papairos* (papyrus stems) or *akirika* (raffia palm leaves) (Figures 1 and 2), which, apart from being indigenous to the area, were the primary materials used for Mat making in the area²¹. The process began with identifying mature *akirika* that were suitable for mat making. The selection was based on their size, colour, and quality, with preference given to leaves with a uniform green colour and a length of around 2-3 meters²². According to Nneoma Okoro "the process of sourcing for the materials can be quite tasking and time consuming. The leaves are harvested by cutting them from the tree using *mma ekwu di nko* or *mma oge* (a sharp knife or machete), taking care to avoid damaging the leaves."²³

The harvested leaves are then tied in bundles and transported back home to the back of the house, where the *nchikota* process was typically done in the early morning or late evening when the leaves were most pliable and most straightforward to handle. The quality of the leaves gathered

²⁰U. J. Okenwa, et.al. "Archaeological Resources as Signature of Early Human Civilization: Contributions from Igboland" *Journal of African History and Archaeology*, 1(2), 2023, p. 20.

²¹ K. N. Okoro. "Africa (Igbo) Traditional Religious Thoughts and Modern Nigerian Environmental Crisis: A Reconsideration." *Middle East Journal of Scientific Research*, 2020, p. 55.

²²C. Okafor. "Traditional Mat Making in Uturu: A Study of Techniques and Materials". *Journal of African Studies*, 10(2), 2018, pp. 5-6.

²³ N. Okoro, personal communication, February 02, 2024.

ultimately determined the quality of the mats produced, making this stage a critical component of the mat-making process²⁴.

In addition to *akirika* or *mpisa papers*, other materials such as *ahihia achara* or *ahihia ami* (grasses/reeds), *ebe nti* (rushes), split canes, and sometimes *we achara* (bamboo stem), categorised as monocotyledonous plant, with pinnate leaves that can reach lengths of up to 28 meters were often used for decorative purposes or to add strength and durability to Uturu mats. The gathering process for these materials was similar to that of *akirika* or *mpisa papairos*, with an emphasis on selecting high-quality materials that would enhance the overall appearance and durability of the mats.²⁵

Ogwugwo is a term used in the field to refer to the raw materials used in local production. It was a critical stage that involved removing excess moisture from *akirika* or *mpisa papairos* to prevent decay and ensure durability. The process began with tying the freshly harvested leaves in bundles and leaving them to dry in the sun for several days²⁶. After which, the leaves were transferred to a more controlled environment, such as a drying shed or a covered area, to dry further for several weeks.

During this period, the leaves were regularly turned and monitored to ensure even drying and prevent mould growth. Once they had reached a moisture level of around 20%, they were considered de-moisturised and ready for the next stage²⁷. *Ogwogwo*, as aptly noted by Madam Onyiechi Ezekwem. Moreover, corroborated by other mat makers in a focus group discussion,

²⁴C. Iweala, personal communication, February 1, 2024.

²⁵C. Okafor. "Traditional Mat Making in Uturu: A Study of Techniques and Materials". *Journal of African Studies*, 10(2), 2018, p. 10.

²⁶O. Ezekwem, personal communication, February 02, 2024.

²⁷N. Okoro, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

"can take from several weeks to several months, depending on the humidity and temperature conditions but it was an essential stage to ensure the quality and durability of the mats, as it prevented decay and insect damage."²⁸

The next stage, *nkwado*, involved cleaning the leaves of excess fibres, making them suitable for coiling or weaving into mats and colouring. "We soak the dried leaves in shallow filled water pit over night or for a few days to make them easy to work with"²⁹. This helps to rehydrate the leaves and remove any dirt or debris that may have accumulated during the *ogwugwo* stage³⁰. The softened leaves were then pounded using either a large wooden or stone pestle against a mortar. This process, known as 'retting', helps to break down the cellular structure of the leaves, making them more flexible and easier to coil or weave³¹.

The pounded leaves were then washed in clean water to remove excess fibres. "Although this process of removing the fibers from the leaves entailed considerable effort, it helped to ensure that the leaves were clean and free of any impurities that could affect the quality of the mats"³². The leaves were then left to dry slightly by air-drying to remove excess moisture. This helped to prevent mould or mildew from developing during the mat-making process. The leaves were then manually split into different segments for colouring and plain *okpukpa*, making the process more efficient.

²⁸ O. Ezekwem, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

²⁹ C. Okafor. "Traditional Mat Making in Uturu: A Study of Techniques and Materials". *Journal of African Studies*, 10(2), 2018, p. 11.

³⁰ I. Ejimofor, personal communication, February 20, 2024.

³¹ C. Okafor. "Traditional Mat Making in Uturu: A Study of Techniques and Materials". *Journal of African Studies*, 10(2), 2018, p. 11.

³² N. Emeto personal communication, February 10, 2024.

The colour decoration process involved the application of *eke, dika, many osisi, and uro* (natural dyes derived from plant bark, leaves, extracts, and clay) to the fibres, creating a range of colours and patterns. The process began with the selection of either *eke, dika, mmanu osisi, or uro*, which were chosen based on their ability to produce specific colours, such as indigo for blue, papyrus for yellow, and clay for red³³. These items were boiled in water to extract their colour pigments. Once the dye pigments had been extracted. The leaves were then submerged in the dye mixture and left to soak for several hours or overnight. Afterwards, they were removed from the dye mixture and washed in clean water to rinse out the excess dye.

Ifunaya Ejimofor noted that "the process could be repeated multiple times to achieve the desired shade and intensity, since these dyeing agents gave the mats their locally preferred prominent black, red, and yellow colors."³⁴ In addition to dyeing, other colour decoration techniques, such as painting and printing, are also used to create intricate designs and patterns on the mats. Painting involves the use of natural pigments such as ochre and umber to create bold designs and patterns, while printing consists of the use of carved wooden or stone blocks to apply dye onto the mats³⁵.

Before mat making, the leaves were meticulously combed using oil to ensure they were smooth and ready for weaving. The weaving process required great care and effort, especially when achieving the desired width. An example of this is splitting a single leaf into seven sections to form the Mat. To prepare the split leaf ends for oil absorption, a wooden scraper tool is used to

³³M. Nwosu. "Natural Dyes used in Uturu mat Making. *Journal of Textile and Fashion Design*, 5(1), 2020, p. 1.

³⁴ I. Ejimofor, personal communication, February 02, 2024.

³⁵ M. Nwosu. "Natural Dyes used in Uturu mat Making. *Journal of Textile and Fashion Design*, 5(1), 2020, p. 5.

enhance the fibre surface delicately. These scrapers possessed sharp, thin teeth that served the same purpose as certain modern commercial combs. In addition to these tools, a needle-like awl containing a sharp, flattened, pointed tip, complemented with a wooden handle, was used to effectively pierce holes for each mat stitch³⁶. These combed leaves used in Uturu mats had dimensions of approximately 0.32 cm in width and 1 meter in length, with no joints³⁷.

Information on the style of loom used to weave mats in the Uturu area was described as a large frame loom, in which the warp threads were tied to the upper and lower parts of the frame, and the horizontal threads were secured between the woven Mat (App. 3 and 5). Women would sit on the ground, facing the length of the loom, and turn the Mat as necessary³⁸. The finished products revealed a distinct type of Mat known as *okereke* mats, unique to Uturu.

These women, who engaged in mat-making, were active farmers. In their free moments between farm responsibilities and other duties, they ventured into the forest, gathered *akirika*, transported them back home, and began the stages of mat-making³⁹. Mat-making skills were passed down through generations; hence, it was not uncommon to witness multiple generations of women gathered together, weaving in unison. This sense of community also extended to the mat-making process itself, which often became a social occasion where women visited friends or

³⁶C. Iweala, personal communication, February 01, 2024.

³⁷N. Emeofor, personal communication, February 02, 2024.

³⁸M. Y. Waziri. The Modification of the Traditional Horizontal Looms from Wooden to Steel Frames for the Production of the Narrow Band Fabric. *Journal of the Environment*, 15(11), 2021, p. 30.

³⁹ N. Okeke and E. Okunna. (2021, October). Indigenous Fiber Art: Strategy for Sustainable Development. *Journal of Humanities*, 14(1), 2021, p. 33.

relatives as they worked on their mats, exchanging materials and advice regarding the craft⁴⁰. Mat-making fit in with domestic responsibilities because women had more control over how they scheduled their workday. This meant that they could engage in this income-generating activity without straying too far from home. This was a welcomed idea for women who found it difficult to juggle their work roles and domestic ones, as a complex often associated with guilt could cause some women to quit their jobs entirely⁴¹.

Madam Nnenna Ekechukwu lamented the poor visibility and the sting from insects, particularly when she had to weave late into the night to meet an order from the city. This was in the context of paid employment that occupied her daytime hours⁴². However, all the women involved in mat-making shared the same sentiments regarding light and visibility N. Okoro narrates how the weaving process can take several days, depending on the size and complexity of the design, yet in certain instances, it can be completed in a matter of hours⁴³. However, when completed, the Mat was a masterpiece of intricate weaving, design, and colour (App. 6).

Generally, the flexibility involved in mat-making allowed women to easily readjust their working hours or take long breaks from their mats and return to them at a later time. This was especially pertinent for some Uturu women who had seasonal occupations or had to cope with other frequent interruptions. An example of such an occupation was teaching, which allowed

⁴⁰N. Okeke and E. Okunna. "Indigenous Fiber Art: Strategy for Sustainable Development". *Journal of Humanities*, 14(1), 2021, p. 34.

⁴¹N. Okeke and E. Okunna. "Indigenous Fiber Art: Strategy for Sustainable Development". *Journal of Humanities*, 14(1), 2021, p. 34.

⁴²N. Ekechukwu, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

⁴³ N. Okoro, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

women to work intensively during school term and take a break during school holidays⁴⁴. The role of women in the production of mats was significant, particularly due to the widespread use of mats in Igbo culture. A woman can make a mat for personal use in the home or for a specific ceremony. This likely reduced costs for the family, as the mat maker could consistently provide mats in various styles and sizes to meet different family needs⁴⁵.

The period of mat-making by the roadside was also culturally significant. It was a place to chat with old friends, catch up with the local news, or gossip about people in the village while making the traditionally male-woven *sago* palm fans. Also, during off-seasons from farming, when the palm oil mills were not operational, women were seen weaving mats by the side of the road. Many youths paid their way through school with the proceeds from making mats. (App. 4). The cultural significance of the production of mats in Uturu was such that a large number of the women population actively participated. To date, mat weaving can be seen being done under coconut trees, redefining indigenous knowledge through modern diffusion⁴⁶.

Uses of Mats in Uturu

Women were responsible for providing mats for all occasions, and as most of these women were married and had families, they were often involved in the same ceremonies where mats were used. Culturally, *Iri ji'* (New Yam Festival), a significant ceremony in Igbo culture, was celebrated

⁴⁴ V. Onyema. "Patterns of Inter-Group Relations between Nnaeto and Umunze of Abia and Anambra States". *Lagos Historical Review*, 2021, p. 60.

⁴⁵C. Oko-Otu and D. Ajaegbo. "Geography and the Political Economy of Pre-Colonial Ehugbo". *Studies in People's History*, 10(1), 2023, p. 25.

⁴⁶K. N. Okoro. "Africa (Igbo) Traditional Religious Thoughts and Modern Nigerian Environmental Crisis: A Reconsideration". *Middle East Journal of Scientific Research*, 2020, p. 50.

with yams served on traditionally woven mats only. The white Mat was one of the required items for bride-price settlement, as it was synonymous with peace⁴⁷. Mats were often used in settling disputes when money payments could not be made. *Ibeji* (burial mat) had significant value in commemorating the passing of twins, although the cultural importance of burial mats has declined. Distinguished mats with intricate, symbolic designs were used during events such as chieftaincy ceremonies, war title-taking, and other esteemed festivities. Some unique mat patterns even served as weaponry in times of conflict⁴⁸. The wig covered with mats, a cultural design (tattoo or symbol), was a special headgear made for adult men in Uturu and was worn during special social and cultural functions.

Artistically crafted, tattoo-designed ceremonial mats, known as *ogbogo*, were created for initiates learning the art and secrets of *obu*, which they would wrap around their heads. Mats were wrapped like loins and worn on the shoulders. Today, other items, such as shirts, are worn with the ritual mats during *obu*⁴⁹. Another cultural ceremony that involved the use of a mat was the child naming ceremony, which was performed on the third or seventh day. The Mat used for this purpose was a hay mat woven to a length of about six feet with a rack for carrying.

In shrines or traditional gatherings, people sat on mats to speak with *Eze mmuo* (chief priest) or with the *Onye ji isi* (diviner) or an elder. Mats could also be burnt as a last resort in taking a case to a 'spiritual' level to curse a wrongdoer. Interwoven mats were also hung on palm trees as a form of religious offering to the gods, seeking protection and wealth for the interwoven society

⁴⁷N. Okeke and E. Okunna. "Indigenous Fiber Art: Strategy for Sustainable Development". *Journal of Humanities*, 14(1), 2021, p. 35.

⁴⁸D. Iweala, personal communication, February 01, 2024.

⁴⁹M. Okoro. "Women in Igbo Culture: Extrapolations from Nsukka, South-eastern Nigeria". *Asian Women*, 38(1), 2022, p.77.

members. It was common to offer the first fruits from the farm with such sacred mats as the first fruits of interwoven labour⁵⁰. Once a mat was spread on a plot of field, people understood it as an invitation to participate in the function. Traditionally speaking, it was essential to keep mats handy. These mat owners had the responsibility of keeping the mats clean and free from pests, insects, soiling, unpleasant smells, fungi, injuries, burns, theft, and other hazards. Mostly, curly pegs or palm nopals were the simple items used to keep mats warm⁵¹.

In Egodinobi-Uturu, for example, during *Mgbo Igbu* (a memorable picnic day held on the first Sunday after Easter Sunday of the dry season, which sometimes coincides with the celebration of the yam deity in some Igbo areas), a large number of cooked dishes were artistically arranged on *mba ama-ulo*. This was a type of traditional large Mat used in conjunction with a tied palm frond at a selected arena on the ground alongside other mats⁵². *Mba ama-ulo* were woven in robust large diameters so that they could carry large varieties of meals and also large family members, elders, and age-grade members.

Economically, mats were used by women in various activities, such as shell breaking. They sat in a jigsaw arrangement called *anainunu* (beautiful sitting) on corded mats raised to form a hip rest. These mats were like arrows pointing outward, carrying between 4 and 6 people⁵³. Mats were also used as mattresses by tradespeople and those engaged in outdoor activities, especially early and late in the evening, to protect them from the cold ground. While working on the farm during the late afternoon when the temperature became hot, it was commonplace to find farmers sitting

⁵⁰E. Okoro. (2014). "The Interconnectedness of Mat Making in Uturu". *Journal of Interconnectedness*, 18(1), 2014, p.34.

⁵¹B. Chukwu. (2018). Economic Contributions of Traditional Crafts in Uturu. *Journal of African Studies*, 12(3), 2018, p. 45.

⁵²I. Ejimofor, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

⁵³N. Okoro, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

on mats to carry out activities such as picking vegetables and other agricultural products on farms far from their homes,

Domestically, as an essential item in the home, mats serve various purposes, including serving as sitting mats, footrests, cushioning mats, sleeping mats, and delineating spaces within the house. Along the length of the living room, one or more people sit in the kind of position where one's back is against the wall or the rail or any support for the back while taking local herbs for sore throat and cough in a small group discussion⁵⁴. *Cinemalu or Agomde* (sitting mats) were generally of distinct sizes and had different configurations.

This was also the case with some homes in urban centres, where some women still used mats in the domestic areas where they sat rather than using more modern carpets. Women who lived in very crowded areas and needed time to entertain guests, rest, or study often improvised with mats as seating materials to avoid their children and spouses. The invention of mattresses and other foam items has not adversely affected the use of mats in Nigeria⁵⁵. It must, however, be emphasised that to the Uturu people, mats were not merely for domestic use, as they were also made on a commercial scale, employing the efforts of many other women in the community⁵⁶.

Impact of Mat-Making on Women

Socio-Cultural Impact

Mat-making has been a cornerstone in Uturu's socio-cultural fabric, as women have used the craft to sustain social bonds. In other words, the dexterity of the craftswomen struck a cordial

⁵⁴ I. Ejimofor personal communication, February 02, 2024.

⁵⁵ N. Okeke and E. Okunna. "Indigenous Fiber Art: Strategy for Sustainable Development". *Journal of Humanities*, 14(1), 2021, p. 37.

⁵⁶ N. Ekechukwu, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

hold amongst the people⁵⁷. Granted that man by nature is gregarious⁵⁸ mat-making created a sense of community and solidarity, reinforcing social networks that have been crucial for mutual support in times of need⁵⁹. The designs and techniques used in mat-making were often unique to the region, reflecting its cultural identity. By continuing this tradition, women help preserve and promote their cultural history⁶⁰. The patterns and designs on mats also carried stories, serving as a medium through which women expressed their identities and cultural narratives⁶¹. Consequently, Mat plays a significant role in various cultural ceremonies and festivals and women, as the primary mat-makers, thus hold a central role in these important cultural events⁶².

In Uturu, mat-making served as a means of informal education, where skills and knowledge were passed down from one generation to the next. This was why grandmothers ensured that their daughters learnt mat-making before completing their formal education. Through mat-making, women were able to leave property to their children, even if they pre-deceased their husbands. This not only preserved cultural heritage but also ensured that younger women, new brides and women with many dependents had a skill to rely on for income, thereby promoting self-reliance and independence⁶³.

Religious Contribution

⁵⁷ P.O. Odey. "Yala and Her Neighbours in the 20th Century" *Benue Valley Journal of Humanities*, Volume 13, Numbers 1&2 January-December, 2014, p. 171.

⁵⁸ P.O. Odey. "Yala and Her Neighbours..." p. 174.

⁵⁹ E. Eze. *The Art of Mat Making in Uturu*. (Nsukka, 2015), p. 15.

⁶⁰ E. Eze. *The Art of ...* p. 15.

⁶¹ E. Eze. *The Art of ...* p. 15.

⁶² N. Okoro. "Preservation of Cultural Heritage through Traditional Crafts". *Cultural Anthropology Quarterly*, 25(4), 2019, p.84.

⁶³ N. Okoro, personal communication, February 02, 2024.

In Uturu, mats were considered a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, connecting the community to their ancestors and the divine⁶⁴. Mat-making was not just a traditional craft but a sacred act that connected creators and users⁶⁵. The process of weaving mats was believed to possess spiritual powers, allowing mat makers to communicate with the divine and seek guidance and protection⁶⁶. Some of the women saw the act of mat-making as a religious activity which closely connected them with both their natural and supernatural environments⁶⁷. This was substantiated by one informant, who stated that women's involvement in mat-making is often tied to religious rituals and practices, thereby strengthening their connection to their faith⁶⁸. The mats themselves were imbued with spiritual significance, symbolising prosperity, peace, and unity⁶⁹. The finished mats were often used in various communal ceremonies and celebrations, such as religious rituals, births, and funerals, to invoke blessings and ensure a smooth transition through life's milestones⁷⁰. This collective aspect of the Mat was seen as a symbol of hospitality and

⁶⁴ E. Okoro. "The Divine Calling of Mat Making in Uturu". *Journal of Divine Studies*, 20(1), 2014, p. 67.

⁶⁵ A. Oji. "The sacred Art of Mat Making in Uturu". *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 31(1), 2019, p. 53.

⁶⁶ C. Eke. "The Spiritual Significance of Mat Making in Uturu". *Journal of Religion and Culture*, 18(2), 2015, p.123.

⁶⁷ O. Uche. "Religious Practises and Symbolism in Uturu's Traditional Crafts". *Journal of Religious and Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 2017, p. 38.

⁶⁸ N. Ekechukwu, personal communication, February 2, 2024.

⁶⁹ I. Nwosu. "The symbolism of mats in Uturu Culture". *Journal of Symbolic Anthropology*, 12(1), 2012, p. 34.

⁷⁰ A. Anyanwu. "The Ancestral Significance of Mat in Uturu". *Journal of Ancestral Studies*, 15(2), 2016, p. 145

respect, reflecting the community's values and reinforcing the sense of interconnectedness and unity central to Uturu's spiritual beliefs⁷¹.

Political Impact

The preservation and promotion of cultural identities through mat-making reinforced the uniqueness of the Uturu community and strengthened the position of women within the broader socio-political landscape. The income generated from mat-making enabled women to achieve economic independence and financial stability. In contrast, financial contributions in the community brought recognition and respect, translating to a stronger political voice and contributing significantly to local governance and community development⁷².

As a result of the communal nature of the craft of mat-making, women were enabled to organise collectively in addressing issues such as women's rights, access to resources, and social justice for themselves in the Uturu community⁷³. Hence, as skilled artisans and economic contributors, they were often looked upon as leaders and representatives of their groups and other community organisations representing women. Paul Mbakwe has also acknowledged the role of mat-making as "a visual culture ... enhancing the political status of wealthy women in the community.... Royalty was established through mat-making"⁷⁴

⁷¹ P. Mbakwe. "The Traditional Uturu Society: Perspectives on Igbo Socio-Cultural History". *International Journal of African Society, Culture and Tradition*, 5(3), 2017, p. 21.

⁷²N. Okoro. "Women's Influence in Local Governance through Economic Activity". *Nigerian Journal of Political Science*, 14(1), 2017, p. 32.
(Okoro, 2017)

⁷³O. Uche. "Cultural Identity and Political Empowerment of Women in Uturu". *Journal of Cultural and Political Studies*, 8(2), 2016, p. 34.

⁷⁴P. Mbakwe. "The Traditional Uturu Society: Perspectives on Igbo Socio-Cultural History". *International Journal of African Society, Culture and Tradition*, 5(3), 2017, p. 23.

Economic Impact

As a form of empowerment, mat-making provided a source of year-round income for many women, contributing to their economic independence and socioeconomic well-being. This enabled them to interact with their husbands and other community members more confidently, as well as financially participate in community development projects. The existence of surplus somewhere and deficit elsewhere necessitated exchange⁷⁵. The sale of mats at local markets and beyond, along with regular and timely payment by mat merchants and traders, allowed women to enhance their status within their families by fulfilling family welfare responsibilities⁷⁶. This economic empowerment reduced their vulnerability to social problems, such as illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty, and reduced maternal and child mortality⁷⁷.

Challenges Facing the Mat-Making Industry in Uturu

Mat-making, which has played a crucial role in enhancing the status of women, has been bedeviled by challenges that hinder its growth, sustainability, and the empowerment it provides for women, the primary participants. Mat-making is labour-intensive relying on manual skills, which has made it difficult for women to increase productivity and meet the significant demand⁷⁸. The reliance on traditional marketing methods, such as word of mouth and local markets, has restricted their ability to reach a wider audience and compete with larger industries⁷⁹. Mat-making

⁷⁵ P. O. Odey. "Old Ogoja Province: Reflecting on a Minority Identity" *Kaduna Journal of Humanities*, Volume 6, Number 2, 2022, p. 37.

⁷⁶ O. A. Irom. "Market Place and Integration: Interrogating Obudu and Tiv Women in Cross Border Trade". *International Journal of Integrative Humanism*, 12(1), 2020, p. 46.

⁷⁷ N. Emeto, personal communication, February 10, 2024.

⁷⁸ E. Eze. *The Art of Mat Making in Uturu*. (Nsukka, 2015), p. 47.

⁷⁹ T. Akanbi. "Economic Empowerment and Political Participation of Women in Rural Nigeria". *Journal of African Political Economy*, 17(2), 2005, p. 112.

faces stiff competition from modern, mass-produced alternatives that are often cheaper and readily available.

These products can be found in urban markets and imported from other regions or countries, making it difficult for traditional mat-makers to compete on price and volume⁸⁰. The result is a reduced demand for handmade mats, which affects the income and economic stability of women who rely on this craft. In addition, the lack of formal education and training programs hinders women's ability to acquire new skills and knowledge, limiting their capacity to innovate and adapt to changing market demands⁸¹.

Conclusion

The conclusion that comes to the fore is twofold. Firstly, mat-making is a communal activity that brings the community together, fostering social cohesion and cooperation. Secondly, mat-making has been a vital source of economic empowerment for Uturu women, as it provides significant economic benefits, contributing to their financial independence, which is crucial in a context where employment opportunities for women may be limited. The income generated from mat-making not only contributed to household stability but also empowered women to take on more active roles in their communities. However, the research also identifies several challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the continued success of mat-making in Uturu. To address these challenges, the paper advocates for a multifaceted approach, enabling the craft to continue providing economic benefits and preserving cultural heritage for future generations.

⁸⁰ E. Eze. *The Art of Mat Making in Uturu*. (Nsukka, 2015), p. 47.

⁸¹ N. Emeto personal communication, February 10, 2024.

APPENDICES



App. 1: Papyrus Plant used in mat making

Source: Field Research



App 2: Dried Papyrus Plant ready for use in mat making

Source: Field Research



App 3: Mat making process

Source: Field Research



App 4: A lady weaving mat
Source: Field Research



App. 5: Weaving process using the frame as guide

Source: Field Research



App. 6: Finished mat

Source: Field Research