

Beyond Aesthetics, Functionality and Economic Benefits: Art and Societal Transformation taking the Example of Cap Making in Northeast Nigeria

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Abstract

Dieser Artikel basiert auf der Forschungsarbeit der Autorin im Rahmen des Graduiertenkollegs [„Performing Sustainability. Cultures and Development in West-Africa“](#) der Universität Hildesheim (Deutschland), der Universität Maiduguri (Nigeria) und der Universität Cape Coast (Ghana). Er untersucht die Rolle von Kunst, über ihre ästhetischen, wirtschaftlichen und therapeutischen Qualitäten hinaus, in gesellschaftlichen Transformationsprozessen. Dabei wird die Herstellung von Kopfbedeckungen von Binnengeflüchteten im Bundesstaat Borno, Nigeria, unter dem Aspekt der Förderung von Geschlechtergerechtigkeit und gesellschaftlicher Inklusion in den Fokus genommen. Nach Vertreibungen durch Boko Haram im Bundestaat Borno hat die Hauptstadt Bornos, Maiduguri, seit 2014 einen großen Zustrom von Binnenvertriebenen erlebt. Die plötzliche Konzentration von Hutmacher*innen in Maiduguri führte zum Aufkommen eines Marktes für Kopfbedeckungen durch die Binnengeflüchteten, welcher zu einem künstlerischen Anziehungspunkt wird. Er bringt Menschen über Alters-, Geschlechter- und soziale Klassengrenzen hinweg zusammen und schafft durch die Kunst des Hutmachens einen Ort der Chancengleichheit für Männer und Frauen, an dem sie ein Auskommen finden und frei interagieren können. Vor diesem Hintergrund untersucht diese Arbeit die Auswirkung der Markt-Interaktionen auf soziale und Geschlechterverhältnisse. Die Studie nutzt bei der Datenerhebung einen qualitativen Forschungsansatz unter Verwendung von Interviews und Beobachtungen. Diese Arbeit untersucht mögliche Auswirkungen der Markt-Interaktionen auf soziale und Geschlechterverhältnisse. Die Studie nutzt bei der Datenerhebung einen qualitativen Forschungsansatz unter Verwendung von Interviews und

Beobachtungen. Ergebnisse dieser Forschung zeigen, dass die in dieser Gesellschaft vorherrschende Geschlechterungleichheit und soziale Ausgrenzung durch die Interaktionen innerhalb des Kunstmarktes schrittweise weniger werden. Die vorliegende Studie betont daher die Möglichkeiten von Kunst, Grenzen der Geschlechterverhältnisse und der gesellschaftlichen Ausgrenzung aufzuweichen.

This paper is an examination of the role of the art of cap making towards the attainment of gender equality and social inclusion in Northeast Nigeria. Maiduguri, Borno State's capital city witnessed the massive influx of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) following the expulsion of people from the Local Government Areas of the state and their surrounding villages since 2014. The concentration of IDPs in Maiduguri precipitated the emergence of a cap market by IDPs that brings people together across gender, social class and age with artistic expression being the force of attraction. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the impact of the interaction which this market space provides on IDPs with regard to gender and social relations. The paper adopts a qualitative research approach using interviews and observation for data collection. Findings of the paper reveal that the lines of gender inequality and social exclusion that were largely dominant within this society are gradually fading as a result of the interactions within the art market space.

Introduction

Displacement induced by Boko Haram Insurgents' violent activities began in the Local Government Areas of Borno State, Northeast Nigeria and their surrounding villages around the end of the year 2013 and reached its peak all through 2014. While a number of the displaced persons fled to neighbouring countries such as Niger, Chad and Cameroon, the vast majority of the forcefully displaced persons have long been temporarily settled in Internally Displaced Persons' (IDP) camps and host communities within Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. Studies have shown that this displacement has significantly disrupted the cultural, psycho-social and economic lives of the people. Shallangwa notes that the displacement placed a barrier between the IDPs and their heritage, their land, physical or material objects, monuments, sites, beliefs, customs, knowledge, traditions and so on, which are passed from generation to generation and has ushered them into a new way of life that is in contrast with what they were familiar with prior to the displacement (Shallangwa 2021).

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are persons or a group of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflicts, situations of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised border (OCHA 1999). This definition is one offered by former UN Secretary-General's representative on IDPs, Francis Deng, and used in the guiding principles on internal displacement.

As a result of the losses they suffered, the IDPs feel inferior, what one could term second class indigenes even though they are within their state of origin. It cannot be denied that there is a subtle marginalization between the IDPs and members of the host communities. While trying to build up resilience in the midst of their losses and despair, the IDPs ventured into several activities such as arts and crafts production, cultural performances and production of local snacks and drinks (Shallangwa and Tijani 2020). The various activities mentioned above have both therapeutic and revenue generation benefits, however, it was observed that

one activity has the ability of bringing people together regardless of their status be it IDP or resident, rich or poor, educated and uneducated; this is the art of cap making. Although this art has been in existence for several decades, the potency of this art to promote gender equality and social inclusion between people of diverse groups within the society is arguably not well explored.

Pre Boko Haram era, a number of towns in Borno State were vibrant in the art of cap making, Bama was one of those towns however, following the onslaught by the insurgents on the towns and villages of Borno State, the inhabitants of such places fled to Maiduguri the State capital for safety; there, they continued their art. The concentration of the cap makers in Maiduguri and the high demand for the caps necessitated the emergence of a cap market in Maiduguri that is fast growing in recent times. This market brings people across gender, age and class in Maiduguri together with art as the common denominator. It is common practice for the performative arts to bring people together yet, not very common within the visual arts milieu. It is against this premise that this paper investigates the potency of the art of cap making in the attainment of the UN sustainable development goals specifically SDG 5 *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*, focusing on target 5.1 with its indicator “End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere” and SDG 10 *Reduce inequality within and among countries*, focusing on target 10.1 with its indicator “empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status” in Maiduguri.

The study adopts a qualitative approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews and observation. A mixed group of males and males participated in study after giving their consent. The findings are linked to the key theoretical concepts of art, gender equality and social inclusion.

- *Art* here refers to a product created through human ingenuity which could be aesthetically appealing and functional.
- *Gender equality* is a concept that advocates that women and men as well as boys and girls are treated equally and have equal access to resources that will enable them thrive and reach their full potential.
- *Social inclusion* is a concept that entails improving the ability and dignity of those disadvantaged or discriminated on the basis of their identity.

This paper is underpinned by Berry’s acculturation theory. Berry defines acculturation as the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. At the group level it involves changes in social structures and institutions and in cultural practices. At the individual level, it involves changes in a person’s behavioural repertoire (Berry 2005). Two key factors were identified by Berry in the acculturation theory. They are: cultural maintenance which entails valuing and preserving cultural identity, and contact and participation which concerns involvement with the dominant culture and other social groups.

Berry also came up with four strategies of acculturation in his acculturation theory namely: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization (Berry 1997).

- *Assimilation*: From the point of view of non-dominant groups, when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures, the *Assimilation* strategy

is defined.

- *Separation*: In contrast to assimilation, when individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, the *Separation* alternative is defined.
- *Integration*: When there is an interest in both maintaining one's original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups, *Integration* is the option. Here, there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time seeking to participate as an integral part of the larger social network.
- *Marginalization*: When there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination) then *Marginalization* is defined (Berry 1997).

In the context of the IDPs and the cap market, the integration strategy can be applied to understand how their interactions with other individuals have affected their lives and caused a shift in their culture. The IDPs are caught in-between trying to maintain their original identities while at the same time having to succumb to the pressure of change in gender and social relations as provided by the market space.

Pluralistic Ethnic Composition of the Borno Area and People

Borno State is pluralistic in ethnic composition with about thirty languages represented, many of which are autochthonous. Twenty-six of these languages are classified as Chadic, while Kanuri (the largest language and ethnic group) is classified as Saharan. Nineteen out of the twenty-seven Local Government Areas are Kanuri-speaking (El-Yakub 2009). Arabic is only spoken by the Shuwa-Arab, and parts of the state also speak Fulfulde. Kanuri, the major language, is also spoken in some other states in the country as well as in other African countries. For example, there are Kanuri people in Yobe and Nasarawa states of Nigeria and in other African countries of Niger, Cameroun, Chad and Sudan (El-Yakub 2009). The second largest ethnic group in Borno State is the Bura-Pabir, with its home in the Biu emirate in the southern part of the state. The Bura-Pabir have a lot in common with the Kanuri. Although their kingship traditions of today appear to be similar, the different regalia and ceremonies suggest independent origins (El-Yakub 2009).

The ethnic makeup of the rest of Borno State is quite mixed. Gwoza Emirate is a mosaic of languages and a mixture of all ethnicities, with a number of languages and cultural traditions shared with the people of Cameroon. Their major languages are Clavda, Johode, Mandara and Waha. Elsewhere, the Marghi language of the Askira-Uba emirate is divided into dialects grouped mainly under the North and South Marghi. Like Gwoza, Uba emirate is also a place of mixed ethnicity. The main language of another emirate, the Shani emirate is Tera. The Shani record a long list of capable leaders (El-Yakub 2009).

Borno State is essentially an agrarian society and most of the people residing in the rural areas are peasant farmers. The various loamy soils of the area are known for their good harvests of crops such as groundnuts, onions, beans, millet, maize and a variety of vegetables like pepper, tomatoes, sorrel and okra. In the depressed zones where the soils are heavier and wetter; water is more available during dry periods, irrigation is practiced and vegetables and some root crops like potatoes, cassava and fruits are grown (Tijani 2010).

Kanuri people have been Muslims for many centuries, therefore, one must constantly bear in mind that the whole framework of their social organization is based on Muslim practice and tradition (Cohen 1961).

Platte (2011) notes that in both rural and urban settings, the spatial structure of a Kanuri compound basically consists of a walled area with three individual structures: an entrance room, a room for the husband and as is appropriate in a society where gender segregation is optimally expressed, one room for each of the wives, where the children sleep as well. Platte notes however that a very recent development is the tendency for the men's and if possible, the women's rooms to be entered through another room furnished in the style of a Western 'living room'.

Gender Roles and Social Stratification in Traditional Kanuri Settings

Gender roles were clearly defined in Kanuri traditional settings before the displacement: men were solely responsible for providing food and guaranteeing the safety of their families while the women were saddled with the responsibility of managing domestic matters within their homes and ensuring their children were well nurtured and given the proper upbringing. The men had central authority manifested in their power in decision making as the heads of households as well as the breadwinners of their homes. While the opinions of women were sought, the power to take the final decisions lay almost completely with the men. Cohen explicitly outlines gender roles in Kanuri traditional settings thus:

In their daily lives, Kanuri women cook, nurse young children, bring water for the household if there is no well, help in the fields, grow garden crops and maize in the back of the compound, prepare cooked and uncooked foods, make pots, trade, and visit one another to help with the preparation of ceremonies as well as companionship and hairdressing. Men clear the fields, plant crops, work at large number of crafts including modern ones such as truck driving or using singer sewing machines; they also engage in religious activities as specialists, and carry out specialised political, judicial and medical roles" (Cohen 1967:42) .

In Kanuri traditional settings like in most patriarchal African societies, men had central authority which is manifested in their power in decision making. Although in some instances, the opinion of the woman could be sought, the man had the final say.

Cohen (1961) mentions that the Kanuri society is stratified, with status based on tribal membership, occupation, birth, age, wealth, and to some extent on urban residence identifications. The people recognize two major class divisions, the upper or ruling class (*Kantuoma*), and the broad base of the peasant class (*tala*), under the autocratic hegemony of the rulers. Upward mobility can be achieved by obtaining more wealth, a more highly ranked occupation, and by copying the manners, dress, and behaviour of the upper class.

It is evident from the brief discussion that gender inequality and class distinction which often times result in the marginalization of the "other" group are dominant features in Kanuri traditional settings. Class distinction has been heightened by the displacement as discussed in the introductory part of this paper while in the case of gender equality, the displacement can be a stepping stone in its attainment in traditional Kanuri settings (Shallangwa 2021).

Origin and Development of the Art of Cap Making

Kanuri people place high premium on caps. Protecting the head from the scorching sun and dust are some of the functions of the cap (Ogboli 2004). Tracing the exact origin of the art of cap making among the participants of this study was difficult however, a number of them mentioned Mecca in Saudi Arabia. One is tempted to conclude that the generation that had the information on the origin of the art of cap making phased out without handing down the oral history to their successors. Fannami and Muazu (2012) attest that the origin of how the use of the caps began among the Kanuri peoples and the etymology of the term was not known among the informants of their study however, some informants traced the origin to Saudi Arabia, Karachi and Islamabad. This information may be valid considering the empire of Kanem Bornu's early contact with the Islamic world.

Participants of this study explained that initially, there was some form of division of labour involved in the cap making artistic production process; men drew the pattern of the design on the fabric which serves as a frame for the cap while the women or girls embroider the design using thread and needle following the already drawn pattern. Men embroider the design as well however, in most cases where women embroider, the designs were usually created by men. Though it has been reported that it is taboo for a woman to embroider the crown of a cap, this is not unconnected with the belief that it is belittling for a woman to design the crown or dome of an object that will sit on the head of a male in Kanuri tradition. But today no one bothers to know who embroiders the crown (Fannami and Muazu 2012). In some cases, this division of labour still exists but subtly as people have mastered the various steps involved in the production process. Today, most women involved in this art have mastered the design production and crown embroidery as well hence, there are women who produce caps from start to finish who are well patronized.

Cap Market by Internally Displaced Persons

The cap market is located on Damoboa Road in Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno State. It emerged in the face of displacement when the insurgents took over Bama town in 2014. Bama was very famous in the art of cap making pre-insurgency era hence, a good number of Bama indigenes are involved in the art. A number of IDPs from Bama upon arrival moved to the house of Late Senator Khalifa Ahmed Zanna who was then the Senator representing Borno Central Senatorial Zone in the National Assembly. Participants mentioned that the market was found by some displaced men who usually sat in the open space adjacent the late senator's house to interact during the day time. This gathering is popularly known among locals as *majalisa*. The *majalisa* are a group of men, usually age mates who sit in a fixed location to chat, discuss individual and collective issues as well as play games. The members of this group are usually friends who rally around each other both in times of sorrow and joy. As earlier mentioned, Bama people are famous for the art of cap making, as a matter of fact, their caps are considered the best both in terms of the quality of threads and design. These men who were already professionals in the art would sit with friends in the open space and while chit-chatting with one another, embroider their caps. According to study participants, their *majalisa* was unique because of the art of cap making which most of the members of the *majalisa* engaged in as they went on chit-chatting. This drew the attention of passers-by especially on Fridays because of the big and famous Indimi Mosque that hosts a large number of Muslim faithfuls who converge to pray in the mosque on Fridays. Participants mentioned that people stopped by to make enquiries about the gathering and the art and some instantly purchased caps. Words spread about the Bama people's *majalisa* and their

art of cap making across Maiduguri town and the *majalisa* evolved to a small market that was more vibrant on Fridays for the aforementioned reason. Women are also involved in the art hence, they also began to exhibit their works in the small market and to their greatest surprise, they were patronized as well regardless of their gender according to a female participant.

Presently, this small market has evolved to a daily vibrant cap market with over 1000 people both men and women, old and young making a living. The market has a chairman who coordinates its activities. Both males and females take part in cleaning and ensuring the environment is safe. In the market one finds different activities involved in the production process ongoing such as design creation, embroidery, fixing the tufts or crown of the cap as well as finishing which involves washing, starching, beating and ironing of the caps.



Cap makers engaging in different cap making activities (Source: Author 2021)

The Impact of the Cap Market on the Internally Displaced Persons

This unique market is said to be having great impact on the artisans in numerous ways and that is what this subsection is preoccupied with, specifically how it relates to the issue of gender equality and social inclusion. Kanuri societies have always been socially stratified and gender inequality has always been dominant. Males are almost always considered superior to women. Such conditions are not very beneficial

for enabling sustainable communities. Study participants also conceded that beyond economic and therapeutic benefits, the market has had a huge impact on gender and social relations among the IDPs in the art market.

Shifting Gender Relations through the Artistic Process of Cap Making



A female cap maker waiting to collect drawn design patterns from the design specialist (Source: Author 2021)

Before the displacement, women who engaged in the art and business of cap making usually operated within their homes. Some female participants mentioned that their customers were limited since their visibility level was low, only a few who knew they were into the art and business patronised them and their negotiating skills were limited. In most cases, prices were fixed and they did not have direct contact with the customers; there was always a middle person and they suspect they were cheated. A female participant said:

In Bama, I embroidered the caps and I had a customer who usually came for the embroidered frame without the crown and tuft. To be honest, I think I was exploited by that man, I made between 1,000 and 1,500 Naira for each but in this market, I make more than five times the amount myself. I have direct link with customers and I am able to negotiate by myself. I am happy about this because I am now more confident in myself, I am able to decide and stand for myself (Female participant 2021).

From the words of this participant and other several female participants of this study, the women involved in this art and business have achieved a form of liberation in the business. They are able to speak for themselves and decide on prices which has affected their confidence level progressively. They feel empowered through the artistic process of cap making.

Both men and women interact freely in the cap market by IDPs without anyone feeling intimidated or less appreciated. Customers are free to purchase items whether made by a man or a woman as long as they find it aesthetically appealing and valuable. A male participant mentioned that:

In this market, both men and women are treated equally. The customer buys the item he/she finds attractive. The gender of the producer or seller does not determine the price of the item in any way. Women and men are free to exhibit their works and fix prices based on their investment of materials and time. Honestly, in the past, caps produced by men were more expensive but this has changed tremendously (Male participant, March 2021).



Female and male cap makers interacting in the market (Source: Author 2021)

Study participants mentioned that the fact that both males and females are treated equally does not mean the men have lost their respect by the women, rather it has fostered better understanding on the synergy that is required by both genders for stronger and peaceful communities. It was observed that sanitation in the market is the collective effort of both men and women. This is an indicator that the superiority and

inferiority lines have been blurred and everyone is treated equally. Participants attested to the fact that some years ago, it would have been difficult to imagine that men and women will be together in a common public space and work together to achieve a common goal without anyone feeling intimidated or inferior.

Strengthening Social Relations through the Arts

The displacement has amplified the issue of social stratification between the IDPs and Maiduguri residents. Often times, the IDPs are seen as unclean and blamed for mishaps within host communities. For instance, IDPs are accused for thefts within neighbourhoods and in some instances they are accused of witchcraft. This has resulted in the feeling of marginalization among IDPs however, the cap market by IDPs is contributing immensely in eliminating that marginalization by creating a common space for both IDPs and residents to interact with each party having something to bring to the table. The IDPs bring the products of their ingenuity- their art - while the residents purchase these items.



Finished caps displayed in the cap market (Source: Author 2021)

Participants of the study attested that most of them arrived Maiduguri with little or nothing having lost their assets and means of livelihoods to the violent attacks by the insurgents. This made some residents look

down on them which in turn created a sense of marginalization creating a barrier between the IDPs and residents. However, this market is gradually removing the barrier. Some study participants highlighted that besides economic empowerment, the cap market has positively impacted how they perceive themselves. A male participant stated:

I was into the art and business of cap making long before the displacement. I built my house and cared for my family from the profit I made. Unfortunately, I lost everything to the violent attacks of the insurgents. I arrived Maiduguri with nothing except my family and we relied on kind individuals and the government for everything, I mean everything. I am grateful for the skill of cap making, the insurgents took away all I had but they could not take my skill away. I was able to acquire materials to start embroidering and when we moved to the Late Senator's house, I joined this cap market. Before then, I was a nobody and I was even ashamed of myself because I could not take good care of my family but today, everything has changed for me through this market. I make a good amount of money daily, I have been able to acquire a plot of land and I have built my own house here in Maiduguri from this small market. Today, no one looks down on me and I am very pleased with myself. By the help of Allah, my family feeds well, is well clothed and my children go school. What else can I say? This market looks small but it has changed our lives positively (Male participant, March 2021).

From the words of this participant the market has changed the way he thinks about himself and his living standard has greatly improved as a result of his engagement in this market.



Cap maker and seller displaying already sewn cap frames (Source: Author 2021)

On the issue of how the market has impacted social relations between Maiduguri residents and the IDPs, participants mentioned that the market has created a platform where residents and IDPs mingle and interact. Participants added that residents come to the market to buy caps from them. This is a form of interaction where both parties have something to offer hence, the relationship is mutual, no one looks down on another and this has helped in eliminating the feeling of marginalization among the IDPs. Their customers treat them with respect. A study participant said:

Through the market, I feel like I am contributing to the society and I do not feel inferior anymore. I have rich customers and I have their contacts. They invite me to their houses from time to time and they treat me well. This is because I am not relying on them for donations, they pay for my products so they have no reason to look down on me. My living standard has also improved so why should they look down on me? This market has created the avenue for us to meet with the high and mighty and it is paying our bills so no one looks down on us or intimidates us anymore (Male participant, March, 2021).

The market that was started by Bama IDPs is today open to other IDPs from other parts of the state and it is enhancing positive attitudinal change among the Borno people in a rapid manner.

Conclusion

This paper examined the role of the art of cap making in societal transformation in Maiduguri, Borno State Nigeria. While the cap market by IDPs has provided a common space for gender equality and social inclusion to thrive, only one thing attracts people to this market which is art, in this case the art of cap making. This study has identified that art is highly instrumental in societal transformation and advocates for the replication of such spaces and the teaching of artistic skills in education curricular. Culture is dynamic, not static, therefore it is prone to change. This is a form of cultural modification where people are treated equally regardless of their gender and social exclusion is partially phasing out. It is important to mention that this change does not in any way affect the respect both genders have for each other. It fosters respect among social classes of people within the society. The striking aspect about this transformation is that it happened organically, it was not induced through the influence of organizations as this market is not supported by any agency be it governmental or non-governmental. It is a product of people seeing the need for synergy among diverse groups for peaceful co-existence.

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Anmerkungen

Der Artikel basiert auf den Ergebnissen einer Dissertation im Rahmen des Graduiertenkollegs „[Performing Sustainability. Cultures and Development in West-Africa](#)“ der Universität Hildesheim (Deutschland), der Universität Maiduguri (Nigeria) und der Universität Cape Coast (Ghana). Die Stipendiat*innen untersuchen aus kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive die Rolle von Kunst und Kultureller Bildung in Konfliktsituationen in Westafrika. Das Graduiertenkolleg wird von 2016 bis 2025 vom DAAD aus Mitteln des Bundesministeriums für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (BMZ) gefördert. Die Wissensplattform KULTURELLE BILDUNG ONLINE dankt den Mitarbeiter*innen des **Instituts für Kulturpolitik der Universität Hildesheim** für die Ermöglichung dieses Wissenstransfers.

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