

Beninois craftspeople and a material culture of expertise

Elizabeth Ann Fretwell, PhD

Assistant Professor of African History

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA

This paper traces the twentieth century development of a material culture of expertise among craftspeople in southern Benin. The skills of artisans as varied as aluminum pot casters, tailors, weavers, moto mechanics, and others are manifest in the objects they produce and maintain, but in Benin their knowledge and know-how was also rendered visible through ritual and other material performances. Since mid-century, Beninois craftspeople have marked the transition from apprentice to master with a complex and expensive ceremony called *libération*, which drew upon the materials of colonial and mission schools and integrated them into rituals of display and performance rooted in *Vodun* and *Ifá* (Fá). The objects of craftspeople included local and imported technologies and tools, photographs, diplomas, contracts, and membership cards, which craftspeople used to manage their ranks and, later, to organize themselves into politically active associations. This history of artisans and their material culture reveals how West African craftspeople, who scholars and policymakers often depict as marginal to colonial and postcolonial politics, economy, and society, reshaped local notions of expertise and innovated ways of assessing and identifying skill. In doing so, they solidified occupational identities as part of a pan-craft *artisanat* (artisan sector), which provided craftspeople a pathway for participation in local and national politics, particularly after the founding of a national artisans' association in the 1990s. However, when craftspeople rendered their expertise visible through materials, it also subjected them (now the "informal sector") to new forms of governmentality, a process that culminated in 2010s when the Beninois state, aided by European NGOs, nationalized artisan credentialling systems, making *libérations* extralegal occasions. Using archival, oral, and material sources, this paper addresses how ordinary West Africans adapted and altered technology and material culture into local craft practices, and the political and social ramifications of their acts of domestication.