

9-2004

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### Recommended Citation

Mark, C. (2004). Employment creation and opportunities in the manufacturing sub-sector. The millinery industry in Nigeria. CBN Bullion. 28(3), 25-29.

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## EMPLOYMENT CREATION AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE MANUFACTURING SUB-SECTOR: THE MILLINERY INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA



*Chito Mark*

### INTRODUCTION

The critical factor of dwindling economic power has not in any way diminished the informed conclusion based on general observation that Nigeria is a "high fashion nation". Phrases like "fashion conscious" and "fashion crazy" are frequently used to portray the total commitment of the average Nigerian to display more than average sense of fashion. The social bubble occasioned by the obnoxious weekend parties especially in our big cities has created a fashion "madness" that has become like an unquenchable fire. It is estimated that a vast chunk of the nation's populace must attend at least one party per week. The irony is that most of the fashion and accessory displayed by the fun-seeking crowd may not have been paid for. In these days of "tokunbo boom" when even the obnoxious second hand wears like shoes, bags, clothing, have gone out of the reach of most

BY  
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Nigerians; a sizeable number of people would still go any length to over-indulge their sense of fashion, of this category are the hats lovers who now have a wide range of both imported and locally produced hats.

### 1. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MILLINERY FACT- ORY IN NIGERIA

I can authoritatively say that, the millinery industry, as we know it today in Nigeria was non-existent until 1980. It was about this time that I stumbled into the millinery venture. People around me discovered that I had an unusual talent of lumping materials together to come out with graceful designs that have such style that many of my friends wouldn't attend the weddings without consulting me. There are many potential hat designers on the prowl today looking for an enabling environment to launch out. I am hoping that this modest article would be helpful to these talented individuals.

While mainstream millinery industry could be said to be fairly new in Nigeria, it would be wrong to give even the slightest suggestion that Nigerians are new to hats. Before the advent of the current millinery effort in Nigeria, the hat fashion

functioned along colonial sentiments. Much of it were imported into the country from United Kingdom and the United States of America. The first attempt at creation saw the imported hats undergoing slight modifications especially in the area of accessories. Perhaps, to reflect our characteristic flamboyance, these imported hats were decked with synthetic rose flowers and hand-made bows. Then beading, which was first lifted from the orients and adapted locally, took the center stage. Now feather accessory have become the vogue, and promises to remain so for a long while to come. The simple practice of enhancing the "raw" imported hats with elaborate decorative accessory, accounted for the vast stock of allied millinery accessory that has flooded the markets. This position has not changed, rather there has been a rapid spread of interest for hat making amongst established fashion houses who felt they could add the millinery tentacle to their venture. Those of us in the front line, have stayed on course by the rigour of hard work and innovative creativity. Any body can learn hat making skills and procedure but sustainability in the millinery industry is a function of creativity, foresight and artistic venturesome-ness. At Graces Hats we produced what was popularly referred to as fabric hats, more than ten years ago.

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This was an explosive revolution that gave hat lovers the freedom to wear hats made to compliment with their choice of style, colours and poise. This boom later became the doom of many a hat maker who lacked innovative creativity and foresight. Instead of the normal cut and sew that was the main characteristic of fabric hats, there arose the need to experiment with some new materials. This saw the emergence of cinnamay, thus opening the floodgate to create locally, hats that can meet and even surpass international standards. As earlier hinted, the swelling ranks of millinery venture should not include mere enthusiast or people with just the basic skills of hat making. The future of the business belongs to millinery of creative dynamism. This cannot be compromised neither can it be over emphasized. It is needless to start a venture that lacks the roots of survival. If you are daring, adventurous, innovative and creative; if you are willing to hone and sharpen your skills to constantly add value to it; then you are welcome on board.

## (2) CAPITAL OUTLAY

In the eighties, when I stepped into the uncertain terrains of the industry, N30 was my initial capital. It may sound ridiculous to contemplate such amount today as your capital outlay for hat making. Before you set out, you must determine your initial level of operation as follows:

- (A) Small scale  
(experimental)

- (B) Medium scale  
(experimental)

- (C) Factory scale  
(Beneficial)

**SMALL SCALE:-** Assuming you go for small-scale approach, which in any opinion is the ideal way to start, your starting fund may be as minimal as N15,000. This scale is experimental in nature and so offers the opportunity of learning without undue fear of failure. At this level, friends and family members who are normally the first to notice skill and creativity will also be there to offer patronage. At this level, one only needs the basic tools of rudimentary capacity. This, of course is not a picture of a business with dividends. At this level, dividend is derived mainly from the fact of tenacity as observable and measurable increase unfolds to reveal more beneficial prospects.

**MEDIUM SCALE:** The ideal thing is to start small and grow. Anyone contemplating millinery business from the medium scale level must have worked with others in the industry. Experience increases the prospect of a broader starting platform. At this level, one more hand may be needed to complement personal efforts. Equipment base must necessarily be raised to accommodate increased manpower. An initial capital outlay of about N30,000 may be required. While any extra space within a one-room living arrangement may be enough for small-scale level, medium scale level may require at least a 10 by 12 inches room space.

## FACTORY SCALE:

Anyone venturing into this scale must have paid their dues in the industry. At this level, a mixture of talent, creativity, and a sound working experience of the 'bolts and nuts' of the industry must come into play for maximum benefits or profit. If we assume that this level should attract our focus as a case study then other variables may be taken into consideration (See Chart A).

## (3) EQUIPMENT

Graduation is a strong factor in the procurement of millinery equipment or tools. At the small or experimental level, only the basics will do. Scissors is needed for general cutting while thread and needle are needed in the finishing or coupling of design pieces or component parts. Basic hand sewing skills at this level may eliminate the need for a standard sewing machine. Beyond this level, sewing machine becomes a vital equipment and paramount factor of speed and better and competitive finishing. At the factory level, it is obvious that considerations must be made to determine the extend of requirement as it concerns expandable factors of equipments, manpower and space.

## (4) MANPOWER

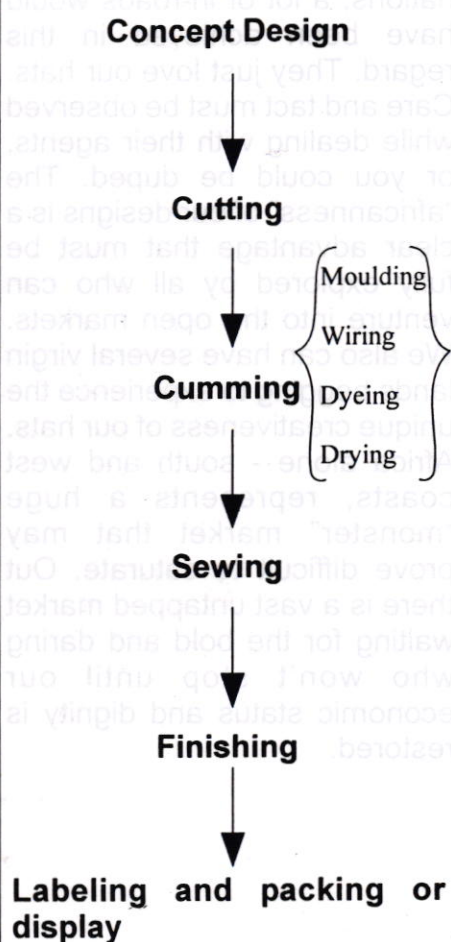
It could be catastrophic to attempt setting up a hat factory unless one is or aspires to be a passionate milliner. At the rudimentary level, the facilitator should experience all the basic aspects of the manufacturing process.



At the medium scale level, an extra manpower may be needed for the manning of the sewing machine. The factory scale always possesses the demand for specialization. For instance, the following procedures may require varying degrees of manpower;

### **CHART B**

#### **PROCEDURE CHART**



#### **(5) LAND SPACE:**

As Chart A indicates, hat making does not require a lot of space. At the level we described as small scale, an extra space within the living room will be just fine. At this "one man show" level, you don't

need a sewing machine, which can pose a space problem. One can get outside sewing service at a little cost. It should also be noted that the authentic industrial millinery machine is very expensive. This is why a measure of doggedness and creative inventiveness is needed in order to adapt and improvise with the easy to procure, common sewing machine. Even at the factory level of high quality production, a commensurable space mileage can still be achieved within the confines of a regular three bedroom flat.

#### **(6A) SOURCES OF MATERIALS AVAILABLE:**

Every high street milliner, more or less depends on imported materials to get their job done. Practically speaking, all the tools, machines, materials and accessories need to be imported. More than 80% of vital machines and tools are imported from England. They are also heavy exporters of pre-moulded straw hats and straw based sheets, as well as the latest "miracle" material called cinamay. The Americans are noted for their high-tech exquisite accessories. Their beautifully cultured feathers and special flowers are in high demand for that special touch of sophistication. China and other far-east nations have followed suit. Documented data may not be available as to the bulk of materials imported but personal investigation and research coupled with our company's experience indicates that, the volume of

import runs into billions of naira with foreign exchange considerations in place. Within the last four years, some companies I know have expended millions of pounds on straw hat and straw sheet alone, not to talk of other equally important incidentals. In spite of the obvious implications and cost of importation, the aspiring milliner can take solace in the fact that the raw materials are locally available. For more than ten years of my active involvement in the business, it was not so. The few of us who were serious about the business sourced and imported our materials. Now we still don't make the materials, but you can easily source and purchase them locally.

#### **(6B) RESEARCH CONSIDERATION:**

It seems right to use this opportunity to advocate for genuine research into our local hat making materials. The government, corporate bodies, universities, science and agro-allied bodies should come together and create research teams that will look into the prospect of processing our local raw materials into world class accessories and base materials. Our local straw from raffia and other palms can only give us "local" looking hats that can only earn us disdain in the international scene. We have banana raffia and palm trees, surely we can acquire and master the techniques needed to process and transform these natural materials into sophisticated economy - boosting raw materials, for local and export uses. America and



China can eat their chicken and make sure we are the ones to pay for it. They separate the feathers, process them into beautiful ornaments or accessories and get us to buy them at prices higher than the chicken that produced them. We cannot continue to pretend to be part of the global market while wasting our natural "heritage". We can eat our chicken and have it.

With today's high-tech reality and information revolution; it takes almost nothing to produce gum, scissors, local wooden moulds, wire gauze, hammer, needles etc. The fashion business, all over the world is big business with great prospect of spinning vast foreign exchange earning. Any amount of research that goes into the enhancement of its potentials is highly recommended and commended.

#### **(7A) PROFITABILITY AND TARGET MARKET:**

Over the centuries all over the world, ample evidence exist to show that hat wearing, as a complimenting accessory of fashion have come to stay. Quality may improve from one level of sophistication to another, design, shape, style and material may differ from time to time but people will always wear hats. As long as we have shoes, handbags and other accessories, we will always have hats. This should be sweet music to all aspiring milliners. Currently in the country, we have a glut of pretenders in the hat making industry. This is nothing to be bothered about because your

creativity, standard and quality on the long run will put you ahead and swell your bank accounts.

The hat business in Nigeria is booming and everybody is attracted. Very soon market forces will swing a deadly blow on milliners with weak foundation and reputation and sanity will be restored to pave way for the ultimate reward of the few serious minded producers who have gained international acceptance.

#### **(7B) DOMESTIC MARKET:**

The domestic market is quite large, it has the potential for rapid and dynamic explosion. More than 90% of Nigerians have religious inclinations. A large chunk of these are christians. Contemporary charisma notwithstanding, millions of orthodox christians and others are opting for more trendy fashionable headgears as a replacement for the traditional but less attractive head ties. Lump this together with countless church and traditional wedding ceremonies not mentioning the "owambe" parties; and you have a large pool of hat market.

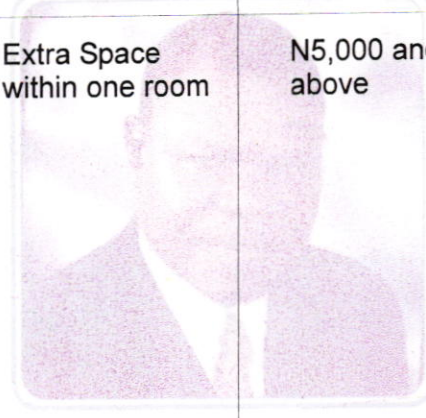
#### **(7C) FOREIGN MARKET:**

My personal experience shows that, the foreign market for Nigerian hats may well exceed that of the local in leaps and bounds. Nigeria appears to have a traditional attitude of disdain against their own locally produced materials even when such is internationally recognised and accepted. Personally I receive

more accolade abroad than at home. Each time I am running hat shows abroad, my stand is always a beehive of activities as both black and "oyinbos" are amazed or even shocked at the magnificent uniqueness of our designs. In one particular hat show in Miami Florida, some white women were openly weeping as they perused the designs we had put on display. Barring stiff market regulations of the so called advanced nations, a lot of in-roads would have been achieved in this regard. They just love our hats. Care and tact must be observed while dealing with their agents, or you could be duped. The "africanness" of our designs is a clear advantage that must be fully explored by all who can venture into the open markets. We also can have several virgin lands begging to experience the unique creativeness of our hats. Africa alone - south and west coasts, represents a huge "monster" market that may prove difficult to saturate. Out there is a vast untapped market waiting for the bold and daring who won't stop until our economic status and dignity is restored.



(CHART A)

SMALL SCALE	EQUIPMENT	MANPOWER	LANDSPACE	CAPITAL
*Experimental  *Minimal fear of failure  *Friends and Family members provide initial patronage	*Scissors  *Thread *One Sewing Machine  *Wooden Mould  *Bottle of Gum  *Hammer  *Thick Paper  *Wire gauze  *Fabric	1 Person	Extra Space within one room  	N5,000 and above
<b>MEDIUM SCALE</b>				
*Experience  *Minimal fear of failure  *Profit prospects	*More Scissors *More Thread *One Sewing Machine *Display Hangers *More Wooden Moulds *Moulders *Hammers *Wire gauze *Gallons of Gum Fabric & Accessories	At least 2 Persons	10 by 12 inches room space	From N30,000 and above
<b>FACTORY SCALE</b>				
*Experience  *Talent  *Creativity  *Profit  *Commercial Advertisement	Industrial Amount of: *Scissors *Sewing Machine *Wooden Moulds *Hammers *Gum *Wire gauze *Local Fabric *Imported Fabric *Moulders *Fabric Accessories Flower Bows Beads *Display Hangers etc.	At least 6 Persons	3 bedroom flat (Not included in Capital)  *Space for display included	From N50,000