



**THE LOST CRAFT OF AKWETE FABRIC IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN FASHION:
INNOVATION, CREATIVITY AND CHALLENGES FACED BY DESIGNERS**

BY

Owodiong-Idemeko Boiso Maria: Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin and Epe Campus; E-mail: boisomariaowodiong@yahoo.com

Idowu Samson Adeshola: Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin and Epe Campus; Email: idadeshola@gmail.com

Bailikis Omolade Kaka: Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin and Epe Campus; E-mail: kakabailikis3940@gmail.com

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Udom Owodiong: Bayshore Schools, Lekki, Lagos; E-mail: udomowodiong@gmail.com

Abstract

The study on the lost craft of Akwete fabric in contemporary Nigerian fashion: Innovation, creativity and challenges faced by designers was conducted among 120 respondents of fashion designer's association of Nigeria (FADAN. Two research questions were raised, a purposive research question and sample were used and a 31 item questionnaire was the main instrument used to collect data for the study. Respondents were to answer yes or no. The statistical tools used were Mean and Chi-square and Freidman's test. Although the local cotton was introduced by the Portuguese between the 14th and 15th century but Akwete fabric is becoming unpopular. 97 (80.8%) respondents have not designed with Akwete fabric, 68 (56.7%) answered yes, when indigenous fabric is not used in contemporary fashion the culture of the people is lost. 102 (85%) answered yes. Nigerians love for imported textiles is a challenge. 91 (75.8%) answered yes, modern technology has not been incorporated into the weaving by the weavers. 97 (80.8%) answered yes, government has not recognized the socio-economic importance of Akwete 99 (82.5%) answered yes, fashion designers can foster the value of Akwete fabric since it is versatile. In conclusion, Akwete fabric can be combined with other fabrics to produce any item of choice. It is recommended that, the Nigerian government should support and encourage the growing in a large scale of the local cotton. Buy Akwete, Use Akweta should be the watch "words", fashion designers to foster the revival of Akwete fabric.

Keywords: Akwete, Challenges, Contemporary, Creativity and Innovation

Introduction

Akwete weaving is an ancient craft. Craft is traditionally associated with skillfully produced products and is a manually produced object that covers a particular purpose of human needs, sometimes called handicraft because skilled hand is involved and usually with local materials which may come from fabric or paper (Gabriel & Pablo, 2020). Traditional handicraft sector is a mechanism for sustainable development, employment opportunities, tourism and economic growth, especially in rural areas. It is not only a symbol of regional characteristics but a link between the past and the future, reflecting the crystallization of people's wisdom and creativity (Lui, Hassan & Irwan, 2024, Beliver, Brados-Peria, Garcia – Lopez & Molina – Moreno, 2023). Craft art is most valued because it explores identity and it is an occupation, trade or activity requiring manual dexterity and artistic skill. Often received as gifts, purchased or souvenirs and therefore tend to carry shared meanings and interpretations of cultural heritage. Yung-Lun, Jui-Te, & Pena (2023) Akwete weaving is therefore a craft that projects the identity and culture of the people and will play a significant role in tourism development. (Gabriel & Pablo, 2022, Oriaku, 2019). Weaving dates back to the early new Stone Age when man learnt how to make a rough kind of clothing from the fibres of flax plants, (McIntosh & Cartwright 2022). The idea is said to have emanated from man watching the birds in skillfully constructing their nests (Oriaku, 2019).



Archaeological remains have shown that woven fabric have been in existence since the 9th century A.D. in Nigeria from woven back fragments from the Igbo – Ukwu sites. Isabia Anozie in 1938 who was an Igbo –kwu archaeologist stumbled upon colorful regalia and other artifacts during the process of digging for a water cistern in his compound. The federal commission for museum and monument authorized an investigation into the discovery. Thurstan Shaw was invited by the commission in 1964 – 65 to carry out excavation at the site. In 1970 and 1977 Shaw published his findings among which colorful textiles were discovered at Igbo – Ukwu after being subjected to radiocarbon, shows the date around 9th century AD which was correlated with Akwete indigenous weaving materials. (Oriaku, 2019, Ikegwu, Uzuegbu, 2015). The cloth Akwete, takes its name after the town Akwete in the south Eastern State of Nigeria where it is produced. The hand crafted cloth Akwete is called “Akuru” in Igbo language meaning something woven. Akwete is a decorative cloth with complex weave designs creating intricate geometric patterns and vibrant colours. (Aronson, 2023, Ahuja, 2021, Oriaku, 2019, Ikegwu & Uzuegbu, 2015). History has it that the local cotton yarn used to weave the local cotton cloth known as “Acham” was brought to the area through trade with the Portuguese (Potoki) between the 14th and 16th centuries, when the European clothes were introduced into Igbo area in the Mid – nineteenth century, they were used in conjunction with the local apparels, (Puddicomby, 2021).

The first recorded Akwete weaver was a woman called Dada Nwakata who is said to have received the gift in a dream from her ancestors at the start of the 19th century. It has been suggested through that, she studied the cloth brought by the Portuguese between the 14th and 16th centuries adapting and improving upon the weave structure and developing unusual designs with her magic hands, with refreshing unique and secret techniques. Materials for the weaving consist of cotton, needle and twine or rope, hemp, silk and raffia among others. (Chudi – Duru, 2021, Ifeanyi, 2020, Ihesiulo, 2020, Oriaku, 2019). Two types of looms are used in the production of Akwete cloth. The horizontal loom is used by the men and the vertical loom is used by the women. The local name for loom is “Nkwe” (Ahuja, 2021, Chudi – Duru 2021, Oriaku 2019, Nwachukwu & Ibebabuchi, 2012). It is a stripe – woven cotton fabric woven on an upright wall loom with the cloth about 100 to 127cm (40’ to 50’) wide. Their designs are by inspiration. Akwere cloth is woven in different colours and designs, beads and embroidery can be in cooperated into the design. Akwete comes in the patterns of red and black designs interwoven in geometric patterns on a white background favoured by the men as towel for bathing (Aronson, 2023, Igbokwe, 2023) Akwete cloth woven from sisal-hemp are coarse, usually used by masquerades and warriors as headgears while those from raffia are used for religious occasions like Ozo title taking and for mourning by women (Igbokwe, 2023). Akwete weaving is not only a means of creating beautiful fabrics but also serves as a form of expression, storytelling and preservation of history. It also holds great significance in terms of social status and identity within the different communities. In some areas, certain types of colour of fabrics are reserved for royalty or specific groups with the society.

For example, among the Igbos, red represents wealth, while white symbolizes purity. Many traditional fabrics feature symbols that hold deep cultural significance. These symbols may represent value such as strength, courage, fertility and more, (Adetunji, Nwewuihe, 2024 Adiji & Ayeni 2023, Odey, Saliu, Achukwu, Olashina, 2018) years back, it was typical in ceremonies beaming with colors and glam of Nigeria traditionally woven clothing materials which was at the centre of attraction for celebrants, brides, grooms, family members and guests who would flaunt their attires made from Akwete. How thick and colorful the material is shows the social and economic status of the wearer. (Adebule, 2022). Due to the rapid development through modern science and technology as well as globalization the traditional handicrafts are facing increasingly serious marginalization and even on the verge of being lost (Lui, Hassan, & Irwan, 2024). Fashion attention has shifted away from clothes made from these thick traditionally woven textiles who is mainly controlled by local women to imported designer wear, George, brocade, lace, imported from China, India, Malaysia or the United States of America as a result, the industry experienced a decline in popularity and patronage resulting in a drop in their profit (Adebule, 2022). Akwete is a vintage indigenous fabric cloth passed from generation to generation that had unfortunately been overlooked. One wonders why the people have lost their sense of history and culture in Nigeria. Rather than



reviving the indigenous fabrics, they are busy chasing “Viscos” and “Davivas” instead of focusing on things that will make the region prosper, they are focusing attention on crude oil as the only source of revenue (Ihesiulo, 2020).

Regrettably, over the years, the treasured craft which put the area on the global indigenous textile production map began to wane as the focus of economic activities shifted to other sectors especially oil (Enyeribe & Okey, 2022). But the women have decided to keep the trade alive and boost their family income (Ukandu, 2023, Adebule, 2022). Government and individuals are making efforts to bring back this lost craft. For example, Soludo, the governor of Anambra State approved the distribution of over ₦2billion to over five hundred youth across the state, who were trained under the “one – youth – two skills” programmes on Akwete weaving to revive this cultural treasure and also foster the indigenous fashion values. He singled handedly championed the Akwete fabrics at very-high profile events which has significantly elevated its contemporary value and as well instilled as immense pride in the indigenous master-weavers, leading to unprecedented prominence, patronage and renewed sense of cultural patriotism. This revival is truly a shining beacon of hope in their cultural renaissance earning its rightful place as the light of the nation in heritage revival (Onwuka, 2024). Governor Soludo wore a simple but elegant outfit made from the indigenous fabric for his inauguration. Okezie Ikpeazu, the governor of Enugu State, when he hosted his party members, all adorned themselves with apparel made from Akwete fabrics.

Also, Governor Oti of Abia State has conceptualized a project to build Akwete gallery in Akwete town to serve as a tourist attraction and has also initiated a cooperative project to bring in cooperative societies in the state to one basket, with these high profile endorsements. Akwete is now positioned for resurgence as an indigenous textile of note that will compete with other popular African fabrics (Ukandu, 2023, Enyeribe & Okey, 2022) in Ebonyi State, the Ekwueme Federal University has established a centre focusing on Akwete weaving course. The University also encourages students to wear Akwete cloth on “Traditional Dress Monday” and gives the best – woven pieces produced at the center as souvenir to visitors (Nwewuihe 2024) it is imperative to note that, Akwete is currently being used for the production of special handbags and shoes (Igbokwe 2023). It is in high demand for wedding, burials and chieftaincy ceremonies with matching pairs of shoes (Aronson, 2023). The finished cloths can be used for anything ranging from wrappers to shirts, trousers, garments, drapes and bed spread and the very possession of them is a mark of taste. (Ihesiulo, 2020). A notable designer Emmy Kasbit has used Akwete to refashion into modern cape silhouette as opposed to the traditional wrapper. When Theresa May, the former British Prime Minister, then the foreign minister visited Nigeria, Emmy Kasbit designed a Jacket for her using Akwete fabric (Ahuja, 2021). Akwete has been featured in many fashion publications and houses, used in making different apparels. Its sturdiness makes it an excellent choice for tailored clothing items. Its durability ensures that it can be passed down from generation to generation within families (Nwewuihe, 2024).

However, the artisans and fashion designers are faced with a lot of challenges due to rapid globalization as traditional artifacts are on the verge of being lost. (Lui, Hassan & Irwan, 2024). The weavers weave on demand because they lack patronage, some weavers take orders of booking before production because no one wants to tie her money down. As a result, artisans have to support their vocation with other occupations to make their ends meet. (Chudi – Duru 2021, Oriaku, 2019). There is none integration of Akwete local weaving technology into the modern technological framework for globalization and to meet the demand of the indigenes in order to produce textiles that can compete with foreign textiles and products that come into Nigeria (Iweka 2019, Ikegwu & Uzuegbu, 2015) becoming unpopular among consumers because it cannot compete favourably with other fabrics such as Wax prints, laces, George and other woven fabrics. Generally, Nigerians prefer foreign textiles over home-made textiles because of texture which is usually heavy limiting its usefulness, aesthetics, properties and comfort during use. (Chudi – Duru, 2021). High interest on loans, lack of marketing strategies as well as inadequacies of locally produced raw materials, even when available are of low quality and not of commercial capacity. They have poor distribution channel and dependency on foreign technology and accessories (Odey, Saliu, Achukwu & Olashina, 2018).



High cost of yarn and insecurity especially kidnapping has scared away foreigners who were their main customers (Chudi-Duru 2021). Most foreign textiles are often smuggled and their activities have largely affected the locally produced products to compete with the cheap smuggled ones into the country. Research has shown that more than 70% of Nigerians prefer imported textiles and these shows lack of patriotism on our part (Odey, Saliu, Achukwu & Olashina, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Modern science and technology as well as globalization pose a serious challenge to traditional woven fabrics such as Akwete making it to be on the verge of being lost. The fashion designers are not aware that it is a source of employment opportunities and economic growth for their business hence the need to design using Akwete. They are not aware that it is a symbol of regional characteristics, a link between the past and the future also reflecting the creativity and innovation of the people. Besides there are lots that can be done with Akwete to suit contemporary fashion to tell a story and preserve the history of the people. It is hoped that this research work will encourage fashion designers to see the beauty, creativity and innovation in reviving Akwete fabric and be more patriotic in their contemporary fashion.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective was to examine the innovation, creativity and challenges faced by Nigerian fashion designers in reviving the lost craft of Akwete fabric into contemporary fashion. Therefore, the following objectives were formulated to:

1. Examine innovations and creativity by Nigerian fashion designers in reviving the lost craft of Akwete fabric into contemporary fashion.
2. Examine the challenges Nigerian Fashion Designers faced in reviving the lost craft of Akwete fabric into contemporary fashion.

Research Questions

1. What are the innovations and creativity by Nigerian fashion designers in reviving the lost craft of Akwete fabric in contemporary fashion?
2. What are the challenges faced by Nigerian fashion designers in reviving the lost craft of Akwete fabric in contemporary fashion?

Methodology

Descriptive Survey design was adopted for the study to enable respondents go through the questionnaire, to give their personal opinions about the problem being investigated. The area of the study was Lagos State. The population of the study consisted of 120 members of fashion designer's association of Nigeria (FADAN-Lagos). Who were purposively sampled. A structured questionnaire was the main instrument used in the collection of data for the research, in which respondents were to answer yes or no. The questionnaire was divided into two sections, section A and B. Section A was on the bio-data of the respondents, while section B had 31 items, 16, were on creativity and innovation by fashion designers with lost Akwete fabric in contemporary Nigerian fashion. 15 were on challenges faced by Nigeria fashion designers with lost Akwete fabric in contemporary Nigeria fashion totaling 31. The questionnaire was given content and face validity by 2 experts in Nigerian fashion. Their constructive corrections were effected and test-retest was used to determine the reliability and consistency of the instrument. The reliability coefficient of 0.70 was obtained at reliability level this shows that the instrument was valid and reliable. All the responses were collected using Google form and analyzed using Chi-square and Friedman's test. The results are presented below.



Results

Research Question 1: In what ways does Akwete fabric promote creativity and innovation in contemporary Nigeria fashion.

Table 1: Ways Akwete fabric promotes creativity and innovation in contemporary Nigerian fashion

S/ N	Statement (n=120)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Mean Rank	χ^2 (p-value)
1	I have heard of Akwete Fabric as a Nigerian fashion designer	60 (50.0)	60 (50.0)	10.26	450.206* (<0.001)
2	I am aware it is hand woven, therefore a handicraft	70 (58.3)	50 (41.7)	9.59	
3	Handicraft shows the identity of the people	120 (100)	0 (0)	6.26	
4	It also shows their creativity	120 (100)	0 (0)	6.26	
5	It is the people's cultural heritage	104 (86.7)	16 (13.3)	7.33	450.206* (<0.001)
6	I have designed with Akwete fabric before	23 (19.2)	97 (80.8)	12.73	
7	Designing with Akwete fabric tells a story about the culture of the people	103 (85.8)	17 (14.2)	7.39	
8	The culture of the people is lost when this cultural fabric is not used in contemporary fashion	68 (56.7)	52 (43.3)	9.73	
9	Akwete fabric can be combined with other fabrics to make it contemporary	95 (79.2)	25 (20.8)	7.93	450.206* (<0.001)
10	Akwete can be creatively designed into fashion accessories	97 (80.8)	23 (19.2)	7.79	
11	It can be used to design formal wears	87 (72.5)	33 (27.5)	8.46	
12	Souvenirs can be crafted with this versatile fabric for tourists	104 (86.7)	16 (13.3)	7.33	
13	This creates employment opportunities for the people	106 (88.3)	14 (11.7)	7.19	450.206* (<0.001)
14	I prefer to design using imported fabrics	56 (46.7)	64 (53.3)	10.53	
15	Continued reliance on imported fabric may lead to the disappearance of this indigenous cultural fabric	70 (58.3)	50 (41.7)	9.59	
16	Fashion designers can foster the indigenous fashion values by using Akwete fabric	99 (82.5)	21 (17.5)	7.66	

* Significant at 1% level

The Friedman test result ($\chi^2 = 450.206$, $p < .001$) indicates that respondents perceived Akwete fabric as a significant source of creativity and innovation in contemporary Nigerian fashion. The most highly rated contributions included the promotion of cultural identity, preservation of cultural heritage, adaptation to contemporary fashion styles, development of fashion accessories, and fostering indigenous fashion values.

Research Question 2: Are there challenges affecting the utilization of Akwete fabric in contemporary Nigeria fashion.

Table 2: Challenges in utilization of Akwete fabric in contemporary Nigeria fashion

S/N	Statement (n=120)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Mean Rank	χ^2 (p-value)
1	Globalization is the most challenging factor facing designers in reviving Akwete fabric	92 (76.7)	28 (23.3)	7.86	42.513 (<0.001)



2	Fashion designers do not patronize artisans of Akwete fabric weavers	75 (62.5)	45 (37.5)	8.93
3	The thickness of the fabric makes it challenging in competing with the imported cotton fabrics	93 (77.5)	27 (22.5)	7.80
4	Lack of loans to artisans by banks has the fabric at the verge of lost	85 (70.8)	35 (29.2)	8.30
5	Artisans have poor marketing strategies	88 (73.3)	29 (26.7)	8.11
6	Insecurity in the country have not allowed fashion designers to source for the fabric	89 (74.2)	31 (25.8)	8.05
7	Cheap smuggled fabrics for fast fashion are a challenge to reviving Akwete fabric by fashion designers	79 (65.8)	41 (34.2)	8.68
8	Nigerians' preference for imported textiles is also a challenge	102 (85.0)	18 (15.0)	7.24
9	Akwete weaving is left to the hands of rural weavers	90 (75.0)	30 (25.0)	7.99
10	Modern technology has not been incorporated into the craft	91 (75.8)	29 (24.2)	7.93
11	Government lacks commitment in reviving the craft of Akwete weaving	92 (76.7)	28 (23.3)	7.86
12	Lack of modernisation and poor packaging for export is a huge challenge to Akwete designers	95 (79.2)	25 (20.8)	7.68
13	Government has not recognized the socio-economic importance of Akwete in tourism	97 (80.8)	23 (19.2)	7.55
14	Fashion designers have a challenge producing fashion items for tourism	96 (80.0)	24 (20.0)	7.61
15	Akwete weaving is gender based; therefore, stereotyping must be removed for mass production for designers	83 (69.2)	37 (30.8)	8.43

* Significant at 1% level

The Friedman test result ($\chi^2 = 42.513$, $p < .001$) indicates that respondents perceived several significant challenges affecting the utilization of Akwete fabric. Key challenges identified include globalization, preference for imported textiles, inadequate access to finance, poor marketing strategies, and lack of technological integration, insufficient government support, and security-related constraints

Discussion of the Findings

The findings revealed that Akwete fabric possesses considerable potential for creativity and innovation in contemporary Nigerian fashion. Respondents generally acknowledged that Akwete fabric is an important indigenous handicraft that reflects the identity, culture, and heritage of the people. The findings further indicate that the fabric can be adapted for contemporary fashion applications, including garments, fashion accessories, and souvenirs. This suggests that Akwete fabric remains relevant in modern fashion despite increasing competition from imported textiles. The study also revealed that although many fashion designers recognize the cultural and creative value of Akwete fabric, only a few have previously incorporated it into their fashion products. This finding suggests a gap between awareness and actual utilization of the fabric within the contemporary fashion industry. The low level of utilization may be attributed to challenges associated with accessibility, production limitations, consumer preferences, and market competitiveness. Furthermore, respondents agreed that the continued use of Akwete fabric contributes to the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage and promotes the transmission of cultural values from one generation to another. The findings support the views of Oriaku (2019) and Chudi-Duru (2021), who observed that Akwete weaving serves as an important cultural symbol and medium



through which the history, identity, and artistic traditions of the Igbo people are preserved. The findings also revealed that Akwete fabric can be successfully combined with other textile materials to produce contemporary fashion items. This supports the growing argument that indigenous textiles can be creatively adapted to meet modern fashion demands without losing their cultural significance. The versatility of Akwete fabric therefore presents opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship, and the promotion of indigenous fashion values within Nigeria and beyond.

The findings revealed that Nigerian fashion designers encounter several challenges in their efforts to revive and utilize Akwete fabric in contemporary fashion. One of the major challenges identified was globalization and the increasing preference for imported textiles. Respondents perceived that imported fabrics continue to dominate the Nigerian fashion market, thereby reducing patronage for indigenous textiles such as Akwete. This finding supports the observations of Chudi-Duru (2021) and Odey, Saliu, Achukwu, and Olashina (2018), who reported that imported textiles and changing consumer preferences have adversely affected the growth and sustainability of local textile industries in Nigeria. The study further revealed that production-related challenges hinder the utilization of Akwete fabric. These include the thickness of the fabric, inadequate modernization of production processes, and the limited integration of modern technology into weaving practices. Such limitations reduce the competitiveness of Akwete fabric when compared with imported textiles that are often produced using advanced technologies and large-scale manufacturing systems. This finding agrees with Iweka (2019) and Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2015), who emphasized the need for technological advancement and modernization in indigenous textile production. Financial and marketing challenges were also identified as significant barriers to the growth of the Akwete industry. Respondents indicated that limited access to credit facilities, poor marketing strategies, and inadequate investment support have constrained the activities of weavers and artisans. These challenges affect production capacity, product visibility, and market expansion. Similar concerns were reported by Odey et al. (2018), who noted that inadequate financing and weak marketing structures continue to impede the development of Nigeria's textile sector. Another important finding of the study was the perceived lack of institutional support for the promotion and commercialization of Akwete fabric. Respondents believed that government commitment towards the revitalization of the craft remains inadequate, particularly in the areas of modernization, export promotion, and tourism development. The findings suggest that greater collaboration among government agencies, investors, cultural organizations, and fashion stakeholders is required to harness the economic and cultural potentials of Akwete fabric. This finding is consistent with the views of Enyeribe and Okey (2022) and Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2015), who highlighted the importance of policy support and investment in sustaining indigenous textile industries. The study also revealed concerns regarding the limited participation of younger generations and the gendered nature of Akwete weaving. The craft remains largely concentrated among rural female weavers, which may restrict knowledge transfer, skill acquisition, and expansion of the industry. Broadening participation and encouraging younger people to acquire weaving skills could contribute significantly to the preservation and sustainability of the craft.

Conclusion

Akwete fabric is a hand woven cloth, as such it is a handicraft. It shows the identity, culture, creativity and also tell the story of a people but unfortunately, it is at a verge of lost as Nigerian fashion designers are not using it to design contemporary styles, formal wears or souvenirs. This is due to lots of challenges faced by the weavers, such as poor patronage, insecurity, globalization, activities of smugglers, Nigerian love for foreign textile and a host of others. However, if these lost fabrics can be revived, it can be a source of income generation for weavers and designers, thereby preserving the cultural heritage of the people.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Nigerian government should encourage the large-scale cultivation of local cotton through agricultural support programmes and incentives. This will ensure a steady supply of raw materials for Akwete weaving,



reduce dependence on imported inputs, lower production costs, and enhance the sustainability of the indigenous textile industry.

2. Government agencies and financial institutions should provide artisans and weavers with access to low-interest loans and other forms of financial support. Such funding will enable them to purchase quality raw materials, acquire modern equipment, expand production capacity, improve product quality, and strengthen their businesses.
3. Nigerian fashion designers should be encouraged to incorporate Akwete fabric into contemporary garments, accessories, and fashion products. This will promote innovation and creativity, increase patronage for indigenous textiles, preserve cultural heritage, and create additional income opportunities for weavers and designers.

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