



An Evaluation of Akwete–Igbo Contemporary Woven Fabrics: Modernity and Changes

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Abstract

Akwete traditional hand weaving, exclusively practised by Igbo women in Akwete, Abia State, Nigeria, is a vital art form that embodies Igbo cultural identity. This female-led craft is deeply rooted in local heritage and history. The intricately woven cloths are boldly adorned with symbolic motifs that express the Igbo worldview, capturing social events, family structures, women's experiences, household items, beliefs, and historical narratives through the skilled use of the women's vertical loom. Modern Akwete weaving, however, is at a critical juncture: few women practise it due to its technical demands and complexity, and innovative designs remain largely unrecognised and underutilised. This study, employing surveys, interviews, and participant observation, reveals the striking creativity and innovation of Akwete weavers—an aspect long overlooked in scholarship. Immediate and strategic action is needed to raise awareness and incorporate these designs into contemporary fashion, ensuring the preservation and ongoing relevance of this exceptional cultural heritage.

Keywords: Akwete weaving, Akwete woven cloth, Igbo indigenous textile industry, contemporary weaving, clothing

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Funding: No funding was received for this research.

Article History: Received: 22 September 2025. Revised: 25 December 2025. Accepted: 26 December 2025. First published: 30 December 2025.

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Published by: [Aesthetix Media Services, India](#)

Citation: Chika, C. C. D. (2025). An Evaluation of Akwete–Igbo Contemporary Woven Fabrics: Modernity and Changes. *Chitrolekha Journal*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.21659/cjad.92.v9n204>



1. Introduction

The Igbo people live in the Southeastern part of Nigeria in West Africa. Their population is among the most numerous ethnic nationalities in Sub-Saharan Africa (Afigbo, 1981). Anni (2015) mentions that archaeological evidence has proven that this group practised indigenous weaving known as Akwete. Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2015), and Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi (2012), report that Akwete cloth is made by women in Ukwa East Local Government Area in Abia State, Nigeria. They also mention that towns where these traditional industries are located include Ndoki in Abia State—which shares boundaries with Ndoki, Ijo, and Ogoni of Rivers State—as a cluster of weaving communities. In Asa, towns where this weaving is still practised include Umunteke, Ohuchu, Mkpobo, Umuebulungwa, and Owo. In Ndoki, prominent towns where the weaving tradition continues include Akwete, Ohanso, Obunku, Ohambele, Obeaku, and Obehie. Ndoki in Rivers State, where this weaving tradition persists, has many towns, with Umuagbai being the most notable. Ekeke in Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2013), named cloth weaving in Umuagbai—Ndoki—Rivers State 'Akuruaku', while in Ndoki—Abia State, it is called 'Akwete', meaning something woven.

Afigbo in Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2013) point out that the weaving is called Akwete because the Akwete people, among other towns in Ukwa Local Government Area, take weaving as their major occupation, while others combine weaving with farming. It is a common heritage of the clan. They further explain that Akwete was brought to prominence by scholars through their contact with colonial authorities, and that it is a traditional technology widely regarded as an indigenous practice of the Igbo people. This fact was buttressed by the emphasis placed on the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological discovery in 1838 by Isaiah Anozie, who stumbled upon colourful regalia and other artefacts while digging a water cistern in his compound. They also mention that this discovery led the federal Department of Antiquities (Federal Commission for Museums and Monuments) to authorise an investigation by inviting Thurston Shaw in 1964-65. In 1970 and 1977, Shaw's findings were published and subjected to radiocarbon dating. Colourful materials (regalia) were also discovered and dated to the 9th Century AD. Aronson (1980) also reported that archaeological remains of woven bark fragments from the 9th-century A.D. site at Igbo Ukwu provide evidence of the earliest known weaving in Nigeria, although the specific nature and use of these textiles remain unknown. These textile discoveries at Igbo Ukwu are linked to Akwete indigenous weaving materials. According to Lambs and Holmes (1980), other Ndigbo groups that engage in weaving include Nsukka women, Abakaliki women in Ebonyi State, Umuagbai women in Rivers State, and Aniocha women in Delta State, among others.

Since the 19th century, Akwete traditional hand weavers, who are exclusively female, have been innovative with their long-standing designs, which the Igbo and Ijaw cherish and use for various purposes. Although there are few Igbo-speaking regions in South-Southern Nigeria that do not weave or utilise Akwete hand-woven fabrics, this project focused on the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria, who engage with these fabrics and have experienced recent levels of modernity and change in their weaving practices. This paper examined what influenced this visual culture, including the periods and places of its development, its cultural significance, and documentation. It also investigates how indigenous it remains to the Igbo. Additionally, the study involved comparing older symbolic designs with contemporary ones to clarify differences. Furthermore, it explored whether the modern woven fabrics are revered and incorporated into fashion alongside foreign fabrics adopted by the Igbo, and assessed the challenges facing the weaving tradition.

Lastly, the research looked into the marketability, acceptability, and identity of the Igbo reflected in these woven fabrics. It includes documentation of both old and new designs of the traditional woven cloth to improve understanding and address common misidentifications.

In Nigeria's apparel history, students of design and art will gain insight into their woven culture through this study, which will broaden their understanding of the contemporary hand-woven textiles of the Igbo. It will also add to the existing literature on the Akwete weaving tradition. Furthermore, this study is expected to yield a collection of new designs identified in the field, as scholars have largely neglected this area. Additionally, it will contribute to socio-cultural history of contemporary indigenous weaving and inspire further research in this area of visual culture.

2. Statement of the problem

Ben-Iheanacho (2011) recounted a personal encounter in Malaysia in 2003, where she attended a cultural exchange programme. All participants were encouraged to wear their traditional attire on the syndicate opening day. That day, she wore her double George wrappers, a lace blouse, and the Igbo woman's large, stiff scarf, in keeping with a typical Igbo woman, and became the centre of admiration. However, she was embarrassed when a female participant of Indian origin from Sri Lanka explained that her wrapper was "hers" and asked whether that was how she used it in her own country. She was astonished and hurt, as she was not dressed in what could be called "her own" and perhaps was unaware that she had such a thing. This felt like confirmation that some Igbo are unaware that their indigenous handwoven fabrics exist in Igbo land and that they long for their use. Ignorance of these indigenous fabrics and their non-use by her and many other Igbo could be one of the reasons that motivated the researcher to explore the Akwete weaving tradition. Most existing writings focused on the origin of Akwete weaving (Aronson, 1979; Cole & Aniakor, 1986; Chudi-duru, 2017; Lamb & Holmes, 1980). Some examined the cultural significance of ancient motifs and images (Davis, 1974; Chudi-duru, 2017; Aronson, 1979), while Aronson (1980) looked into its patronage. Aronson (1994) also studied Akwete-Igbo weavers as entrepreneurs and innovators at the turn of the century, but literature on newer fabric designs was largely absent. Chudi-Duru (2017) explored Akwete weave motifs and adapted some for printed textiles for apparel production, introducing the printed version of Akwete— Igbo traditional weaves—to the world of African printed fabrics. This demonstrated that printed versions could be produced just like kente woven fabrics and prints from Ghana, Bogolanfini mud cloth and print from Mali, kuba woven cloth and print from Congo, Senufo Korhogo cloth and print from Ivory Coast, and Fante Asafo flags and prints produced by the Fante people of the central and western coast of Ghana. These transformations into printed versions were encouraged to prevent traditional weaving practices from becoming extinct. However, clear research gaps and issues still remain, particularly in the area of Igbo Contemporary Weaving: Modernity and Changes. A specific objective was set during this study.

3. Objective of the study

1. To seek and document the contemporary designs produced by the Akwete weavers for more understanding.

4. Research Question

1. In what ways can the Akwete contemporary woven designs be surveyed and documented for clarity?

5. Literature review

In the southeastern part of Nigeria, especially in Akwete in Ndoki and Asa areas of Abia State, women and girls practised the art of cloth weaving known as Akwete using a vertical loom. Lamb & Holmes (1980) note that Akwete is the most famous among all places that utilise the women's vertical loom in Nigeria, although weaving also takes place in various other areas of Igbo land. Goodlife (2010), Powerhouse Museum (2008), and Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi (2012) state that the Igbo are widely recognised for Akwete cloth weaving, which is predominantly practised by women. Lamb & Holmes (1980) mention that the origins of the Akwete weaving tradition are uncertain, with several external influences seemingly combined to produce the characteristic cloths of this region. They further report that an Igbo legend claims that weavers from that village were among the pioneers of Akwete weaving in the late nineteenth century. From the mid to late nineteenth century, weaving expanded from a part-time activity to a full-time occupation in which all Akwete women participated. During this period, Akwete weavers responded to the patronage of neighbouring Ijo people of the Niger Delta and developed novel techniques to create desired patterns in new textile materials. According to Nwachukwu et al. (2012), the Akwete cloth was originally called "Akwa Mmiri" (cloth of the water), meaning towel. The people believe that Akwete cloth is as old as the Igbo nation. Due to the skill of the weavers, who demonstrated great mastery of technique and aesthetic design, the art of Akwete cloth weaving was erroneously thought to have been introduced from Okene in Kogi State, where a similar but more developed style had existed earlier.

Ekwueme (2009) and Aronson (1980) believe that the ancestors of this Igbo traditional costume were imported from the island of Bonny in Rivers State. These ancestors settled on the mainland. While the men's occupation was fishing, the women designed and wove the intricate patterns now known as Akwete. She further states that these intricate designs are arguably regarded as one of the most famous women's vertical loom cloths in Nigeria. Ekwueme (2009) supports Lamb & Holmes (1980) and asserts that although the origin of this unique traditional industry remains shrouded in mystery, history reveals that the production of cloth is a traditional profession of women who began weaving until their hands were strong enough to handle a narrow wall loom. She opines that Akwete is common among Nigerians, mainly in the eastern part of the country, but this study strongly disagrees, as most young men, women, and youths do not even know what Akwete looks like, let alone talk about acquiring one. However, Afigbo (1985) and Goodlife (2010) oppose this view of the origin of Akwete weaving, believing that the legendary weaver Dada Nwakata, acclaimed as the founder of Akwete weaving, began weaving with designs of her own invention. She is said to be the founder of Akwete weaving and has remained a role model for Akwete weavers, who claim they can weave any cloth design set before them just like her. Dada Nwakata unravelled threads from an open woven cotton cloth locally known as "acham," brought into the area through trade with the Portuguese (Potoki) between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries when they operated in the Bight of Biafra. After studying the weave structures of the heavily ornamented cloth, Dada Nwakata copied them and secretly began weaving a new

style of Akwete designs. This style was revealed after her death by a deaf and dumb friend, who was the only person she permitted to be in her company when she wove her fabrics.

Lamb & Holmes (1980) mention that highly talented women use a uniquely wide version of the single heddle loom, and the skills have been passed down from mother to daughter since ancient times. Lamb & Holmes (1980) also observed that it has been highly valued by Igbo women for ceremonial dresses such as the 'up and down', which is wrapped around the waist and another under the arms. Akwete was soon overshadowed by inexpensive imported materials. With the introduction of lighter polyester silk threads and beautiful new patterns, Akwete now competes remarkably well with the best-woven materials in the world. The artistry and craftsmanship involved in Akwete weaving have given it a uniqueness far above other woven fabrics in West Africa. Lamb & Holmes (1980) postulate that although some traditional Akwete patterns have been passed down through centuries, each woman weaver still experiments with new designs in keeping with modern fashion trends, thus creating an interactive and vibrant industry. In this process, some women of Akwete have established a cooperative to organise their marketing. Their works bear the mark of their design innovations while maintaining their traditional character. However, if the Akwete industry is as vibrant as Nwachukwu et al (2012) claim, it would likely be very popular, much like some of its counterparts, such as the kente fabric of Ghana, which is now used globally.



Figure 1: Akwete weaving. A sculptural piece depicting a woman weaving, mounted at the entrance to Akwete town, portrays the town as one in which weaving is a major occupation for women. Photograph by Chudi-Duru (2017).

Clarke (2013) notes that Akwete village is situated on the southern edge of the Igbo-speaking region in Nigeria and that Akwete women wove cloths traded across the Niger Delta, used for various ceremonial occasions. According to Lamb & Holmes (1980), the unique weavings of Akwete women are recognised throughout West Africa; however, this study disagrees with this

statement because Akwete cannot claim the same popularity as the Kente woven cloth of Ghana. She also mentions that although Akwete village is somewhat remote today, in the 19th century it was strategically positioned along the slave and palm oil trading routes, connecting the interior to port cities such as Opobo and Port Harcourt, and that they produced textiles that became a valued trade good. Shaw (1970), cited in Oyedele, Ayokanmi & Obisesan (2014), notes that archaeological excavations have uncovered woven textiles made from fabrics other than cotton at Igbo-ukwu, although how and by whom they were produced remain unknown.



Figure 2: Akwete weaving. An Igbo of Akwete, working on an Akwete cloth in the Akwete co-operative women's building in Akwete town, weaving a popo design. This is also an older design. Photograph by Chudi-Duru (2020)

6. The need to document the contemporary Akwete hand-woven fabrics

Recent publications on Akwete traditional handwoven fabrics have focused on dated motifs used in weaving (Lamb and Holmes, 1980; Chudi-Duru, 2017), along with themes of entrepreneurship, patronage, and cultural significance (Aronson, 1980). In the early sixties, owning Akwete woven fabrics was a way to display material comfort and privileged status. It is often boastfully claimed that the cost of a pair of Akwete woven fabrics could pay for one's school fees for a lifetime (Chudi-Duru, 2017). Although woven fabrics have been infrequently utilised in Igbo fashion—because fashion is not static—and with the influence of social media and modern trends, changes have occurred that should have increased its popularity and patronage, recent investigations indicate that they still struggle for recognition. This study contends that while the unique weavings of Akwete women have been documented and acknowledged in the history of textile art across West Africa and beyond, most Igbo and others have mistaken them for different textiles, and contemporary weaves are yet to gain proper recognition. This is partly due to a lack of awareness about what these fabrics look like. The study aims to open avenues for further research into contemporary Akwete-Igbo weaving, explore their cultural connotations, and document woven

samples within their weaving practices in South-Eastern Nigeria. It also emphasises that understanding the resemblance of these fabrics is essential before they can be fully appreciated; thus, documentation is vital. Sehgal (2016) notes that 'documentation is a useful measure to prove the authenticity of an art piece and keep track of the condition it is in. It enhances the value and desirability of the artwork and assists ordinary everyday people to understand the subtle nuances of the piece.' Moreover, the African Heritage House has stated that kente woven cloth is among the most renowned African textiles and one of the most complex weaves globally. It presented some American models showcasing African heritage designs using solely hand-woven Kente fabrics of the Ewe tribe in Ghana. This was a promotional shot for the largest African heritage exhibition ever held in the USA, which was attended by 60,000 guests at the San Diego Zoo in 1979. While the African Heritage House's comment pertains to Ghanaian kente fabric, this study is interested in how similar dynamics of fame and cultural influence are played out with Akwete handwoven fabrics of the Igbo in Nigeria. The project asserts that since Akwete woven fabrics also feature intricate designs symbolising cultural values and establishing the Igbo presence on the global textile map, they deserve adequate recognition and documentation. The practice of traditional Akwete weaving has been studied by authors such as Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi (2012), Goodlife (2010), Powerhouse Museum (2008), Okeke (1982), Afigbo (1974), Lyndersay (2011), Ikegwuonu (1979), Ekwueme (2009), Ikegwu and Uzuegbu (2015), Ogu and Ndebilie (2011), Sinha (2012), Aronson (1979, 1980), Cole and Aniakor (1986), Basden (1983), Chudi-Duru (2017), Davis (1974), Lamb and Holmes (1980), and Oyelola (2010). The cultural importance of older design motifs has been examined by Aronson (1980), Lamb and Holmes (1980), and Chudi-Duru (2017). Only Davis (1974) attempted to document some of the traditional motif designs, but modern designs remain largely undocumented. Nevertheless, the contemporary weaving of Akwete-Igbo—its modern adaptations and changes—has largely been overlooked by scholars.

7. Origin of these motifs

All the motifs woven into Akwete fabrics have origins. Some weavers claim they see some designs in dreams, while others create their own patterns, according to Lady Ordor, an Akwete weaver the researcher met in 2017. Some weavers are inspired by their environment, Igbo beliefs, traditions, folklore, and worldview.

Aronson (1979) narrated the story behind the origin of the popular ikaki symbolic motif and proclaimed that Akwete Igbo weavers have come to appropriate a wide range of foreign-introduced patterns, including those from the Ijebu Yoruba area. She further narrated that Ijebu Yoruba, who live in southeastern Yoruba land, was ruled by a divine king based in Ijebu-Ode. There is a separate but unrelated system of Ijebu rule called Oshugbo (Ogboni by other Yoruba subgroups). This system functions as the judiciary society. It is composed of male and female elders who decide on criminal cases and oversee all affairs concerning the king. Ijebu women weavers manufacture the ritual attire that all Oshugbo members must wear. Such a cloth is referred to as *aso olona*, meaning "cloth with patterns." It is a large wrapper made of four full-width panels sewn together along the selvedge and worn toga-style on the body. There is also a single panel of cloth called an *itagbe*, which is worn over the left shoulder or as a turban on the head. They wear this ensemble of cloth pieces for public display. It combines the Ooni (crocodile) motif with a *shaki* feature (*shag*) and symbolizes power, prestige, and positive qualities. Aronson (1980) stated that elsewhere in Yoruba land, members of the Ogboni tend not to use Ijebu woven

cloth as standard attire. She discovered that cloths bearing identical patterns to Ijebu cloth are found among the Ijo group living at the eastern end of the Niger Delta, which is over 100 miles from Ijebu land. She strongly believed that trade appears to have been the driving force behind the spread, as the Ijebu Yoruba have long been known as vibrant cloth traders. The Ijebu cloth may have been among the textiles transported to the Niger Delta. For two centuries, the kings of Eastern Ijo have worn clothes bearing Ijebu-like patterns as their official attire. These patterns resemble their Ijebu counterparts closely but are called *Ikaki*, which in Ijo means tortoise. This motif symbolises the tortoise as a highly revered water spirit known for its wisdom, cunning, and tricky behaviour, traits that Ijo kings and chiefs are known to imitate. *Ikaki* has been official attire for royalty since the late 18th century, suggesting that Ijebu cloth was being traded to the Ijo by this early period.

Recently, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the cloth of the Ijo kings (*amanyanabo*) was woven by the Akwete Igbo women weavers, confirming that they had taken on the role of replicating imported cloth types. They no longer purchased from Ijebu weavers but instead placed orders for woven cloth in Akwete. There was a strong attachment and preference for imported cloths among the eastern Ijo, to the extent that local weaving production was affected. Close to the eastern Ijo in the north are the Ndoki people of the village of Akwete, with whom the eastern Ijo traded heavily for slaves and palm oil in the 18th and 19th centuries. Through this commercial contact, women weavers of Akwete acquired the expertise to imitate cloth patterns familiar to their eastern Ijo patrons. By the end of the 19th century, amidst competitive trading among coastal and inland groups, weaving in Ndoki village of Akwete was revolutionised.

Aronson (1980) and Davis (1974) asserted that oral tradition narrates the story of an innovative and pioneering weaver named Dada Nwakata, who exhibited highly exceptional professional skill, invented, and wove hundreds of new patterns using imported cotton threads. This made her fabrics highly sought after by clients. According to Afigbo and Okeke (1985), she uncovered the mystery behind the Indian woven materials sold by the Portuguese and produced the designs using the Akwete loom. Dada Nwakata wove reversible patterns that could be seen on both the front and back of the woven wrapper. Aronson (1979) argued that this was likely done to please her wealthy patrons. Since the late 19th century, Akwete weavers have continued to craft cloths for Eastern Ijo consumption, featuring patterns such as *ikaki*, which was originally introduced to the Eastern delta from the Ijebu Yoruba area. Akwete weavers have become increasingly innovative in their weaving of *Ikaki* and other patterns. This research discovered that many new motifs, which symbolize various concepts, have been incorporated into recently woven Akwete cloths. They exhibit a strong propensity for innovation. Aronson (1980), Davis (1974), and Lamb and Holmes (1980) noted that women weavers produced numerous motifs used to form intricate pattern designs. These patterns often feature complex combinations. For example, no two cloths bearing the *Ikaki* motif are identical, forming a contrast to the traditional Ijebu version. Sometimes, other symbolic motifs from different parts of West Africa, resembling objects or concepts, are given names that reflect their appearance, thus creating a uniquely Akwete woven cloth. By naming and innovating in this manner, the tradition of creativity and innovation, as well as the individual weavers who introduce new motifs, continue to thrive within the Akwete Igbo area of Nigeria. According to Lamb and Holmes (1980), Akwete woven cloth can be classified into three main categories. This study found that this classification is based on the different designs woven

into the cloth, each symbolising and conveying a multitude of meanings. All Akwete woven fabrics fall under these three categories. The three main categories are:

1. George cloth
2. Popo cloth
3. Akwete

7.1 George Cloth

This type of woven cloth features stripes and checks. Aronson (1980) supported Lamb & Holmes (1980) and explained that during her research in Akwete, she encountered a woman using a piece of Indian madras, known locally as George cloth, as the prototype for her design. These Indian madras fabrics are distinguished by their colourful plaid patterns. Nnadede is an example of this George fabric, which also has Indian origins. They further noted that all the numerous Akwete plaid and check designs originate from Indian imports and may have resulted from requests by Ijo patrons to replicate designs they particularly favoured. Cloth designs that are copied from Indian madras fall under this category. A sample of the George cloth design is shown in the figure below.



**Figure 3: Akwete george design. Source: Chudi-Duru (2017). Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020
Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).**

7.2 Popo Cloth

According to Lamb and Holmes (1980) and Talbot in Aronson (1982), it is a fact that the male Ewe parallels of weaving can be found easily on the popo cloth of Akwete, but its origin is from Ghana and Togo. Lamb and Holmes (1980) further explained that it is a type of cloth woven for sale in Opobo market and also in Bonny, in deliberate competition with the Ewe cloths from Keta and Togo. According to Chudi-Duru (2017), they can be combined with other designs. She further mentions that they also come in different colours but bear one name. What differentiates one from another are the colours and the number of vertical and horizontal lines woven as designs onto the fabric. The number of colours used to warp a particular design for weaving also differentiates one design pattern from the other but is called one name, which is Popo.



Figure 5: Akwete woven fabric under the category of Popo. Weaver: Mrs Nneoma Okereke. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).

7.3 Akwete

This type refers to the woven cloth produced by women weavers using their own design motifs. Aronson (1980) mentioned that the Akwete weavers used to create some simple cloths with traditional patterns of black and white warp stripes, which produce an overall effect of small checks, with some crafts featuring further embellishments of the water stripes with arrays of holes that are part of the wider tradition of the Nigerian woman's vertical loom. A sample of Akwete design fabric is shown in the figure below. Almost all woven fabrics in this category have names derived from the originator of the designs' name, current events in Igbo society, household items, Igbo worldview, political scenes in Nigeria, and other factors.



**Figure 4a: Contemporary Akwete woven fabric. Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020
Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town.
Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).**



Figure 4b: Akwete woven fabric comprising of ikaki,comb, ruler and checkerboard design.

Weaver-Mrs. Helen. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).

8. Methodology

This is mixed-method research. This study utilised a descriptive survey design and a five-point Likert scale questionnaire; in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, photographs, and participant observations were also employed as research instruments. The results were analysed using both qualitative methods and descriptive statistical tools such as mean and standard deviation. The qualitative approach was used because the Akwete weaving tradition was observed, studied, described, and documented. For the quantitative approach, descriptive statistical tools like mean and standard deviation were used because they provide measurable attributes and information to generate statistical data about the studied population. The results from the questionnaire were subsequently analysed and presented in a table.

9. Area of Study

The study area is Akwete in Abia State, the place where woven fabrics are produced. From the mid- to late nineteenth century, weaving evolved from a part-time activity that engaged some women to a full-time occupation in which all Akwete women participated. The men were mainly traders and fishermen because Akwete is a riverine town.

10. Population of the study

The population of this study includes the weavers, some staff, and students from selected higher institutions in Abia State. To reduce the population to a sample size for investigating the phenomenon, the formula as proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (2001) was used to determine the sample size from an estimated population of forty-eight thousand three hundred and twenty-four thousand (48,324) across three tertiary institutions surveyed in Abia State: University Uturu, Abia State Polytechnic, Aba, and College of Education (Technical) Arochukwu. The required sample size for the study is 381. The faculty of environmental sciences at these institutions was selected because it is considered sufficiently knowledgeable to provide valuable responses to this study.

11. Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study include questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, photography, and observations. The questionnaire was a five-point Likert scale with response options of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and Undecided. It was employed to examine the Akwete weaving industry. A theoretical mean of 3.0, as suggested by Davies (2005), served as the criterion for evaluating the item means in the structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert format. For this study, the researcher distributed three hundred and eighty-one (381) questionnaires to respondents.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with the interviewees, including a male community leader (Mr. Justice) and an octogenarian named Madam Edith Akpara (85 years old), who is the oldest weaver in the community, on the 14th of August 2016 in Akwete town. The interview questions were structured. The selection of these informants is based on the case study.

12. Reliability of the instrument

The questionnaire, interview guide, and focus group discussion questions were developed by the researcher and reviewed by experts from the Department of Industrial Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

13. Administration of the instrument

The instrument was administered to respondents in higher institutions using purposive random sampling because this study considers that Akwete woven fabrics are not only woven and worn by Akwete people but also by the entire Igbo land and beyond. It was deemed necessary to sample higher institutions since they are places where many individuals from different parts of the country can respond favourably to the questionnaires. These questionnaires were distributed among three higher institutions within the study area: 161 questionnaires were administered to Abia State University, Uturu in Abia South; 120 questionnaires were given to Abia Polytechnic Aba in Abia Central; and 101 questionnaires were distributed to Abia State College of Education (Technical), Arochuku in Abia North. After coding and processing the data, three hundred and thirty-seven (337) questionnaires were deemed valid, representing an 88.5% return rate, and were used in data analysis and interpretation.

14. Data Analysis

To obtain information on this research question, a questionnaire comprising fifteen (15) items was formulated and administered to the respondents. Table 1 shows the items, mean scores, and other relevant information regarding the research question. The data were analysed by coding the results with the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS), after which the descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used to analyse the data.

15. Research Question

1. In what ways can contemporary Akwete woven designs be sought and documented for clarity?

Table 1: Woven designs produced by Akwete weavers.

S/N	ITEMS	Mean	Std. D.	Remarks
1	<i>Akwete</i> contemporary designs are numerous and should be documented.	4.19	1.06	Accepted
2	They consist of westernised designs	3.79	1.22	Accepted
3	<i>Contemporary Akwete</i> woven wrappers are not plainly woven like plain Indian madras	2.40	1.31	Rejected
4	They are always decorated with design motifs.	3.78	1.31	Accepted
5	The motifs are what make them fall into contemporary woven designs	3.71	1.9	Accepted
6	Contemporary design motifs can be used to express ones' ideology	3.97	1.27	Accepted
7	Many significant names are given to these motifs and designs	3.75	1.33	Accepted
8	The contemporary designs depict Igbo culture	2.43	1.47	Rejected
9	The contemporary designs depict Igbo worldview	4.23	.95	Accepted
10	Some of them are borrowed motifs	3.56	1.24	Accepted
11	Some contemporary motifs are preferable to the older ones	3.84	1.21	Accepted
12	Most contemporary designs are more complicated in weaving than the older ones	3.57	1.21	Accepted
13	All the old <i>Akwete</i> design motifs have names attached to them but the new ones do not.	3.85	1.33	Accepted
14	contemporary designs spring up every day and are mistook for their counterparts	3.67	1.37	Accepted
15	The contemporary designs are not known	3.72	1.32	Accepted
	Grand Mean	3.76		Accepted

Key: 1 = Undecided, 2 = Disagree, 3 = strongly disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Source: Chudi-Duru (2017).

Table 1 displays respondents' perceptions of Akwete woven design motifs. The table shows that thirteen items from the questionnaire were accepted, while two were rejected. Based on the mean ratings for the accepted items, it is evident that: all Akwete designs are numerous and should be documented, with a mean score of 4.19; recently woven clothes must always feature design motifs, with a mean score of 3.78; motifs and their sizes define Akwete woven designs, with a mean score of 3.71; motifs can be used to express one's ideology, with a mean score of 3.97; the motifs on Akwete fabrics are plentiful, with a mean score of 3.79; many significant names are assigned to the motifs, with a mean score of 3.75; they hold specific value for the Igbo people, scoring 4.23 on average; some motifs are preferred over others, with a mean of 3.80; new designs emerge daily, with a mean score of 3.63; contemporary designs are not yet widely known, with a mean of 3.66; some motifs are borrowed, averaging 3.56; certain designs are intended for specific groups, with a mean score of 3.57; and all Akwete design motifs are named, with a mean of 3.85. The table also

shows that the following items were rejected: 'Akwete woven wrappers are not woven plain', with a mean score of 3.40; and 'it is impossible to achieve successful weaving of indigenous Akwete woven fabrics recently without the introduction of motifs on them', with a mean score of 2.43.

Based on the value of the weighted mean average of 3.76 recorded from the table, it can be inferred that the Akwete weaving tradition has numerous woven designs, both old and new, that require documentation. They are also valued and still utilised in weaving today. These symbolic design motifs give the Akwete woven fabrics their identity. Previously, some of these designs were reserved for particular groups of people, and many of their contemporary designs are not known to the Igbo or beyond.

From the focus group discussion held with Akwete weavers at the Akwete Weaving Co-operative secretariat, the discussants revealed that Akwete has numerous symbolic motifs, possibly over a hundred and fifty, which are valued and used to decorate woven wrappers. They also mentioned that their various designs should be documented alongside their names. These motifs reflect the Igbo worldview and the weavers' creativity. Lady P. Ordor (a discussant) disclosed that most of her contemporary motifs are revealed to her in dreams and are not copied from fellow weavers. From observations in this study, her designs are uncommon, highly complex, and not easily replicated by other weavers because she employs many heddles to produce multiple patterns on the loom. She noted that only a few weavers produce such designs. She also revealed that some weavers copy design patterns and motifs from others, and some motifs are copied by the weavers themselves, each with different names. The weavers also disclosed that some motifs are borrowed from other cultures, and those cultures, in turn, borrow from them. For example, the design called popo is copied from Ghana. They further explained that new designs arise daily, but this has not eliminated the use of traditional patterns, which are still woven to this day.

16. Discussions and Findings

The study found that motifs woven into the cloth are objects meant to represent something else (usually abstract), even if there is no meaningful relationship. It also disclosed that the names used to represent those designs are symbolic. Lamb and Holmes (1980) and Aronson (1980) reported that the Akwete women have produced many designs (over 100) using different motifs. This research confirmed this when conducted in Akwete town, where a weaver named Mrs. Nneoma Okere rated Dada Nwakata and Madam George Mmeribokwu as first-class weavers and revealed that some fabric designs are named after them. Dada Nwakata wove designs with symbolic motifs on one side that can be seen on both sides, while Madam George Wove George's materials.

This study observed during the focus discussion group that some names of these woven designs are in Ijaw /Ijo language, while the rest have Igbo and English names. The reason why some of them have Ijaw names is that they originate from neighbouring villages near Akwete town, which usually patronise the weavers extensively, and these woven textiles hold significant cultural importance in Ijaw areas. The English names, as this study discovered, were given by expatriates from other countries who work in oil companies in Rivers State; they assigned English names to some of these motifs. These motifs hold great value in the woven cloth and attract buyers because any new design will be sought after by someone who has never purchased it before. All of these motifs have meanings rooted in Igbo traditions, myths, and beliefs. More than a hundred fabric designs woven by the weavers have been documented by Chika Chudi-Duru (2017).

The contemporary designs found in Akwete-Igbo did not develop today but in the 20th century, as mentioned by Patience Ordor (a contemporary weaver) during an interview. She notes that these are newer woven designs that were not given names like the older ones and are more intricate. They are mostly abstract patterns created to connect with one another, sometimes featuring floral motifs and geometrical shapes. The elements of design—line, shape, form, texture, colour, and space—were all deliberately applied by her to craft visually appealing designs. Her works also display some principles of design, such as balancing the elements, proportion, variety, value, dominance, rhythm, emphasis, contrast, and unity. Emphasis highlights the importance or prominence of specific design features. Her designs achieved balance, creating a sense of equilibrium by evenly distributing visual weight. Contrast, a fundamental principle of design, significantly enhances her work; it involves arranging opposing elements—like colours, shapes, sizes, or textures—to generate visual interest or intrigue, or simply to highlight their striking differences. Repetition appears in her designs, reinforcing recurring motifs or patterns within her woven samples, thereby fostering cohesion and harmony. Her motifs were proportionate to one another; proportion concerns the relationship between the size of one motif relative to others, the spacing between them, or the number of motifs used. A well-proportioned design feels natural and pleasing to the eye. Rhythm describes the movement of the viewer's eye across the design, guided by lines, shapes, and colours; she employed this principle effectively, demonstrating a thorough understanding. These characteristics collectively showcase her mastery of Akwete's traditional hand-weaving techniques.

The study found that these designs were not created based on Igbo culture and tradition. Weaving expert Madam Patience Ordor, who was also interviewed, stated that she sees her designs in her dreams, indicating they are not connected to Igbo culture. Lurex yarns were used extensively during the weaving process, making them more expensive than traditional ones. Additionally, more heddles were utilised during weaving to produce more intricate pattern designs. These designs are time-consuming and less popular due to their high prices; however, they are purchased by wealthy individuals for special occasions. A set of two wrappers can sell for two hundred thousand Naira or more. Some of the contemporary woven samples are shown in figures 6 to 17.



Figure 6: contemporary Akwete woven fabric.

Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).



Figure 7: contemporary Akwete woven fabric.

Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).



Figure 8: contemporary Akwete woven fabric.

Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).



Figure 9: contemporary Akwete woven fabric.

Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).



Figure 10: Contemporary Akwete Weaver: Mrs P. Ordor. Photo credit- Mrs. P. Ordor

Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).

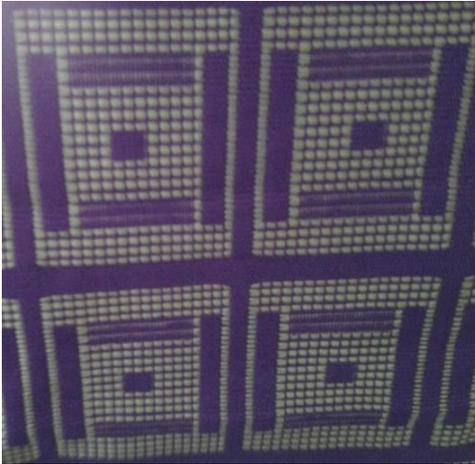


Figure 11: Contemporary Akwete woven fabrics named blocks and utobo. Date: 2025. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).

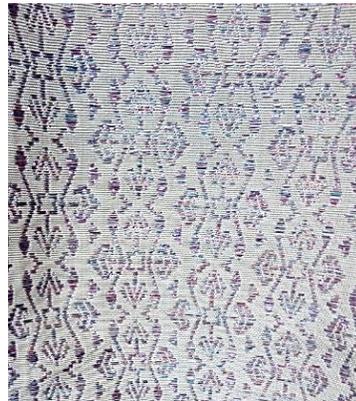


Figure 12: contemporary Akwete woven fabric. Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020 Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).

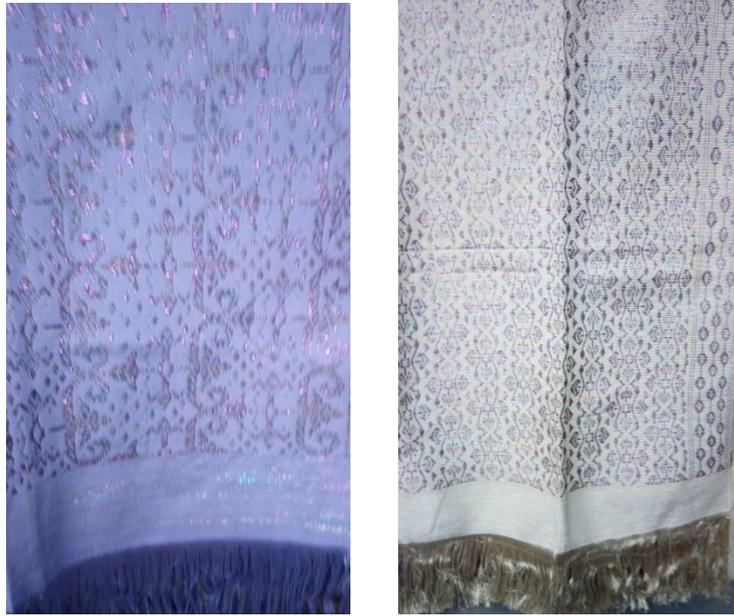


Figure 13: contemporary Akwete woven fabric. Artist: Mrs. Odor. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020

Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in a weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020)



Figure 14: contemporary Akwete woven fabric (Ahia) named *mgbawa tomatoes- broken tomatoes* and a mixture of Akwete woven motifs. Date: 2025. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020)



Figure 15: contemporary Akwete woven fabric (Ahia) and another woven fabric consisting of various motifs. Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimeters: 2.5metres. Found in Madam Nneoma - a weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).



Figure 16: contemporary Akwete woven fabric (Ahia). Artist: Mrs. Nneoma. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020, Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimetres: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2020).



Figure 17: contemporary Akwete woven fabric. Artist: Mrs. Nneoma. Igbo, Nigeria. Date: 2020, Medium: Weaving. Dimensions in centimetres: 2.5metres. Found in the weavers' collection in Akwete town. Photo credit: Chudi-Duru, C.C (2025).

17. Conclusion

This study surveyed the Akwete weaving tradition and documented both old and modern woven designs for proper identification. The woven designs boast over a hundred types, but only about sixty of them were physically observed and documented in this study. Very few women were engaged in weaving complex contemporary designs due to their intricate nature. Most modern woven designs lack stories attached to them, unlike some older designs. They resemble Western patterns, reflecting Western influence. Nonetheless, all designs woven by women are regarded as Akwete hand-woven designs, whether they express Igbo worldviews and beliefs or not. Since the weavers produce them using their vertical looms and weave in Akwete, they all carry the Akwete identity. Contemporary woven designs remain in demand but are more expensive because high-quality yarns are used to create luxurious features that form part of the designs on the fabrics. The weaving process is also time-consuming, and only a few women are capable of weaving these modern designs, making them limited in number. However, this indigenous woven culture is a source of pride for the Igbo, and therefore, it should be supported to ensure its continuation.

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