

Rescue the Local Indigenous Textile and Fashion Design Industry in Nigeria

Iweka, Olive Adaobi

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

olive.iweka@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

Nigerian institutions of learning are annually turning out skilled indigenes who can establish and man industries that produce items needed for existence. Such items include toiletries, textiles, garments, agricultural products and carpentry. Yet, Nigeria as a nation is generally observed as a consumer of goods and not a manufacturer of goods. There is gross technological backwardness in the country, which is buttressing abject poverty amongst talented indigenes of Nigeria. Resources are not maximally attended to and tapped. Technologies are not upgraded. On this platform, this paper moves to discuss the Nigerian local indigenous textiles and fashion design industries, their capacities, the issues hindering the advancement of such industries and the prospects of the industries. The study calls for the rescue of the local indigenous textile and fashion design industry in Nigeria from internal detractors and hindrances so that the industries can stand external competitors for the betterment of the country and thus recommended means by which the industry can be aided. Data for this paper were sourced from newspaper, published books, Internet, journal articles, observations and experiences of the researcher. The data assessment employed the qualitative research method.

Keywords: *Indigenous, Textiles, Fashion-Design.*

Introduction

For as far back as 900 years AD or even earlier, Nigerians have engaged in textile and fashion designing. Pieces of cloths woven in different techniques were recovered at the Igboukwu excavations that took place in 1959 and 1964 respectively by archaeologist Thurstan Shaw (Isichei 1976, p. 12). Cottage textile and weaving industries exist in Nigeria where indigenes engage in fibre arts. In these industries, woven textiles are produced manually on indigenous vertical and horizontal looms. Samples of the local looms are showcased in figures 1, 2, and 3. Among the Yorubas of Nigeria, *aso-oke* is the traditional fabric weaving that identifies the Yoruba group while *okene* weaves identify people of middle belt of Nigeria. *Akwete* cloth weaving basically done by women identifies the Igbo. In these cottage industries, Nigerians acquire the skills of weaving by apprenticeship.

According to Afigbo and Okeke (1985, p. 8) “the art and crafts of Igboland, especially the traditional textile industry, declined disastrously under colonial impact.... Cotton cultivation and spinning remained in vogue until the late forties”. By 1950, fifty fairly used automated power looms came into Nigeria from Lancashire north-western England and were situated in Kano (Kilby, 1969, p.113). With the presence of the automated looms in Nigeria, the indigenous manually operated Nigerian looms became relegated to the background as weaving on the automated loom took over the textile industry, mass producing in great quantities fabrics that are lighter in weight than the locally woven *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* clothes. Nigerians’ taste and attitude towards indigenous textiles became unfavourable for the indigenous textiles as the

people preferred and went for the fabrics produced from the mechanized looms. In the words of Isichei (1977, p. 273), as she quoted F.M. Dennis (1903, p. 23) “Every woman here weaves cloth from the cotton which grows on the trees in abundance and they do it beautifully, working patterns in, but foreign cloth is much coveted and their own cloth despised...” Thus, the presence of foreign cloth in Nigeria spelt doom for indigenous cloth and its development.

The problem here is that indigenous textile technologies are not upgraded to meet the demand of the indigenes and to produce textiles that can compete foreign textile and fashion products that come into Nigeria. Most of the existing manually operated indigenous looms are designed to weave only one style of fabric of one structure and texture and produces minimally. Thus, the need and call to rescue by upgrading and development, the technology and machinery used to produce indigenous textile weaves and fashion designs of Nigeria. Nigerian engineers and technologists are called on to mechanize the Nigerian indigenous looms. Data for this paper were sourced from newspaper, published books, internet, journal articles, observations and experiences of the researcher. The data assessment adopted here was descriptive and thus employed the qualitative research method of data assessment.



Figure 1: Vertical loom. A woman weaving *akwete* cloth.

©<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/07/akwete-cloth-an-igbo-textile-art/> Retrieved on 6th December, 2019.



Figure 2: Vertical loom. Nupe woman weaving in her home in the central Nigerian town of Bida, 1995. Photo by Duncan Clarke. © <https://www.legit.ng/1098325-textile-industry-nigeria-history.html> Retrieved on 6th December, 2019.



Figure 3: Horizontal Loom. A man weaving *okene* cloth. © Ligom, 2015.

Production Processes of Indigenous Woven Textiles in Nigeria

It is important to note that most of Nigerian indigenous textiles which *akwete* weave is one of them, is usually made of locally and manually processed cotton thread, and the designed motifs on the fabric are woven with cotton threads that are heavier in texture and is also sometimes woven with rayon silk. When the raw cotton fibres are harvested, they undergo some processes that get them ready for use. The processes are **first the ginning process**, whereby the cotton seeds are extracted from the fibres by rolling a rod over the cotton boll. **Secondly, combing process**, is the process whereby shorter fibres and filth are removed to achieve and retain longer, lustrous and stronger fibres. **Thirdly, the spinning process**, whereby the fibres are pulled into threads which is then used to weave. Nigerian local weavers use vegetable dyes to dye the woven cloth, which is often the indigo colour. These processes are carried out manually which consumes time. They are processes that should be done with mechanized machinery for maximum output and use.

Some Capacities of Indigenous Textile and Fashion Design Industries in Nigeria

The indigenous textile and fashion design industries in Nigeria have the capacity of elevating the social and economic status of the local Nigerian weaves which includes the *akwete* fabrics of the Igbo, the *aso-oke* fabrics of the Yoruba and the *okene* weaves of the middle belt people of Nigeria. This can be achieved by changing their current use and fashions into the fashion designs that are currently in demand in the society. The *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* weaves are currently worn only for occasional functions like weddings, to Sunday worship services, traditional coronations of traditional chiefs, *ofala* festivals and other indigenous festivals. The fashions come in the forms of *ojije na ntukwasa* (Igbo women's double wrappers), *buba* and *iro* (Yoruba top and wrapper), *sokoto* (Yoruba trousers), and *agbada* or *babariga* (big traditional Nigerian men's gown).

Today statistics collected from a survey by some sociologists in the persons of O. A. Olutayo and O. Akanle (2009) revealed that the above enumerated fashion designs are not the most frequently worn fashions by members of Nigerian society. The fashion outfits that are commonly worn by Nigerians in Nigeria on a daily basis, come in such outfits as jean trousers, the short knicker varieties, western designs of jackets, skirts and even office gears like military and police uniforms. This set of outfits can be made from Nigerian local weaves like the *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* clothes. For instance, the jean fabric which is a foreign imported fabric that is used to mass produce trousers is a fabric that is practically as thick as the *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* clothes. Thus, just as people wear jean trousers as daily wears, the *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* clothes can also be mass produced, fashioned into trousers and pushed into the Nigerian market to replace jean trousers. Like jean, *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* are thick and thus durable.

The Issues Hindering the Advancement of Indigenous Textile Industries in Nigeria

The weaving technology in indigenous textile industries in Nigeria suffers negligence as the system of weaving in indigenous textile industries in Nigeria is still manual. In this 21st century mechanized machinery should be locally invented and made available for these indigenous weavers. Currently, Nigerian local or cottage textile industries are antiquated by the influx of foreign textiles that have taken over the local markets in Nigeria. In the words of Olakitan (2015),

The President of the National Union of Textiles, Garments and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTWN), Comrade Oladele Hunsu, while commending the Federal Government for the intervention fund set up for the textile industry, noted that financing was just one out of the numerous challenges facing the textile industry. He pointed out that the key problems of the sector remained infrastructural inadequacy, raw materials shortage, unreliable electricity supply, and smuggling, counterfeiting, faking, among others. There is also lack of patronage of made in Nigeria textiles due to lack of effective policy enforcement. Indeed, most government ministries and agencies such as police, customs, immigration and army still prefer to use imported fabrics for uniforms rather than sourcing them locally.

Cotton is the driving energy of the textile industry in Nigeria, but neglect of agriculture on the part of the government brought about significant reduction in cotton production. Enhancement of

production of cotton locally is very necessary in Nigeria because cotton is the major fibre that Nigerian cottage textile weavers make use of.

Prospects of Indigenous Textile and Fashion Design Industries in Nigeria

The Prospects of indigenous textile and fashion design industries in Nigeria being favourable, depends on the attitude of Nigerians and the government of Nigeria towards the textile and fashion design industries in Nigeria. *Akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* weaves of Nigeria are durable and can be used to mass produce trousers instead of importing trousers made of the Jean fabric. However, to mass produce them, will require a lot of money as the mechanism currently involved in the production of *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* clothes is the manual operation of the hand looms. The looms will have to be mechanized in other to engage in mass production that can meet the demand of the teeming populace. The situation calls on the government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) to take up the issue of mechanizing the Nigerian indigenous looms for fast production of *akwete*, *aso-oke*, *okene* and other indigenous weaves of Nigeria. It is also necessary that the government authorities passionately block avenues that allow the influx of foreign textiles into Nigeria. As a very effective publicity strategy, the president of Nigeria, the State governors, senators, other politicians and celebrities in Nigeria, should start dressing in *aso-oke* trendy trousers and jackets to give the indigenous weaves publicity and elevation.

Recommendations

This research recommends that government ministries and agencies such as police, customs, immigration and army should stop the use of imported fabrics for uniform designing and rather source the fabrics for designing of their uniforms locally from *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* materials. Assistance and loans should be made available to Nigerian textile and fashion designers for them to design and mass-produce garments made of locally woven fabrics like *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* fabrics. For such new creations to do well in the market, the government should device means of tightening up the borders so that foreign textiles will no longer be smuggled into Nigeria. In addition to wearing the *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* fabrics as *agbada*, *babariga*, *sokoto*, *buba* and *iro*, they should also be designed into the frequently worn modern trendy trousers, knickers, gowns, jackets and skirts. Just as jean fabric is made into trendy trousers, knickers, jackets, gowns, and skirts, it is also necessary that Nigerian traders stop patronising and buying foreign textiles. The government of Nigeria can organise awards for local Nigerian fashion houses that will start the mass production of *akwete*, *aso-oke* and *okene* trendy trousers, knickers, jackets, gowns, and skirts. This will encourage the fashion designers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has discussed the status of the Nigerian indigenous cottage textile industry and that of the indigenous textile weaves of Nigeria. It discussed some samples of the Nigerian indigenous weave which includes *akwete* cloth of Igbo people, *aso-oke* cloth of Yoruba group and the *okene* cloth of middle belt group of Nigeria. The study disclosed that cotton fibre is the main thread that these indigenous weaves are made of and thus the development of cotton should be top priority of the government. The study revealed that the attitude of Nigerians towards the Nigerian indigenous weaves, have relegated the weaves to the background living them antiquated. The paper thus called on Nigerians and the government of Nigeria to have a change of perception and attitude towards the indigenous textile weaves so as to elevate the social and economic status of the indigenous textile weaves for the betterment of the nation and

for the improvement of Nigerian economy. The study thus made recommendations to that effect. It recommended that the indigenous looms and their components be mechanized for maximum efficiency in production. Thus, called on Nigeria's government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) to work at the upgrading of indigenous textile technology and machinery such as the indigenous looms and their components. The study discussed the possibilities of designing and constructing trendy outfits like trousers, jackets, varieties of knickers, gowns and skirts using the various Nigerian indigenous weaves and mass producing them to replace a foreign textile production like the jean which is very commonly appreciated and worn in Nigerian.

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