

# ANALYSIS OF THE VARIABLES INFLUENCING THE AVAILABILITY OF HAND-WOVEN FABRIC AT OGBO ABADA BRIDGE HEAD FABRIC NICHE MARKET, ONITSHA, ANAMBRA STATE

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## **Abstract**

Africans have traditionally relied on the creation of handcrafted fabrics as a way to identify culturally and to shield their bodies from undesired elements. These fabrics represent many ethnic groups and customs. The handwoven fabric of Nigeria is not merely an art form; it is a language that predates colonialism, preserving the identity and social standing of the various ethnic groups inside the country. Nowadays, people import large quantities of machine-woven fabrics at a lower cost since speed and cost-effectiveness are priorities in our world. Some Nigerian handwoven fabric traditions, like Aso oke, are battling to survive the flood of mass-produced fabric from foreign factories into the Nigerian market, while others, like Akwete and Akwa ocha, are also in grave danger. The lack of hand-woven Akwete and Akwa Ocha fabric at the Ogbo Abada, Bridge Head Fabric Niche Market in Onitsha, Anambra, one of Nigeria's largest Fabric Niche Markets according to study findings, is evidence of this threat. The study aims to investigate the variables influencing the availability of hand-woven textiles in Onitsha, Anambra State's Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Fabric Niche Market. Purposive sample field research was used in this qualitative study. Photographic documentation of hand-woven cloth offered in the market was done, and vendors were questioned to find out the obstacles they face, where they acquire their textiles from, and what customers like. It was found that the majority of hand-woven textiles available on the market are Aso oke, which is derived from southwest Nigeria, and an Akwa ocha variant, which is sourced from Okene in Kogi State. According to the survey, the majority of vendors selling handwoven fabrics are unaware that handwoven fabrics are made in Akwete, Abia State, or even in neighbouring Delta State. Subsequent research revealed that the Akwete and Akwa ocha fabric weavers are unable to meet personal demands because most of the work is done by hand and by a small number of highly trained weavers. The study therefore recommends that the South East governments should set up skill-learning facilities for hand-woven textiles that are outfitted with modern technologies that can improve hand-woven cloth production and increase its appeal to the younger demography.

**Keywords:** *Handwoven, Fabric, Weavers, Pattern, Niche Market.*

## **Introduction**

Textiles have been crucial in fulfilling one of humanity's basic necessities, which is clothing, for centuries. Africans have relied on the manufacturing of handcrafted fabrics as a means of cultural identification and body protection. These fabrics represent various ethnic groups and customs that produce them. One indigenous technology that has endured over time in all of Nigeria's areas is cloth weaving. For example, before the arrival of colonialism, several areas and ethnic groups within the nation practised the craft of fabric weaving. As stated by Ali in

Rakiya and Bello (2020). The people of southwest Nigeria are renowned for their unique hand-woven fabrics, such as Aso-Oke, which are primarily produced in Osun State. The distinctive Akwete cloth, a traditional hand-woven Igbo fabric, is mostly made by Igbo women of Akwete town in Abia State. Another traditional Igbo woven cloth, Akwa-Ocha, is made by the Igbo-speaking Anioma people, who live in Delta State. Additionally, traditional Igbo woven fabrics were made in Udi, Abakaliki, and Nsukka, known as Orii.

However, there is now no active fabric weaving going on in these areas. The Tiv tribe in the North Central region produces Anger woven fabric, while the Idoma tribe in Benue State produces Atu fabric. Okene town in Kogi state is also recognized for producing hand-woven cloth. Before European fabrics were introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Igbo people were provided with cloth for clothing and other purposes by the local cloth-weaving industry. The cloth weaving industry was a vast enterprise that offered employment opportunities to a multitude of individuals. For example, farmers grew large crops of cotton, sisal-hemp, and raffia, which are processed and used for weaving after harvest. The coarse fabric made from raffia was worn by warriors as headgear and by masqueraders. Hemp fibre was utilized for the weaving of handbags, towels or ropes used for numerous purposes. Spun cotton yarns with a more comfortable feel were used for the wearable apparel.

However foreign imported fabrics dominate the market now and the traditional heritage of cloth weaving in Igbo land is gradually being displaced. This is not because the demand for the hand woven fabric is not high, but because the few weavers are not able to meet up with the market demand. Osuyi (2019) citing Christiana Oleh one of the trainees at Issele-Uku undergoing training in the production of Akwa Ocha, states that “the demand for woven fabric is high but the producers are few.” This makes it difficult for the weavers to meet up with the high demand. It was further observed that the producers of these woven fabrics are getting older and the younger generation is not eager to go into the business of cloth weaving, because of its tedious and time-consuming nature. There is a likelihood that if nothing is done to make it more attractive to the youth, this aspect of our cultural heritage could go into extinction.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The interest to undertake this research was roused due to the researcher’s experience during a visit to Ogbo-Abada Fabric Niche Market, Onitsha seeking Akwete woven fabric. Surprisingly, it was observed that woven fabrics from other regions of Nigeria particularly woven fabric from the western region popularly known as Aso oke are prevalent in the market. Whereas woven fabrics such as Akwete and Akwa-ocha from the eastern region of the country despite their cultural significance to the Igbo people, are not readily available. Being a textile designer who knows that there are still few cloth weaving centres in the southeastern region of the country, the researcher became curious to know why woven fabrics from the eastern region of the country were scarce in a big market such as Ogbo-Abada Bridge Head Niche Market, Onitsha which is reputed to be one of the biggest textile markets in Nigeria.

In view of this problem, the aim of this research is to investigate the variables influencing the availability of hand-woven fabrics in the *Ogbo Abada* Head Bridge market in Onitsha.

### **Aim and Objectives of the study**

The aim was accomplished by achieving the following objectives:

1. Identifying the types of hand-woven fabrics available in the Ogbo Abada Head Bridge market as well as photographic documentation of the various hand-woven fabrics sold in the market, their material, designs and patterns.
2. Examining the variables influencing the availability of hand-woven fabrics at Ogbo-Abada Market Onitsha. This involves analyzing customer's demands, preferences, and cultural significance.
3. Identifying the challenges faced by sellers of hand-woven fabrics in Onitsha. This involved examining the difficulties encountered by vendors such as accessibility to products, pricing and competition.
4. Highlighting the significance of hand-woven fabrics in maintaining the cultural traditions and identity of the southeastern states.
5. Providing recommendations for promoting hand-woven fabrics of southeast origin at Ogbo-Abada Market Onitsha. Based on the findings suggest strategies for enhancing the visibility, sales and sustainability of hand-woven fabrics of southeast origin in the market.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study provides an in-depth understanding of the occurrence and characteristics of hand-woven fabric at Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Market, Onitsha. This information is vital for the consumers seeking for hand woven fabrics as well as the weavers of hand-woven fabric in the Southeastern part of Nigeria, who will now know that there is a need for increased visibility and the expansion of the production of hand-woven fabrics in eastern Nigeria origin to meet the huge potential market demand and also project our cultural heritage to the rest of the country.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative research with a focus on a case study of Ogbo Abada Head Bridge Fabric Niche Market, Onitsha. The study used personal observation, photographic documentation, and interviews to gain an in-depth knowledge of the types of hand-woven fabric available in Ogbo Abada Market, Onitsha. A descriptive research approach was also adopted in describing the availability and characteristics of hand-woven fabrics found at Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Fabric Niche Market Onitsha.

### **Types of hand-woven fabrics available in Ogbo Abada Head Bridge Fabric Niche market Onitsha**



Plate 1: Akwa ocha variation woven fabric Source: (Okeke, 2024)

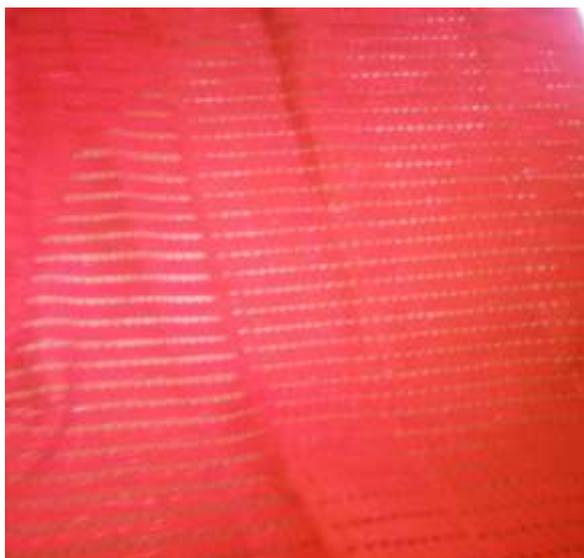


Plate 2: Akwa-ocha variation woven fabric  
Source: (Okeke, 2024)



Plate 3: Stripped pattern Aso oke woven fabric  
Source: (Okeke, 2024)



Plate 4: Stripped pattern Aso oke woven fabric  
Source: (Okeke, 2024)



Plate 5: Machine-woven imported pattern fabric similar to Akwete cloth  
Source: (Okeke 2024)



Plate 6: Machine-woven imported pattern fabric similar to Akwete cloth  
Source: (Okeke 2024)



Plate 7: Machine-woven imported pattern fabric similar to Akwete cloth  
Source: (Okeke 2024)



Plate 8: Machine-woven imported pattern fabric similar to Akwete cloth. Source: (Okeke 2024)



Plate 9: Shelf with assorted types of hand-woven fabrics  
Source: (Okeke, 2024)

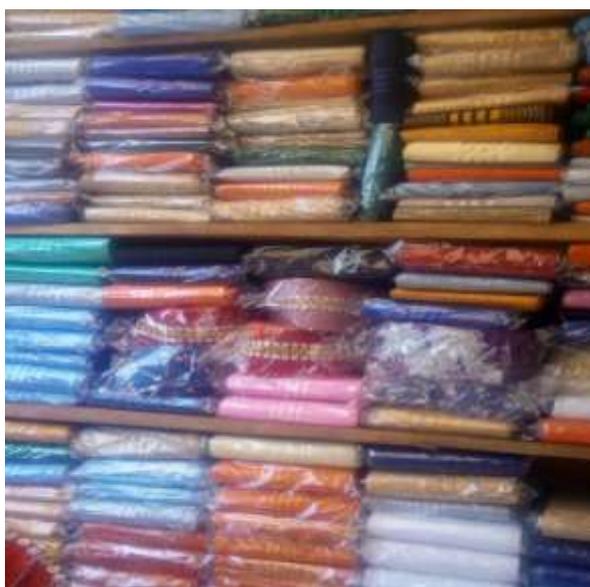


Plate 10: Shelf with assorted types of hand-woven fabrics. Source: (Okeke, 2024)



Plate 11: The researcher at one of the shops for hand-woven fabric

### **Factors that influence the type of hand-woven fabrics available at Ogbo- Abada Bridge-Head Fabric Niche Market Onitsha**

According to Nneka Ozumba (personal communication 22/06/2024) a dealer on assorted types of hand-woven fabric at Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Niche Market, Onitsha, customers demand the aso-oke brand of woven fabrics mostly for use as head gears. This necessitated the availability of the woven fabrics in small strips of about five inches' width as can be seen in the packs arranged on the shelves in the market. These small pieces known as aso-oke are mostly sourced from the southwestern part of Nigeria and some parts of north-central states such as Kogi, Kwara and Benue see Plate 3 and 4. She however stated that some people demand for these woven fabrics to be used as wrappers. People from Delta State mostly demand what she called Akwa Ocha plates 1 and 2 but often the pure white version which they use for special ceremonies. Mrs Ozumba said they order the *Akwa Ocha* brand of hand-woven fabrics mostly from Okene weavers in Kogi state.

I sought to know why it is called *Akwa Ocha* when the colour is not white and she said that the fabric is similar to *Akwa Ocha* in pattern and style though it comes in different colours. *Akwa Ocha* is a popular hand-woven fabric that is associated with the Anioma people of Delta State which is mainly the Igbo-speaking part of Delta state. Akwa ocha which means white cloth has cultural significance among the Anioma people, it signifies purity and therefore traditionally white. It is not an everyday cloth but is mostly used as ceremonial cloth (Osuyi,2019). The commercialization of this indigenous craft has led to innovations that birthed *Akwa Ocha* which comes in different colours, customized to suit the taste of the

wearers. This innovation also gave rise to the introduction of motifs and symbols such as man-made objects, geometric shapes, plants and animals to the previously plain *Akwa Ocha*.

Mama Kosy of De Light Line (Personal communication 22/06/2024) also confirmed that most of their woven fabric is obtained from the southwestern part of the country. She also averred that most customers because of the expensive nature of the hand-woven fabric, demand small strips they use mainly for head gears. It comes in strips of 8 yards per pack which can be used by two people as headgear and a smaller piece that can be hung on the shoulder.

Inquiries about Akwete woven fabrics took me to Mrs Nwanga who is said to be the sole dealer of Akwete woven fabric at Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Niche Market, Onitsha that she is also known as Nwanyi Akwete. I discovered however that what she trades on is a woven imported fabric that has similar patterns to Akwete cloth (see plate 5 and plate 8). According to certain documents, Dada Nwakata, the highly renowned creator of the elaborate weft patterns on Akwete cloths, was inspired to weave new styles of Akwete designs after unravelling threads from open-woven cloth that the Portuguese had brought to their region between the 14th and 16th centuries. The Akwete people were also noted to have been more innovative and open to change and innovation after their interactions with Europeans, which contributed to the revival of their cloth-weaving tradition (Bolatito, 2021).

The various patterns, designs, and motifs found in the imported fabrics from Europe are what the Akwete weavers used and adapted to create their unique designs. As a result, the market grew and the quality, patterns, and designs improved (Bolatito, 2021). This may explain why the pattern of the imported machine-woven cloth and the hand-woven Akwete fabric are so similar. Mrs Nwanga (Personal communication 22/06/2024) stated that the fabrics she trades on which is known as Akwete Cloth in the niche market are imported from India and pieces that can be used for a set of wrappers cost between twelve to thirteen thousand naira. The imported machine-woven cloth is less expensive than its hand-woven counterpart, which may be underestimated in a society where efficiency and speed are valued above all else. But the mass-produced fabric cannot equal the unrealized potential, depth of narrative, complexity of texture, and connection to the human spirit that is associated with the hand-woven fabric. Mrs Nwanga was astonished to hear that the hand-woven version of these types of fabrics is made in south eastern part of Nigeria as well as some south-south states like Delta.

### **Challenges faced by sellers of hand-woven fabrics in Onitsha.**

Mama Kosy De-Light Line (Personal communication 14/09/2024) stated that one of the major challenges they face is accessibility and limited opportunity to place a specific order. This is because most of the *Aso Oke* fabrics are transported down to Onitsha from Lagos. The dealers place orders according to colour more often than design. And for consignments worth up to five hundred thousand naira, if you can pay from three to three fifty thousand naira into the account of the middleman, the consignment will be way billed down to Onitsha. The balance of the money is paid up later, in some cases the middleman comes down to Onitsha to collect the balance of payment. Mr Ozumba (Personal communication 14/09/2024) on the other hand stated that he gets his supply of hand-woven fabric from Okene in Kogi State. Previously he goes there himself to select and buy, but these days because of insecurity he relies on waybill to get his stock. On the price, he said that *Akwa Ocha* pack that comes as 5 rolls in 1 pack which is enough for two wrappers and one head tie sells for thirty thousand naira. He however said that the prices are not stable, partly because of incessant increases in the pump price of petrol, which affects the cost of production as well as transportation. Mr Ozumba also said that their sales return per day is not as high as those of traders dealing in

factory-manufactured fabric. This could be due to the expensive nature of hand-woven fabric compared to factory-manufactured fabric in the niche market.

### **Significance of hand-woven fabrics in preserving cultural heritage and identity of the Southeast region**

People's choice of clothes once depended on their location and cultural backgrounds, even before brands like Levi's and H&M took over the fashion industry. This is a result of the unique clothing styles and diverse production methods seen in many parts of the world (Okare,2020). Nigerian states and regions all have distinctive fabric-weaving traditions. Aso-Oke in Osun, Akwa-Akwete in Abia, Akwa-Ocha in Delta, Anger cloth in Benue, and Okene cloth in Kogi are a few examples. One of the key cultural artefacts that represent Nigeria's cultural legacy to the outside world is handwoven cloth. Cloth weavers who engage in weaving with different types of looms are found in almost all the regions of Nigeria and they provided clothing for the inhabitants of Nigeria before colonialism. Most of them earn a living by weaving and trading on woven fabrics.

However, things are evolving. The cost of the materials needed for production is making it harder for the weavers to stay in business. The rise in machine-woven fabrics, which are frequently produced at a lower cost, has resulted in a decrease in the production and demand for locally made-hand-woven fabrics. According to Rakiya and Bello (2020), modernization and technical advancements led to a significant drop in productivity, quality, and consumer demand for traditional handcrafted textile items, which ultimately resulted in the extinction of some of them. The study reviews the process of converting cotton, silk and other fibres into various yarns for cloth weaving. It was also observed that traditional spinning in Nigeria is almost nonexistent and this has compounded the problem of the few remaining weavers because they have to depend on imported yarns for their weaving, making the fabrics to be more expensive.

While examining the craft of cloth weaving, Rakiya and Bello (2020) citing Yakubu and Suleiman pointed out that a great variety of weaving techniques were independently developed by different groups in Nigeria and were not borrowed from outside the country. Although some communities might have observed and gained some techniques from others within the country. This buttresses the fact that cloth weaving is an indigenous craft. The traditional woven fabrics that have managed to survive the impacts of the influx of machine-woven fabrics are Akwete, Akwa ocha, *Aso oke*, Okene cloth, and the anger cloth. The Onitsha Bridge Head Niche Market situated in the southeastern part of Nigeria is reputed to be one of the biggest fabric Niche Market in Nigeria. It is surprising to note that while there are still few weavers of Akwete fabric in the southeastern part as well as Akwa ocha weavers in some parts of Delta state, hand-woven fabrics dealer at Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Niche Market Onitsha had to depend on the southwestern and north-central part for their supplies. Some of the hand-woven fabric dealers were even surprised to learn that there are cloth weaving centres in the south east and south south part of the country.

Osuyi, (2019) citing Ogoegbunem states that Akwa Ocha is part and parcel of the culture of Aniocha/ Oshimili people of Delta state, also referred to as Enuani people. The weaving skill was, handed over to them by their forefathers. Male and female are involved in the different stages that culminates to cloth weaving. For instance, the male plants and harvest the cotton while the female cleans and spins the cotton into yarns and also does the weaving on a loom. Mr Ubaka A native of Ubulu Uku stated that the original Akwa Ocha is distinguished from other hand-woven fabric from other parts of the country because it is entirely white, and its cultural significance is purity.

Previously a bride going to her husband's house on the first night is given a yard of Akwa ocha which is expected to be returned to the parent of the bride with stains of blood after the first night of mating as a testimony of her good upbringing. Akwa Ocha is considered one of the most important two-dimensional art forms in Nigeria. It is not everyday clothing but reserved for special occasions. Osuyi, (2019) citing Emeka Mgbodo a native of Asaba, states that Anioma people of Delta state also use Akwa Ocha as a gift to people they consider as important visitors to their area. In this way, they showcase their cultural heritage to the rest of the world.

In like manner, in the olden days, Akwete fabrics with certain motifs such as the "tortoise" motif (*ikaki*) means were identity and status symbols because they were reserved for the royal families only because the tortoise was considered wise and cunning. Punishment awaits anyone outside the royal family who is seen weaving this particular pattern of Akwete cloth. Another design known as the *ebe* design is specially reserved for pregnant women or warriors which they use as protective talismans. A particular pattern known as *Ogbanaonweya* is mostly worn by people from the Akwete community in Abia state. However, the modern Akwete weavers learnt to incorporate new motifs such as the Nigerian coat of arms, Nigerian flag, and logo of FESTAC as designs on their fabrics thereby extending the acceptance of their fabrics by people from other regions. (Bolaito, 2021). Patronage of Akwete cloth comes mostly from Igbo and Ijo people which they use for tittle-taking and other ceremonies. Tourists also buy Akwete cloth as souvenirs which helps in projecting our cultural heritage to the rest of the world.

### **Recommendations on strategies for enhancing the visibility, sales and sustainability of Akwete and Akwa ocha hand-woven fabrics at Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Niche Market, Onitsha**

One of the reasons why young people may not be interested in learning the skill of weaving Akwa ocha or Akwete cloth is because it involves a lot of manual processes that are laborious and time-consuming. According to Osuyi, (2019) citing one of the weavers, the manual processes take up to two weeks to produce a wrapper that is two yards (four pieces), this could be quite discouraging. But with the introduction of modern technology, it takes only one week. As the remaining hand-woven fabric weavers are getting old, they need to be replaced by a younger generation in order not to allow this aspect of our cultural heritage to go into extinction.

Currently, the weavers are few and the demand is high. The weavers find it difficult to cope with people who place individual orders, so there is no surplus left to be sold in the open market. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to see the hand-woven Akwete cloth or Akwa ocha cloth at Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Niche Market, Onitsha.

To make this venture attractive to the youths, the State Government in the south-east can set up a skill acquisition centre with modern technology, that will enhance the production of hand-woven fabrics. This may attract the interest of the younger generation in learning the skill of cloth weaving. It will also increase their output so that weavers can satisfy the customers who place individual orders as well as middlemen who will help them in marketing the products.

These hand-woven fabrics are quite expensive and might not be reachable to all individuals who might want to own one, but to encourage the weavers to stay afloat, other governors of the southeast and state legislators can emulate the governor of Anambra state Prof. Chukwuma Soludo who is increasing the visibility of Akwete woven fabric by making it his signature wear. By celebrating and promoting Akwete and Akwa ocha hand-woven fabrics,

we can help preserve this aspect of our cultural heritage, support the local economy, and empower the weaving communities to derive maximum benefit from their creative potential.

### **Conclusion**

The results clearly show that Igbo land's traditional fabric weaving heritage is slowly disappearing. The absence of hand-woven Akwete or Akwa-Ocha fabric at Ogbo Abada Bridge Head Niche Market in Onitsha serves as proof of this. The majority of sellers are unaware that there are fabric weaving centres in the southeast region of Nigeria, which is another unpleasant finding. It's crucial that this component of our tradition doesn't go because the hand-woven fabric is still in high demand and is used as ceremonial attire for weddings, birthday parties, and title taking, among other occasions. The small number of cloth weavers in existence are ageing, and because the craft is laborious and time-consuming, young people are not interested in learning it. If the remaining textile weavers receive financial support and incentives, it may help them buy new machinery that will allow them to increase their output and continue serving the clients who place individual orders. Taking the excess to the market would increase the fabric's visibility. Modern technology replacing manual ones could also make learning how to weave clothes more appealing to young people.

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