

Chapter Five:

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY FASHION DESIGNERS IN OKO METROPOLIS WITH REGARDS TO INDIGENOUS FABRICS

Contributed by

Onyejekwe Rosemary Ebele

Chika Chudi-Duru, PhD

Introduction

Since time immemorial, Nigerians have engaged in textile and fashion designing. Fashion designers are professionals who create concepts of new and trending styles. Build real life prototypes of these designs and prepare the final garments. The fashion industry is one of the fastest-growing industries in Africa, with a significant reliance on indigenous fabrics such as AsoOke, Adire, and Ankara. These fabrics have historical and cultural significance, playing a crucial role in defining Nigerian identity and fashion aesthetics. However, despite their importance, fashion designers in Nigeria face several challenges in working with indigenous fabrics. These challenges range from production constraints to limited consumer acceptance, affecting their ability to compete both locally and internationally. Oko is a small town situated in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State. It has built up some designers as a result of the fashion department sector of the polytechnic. But these designers are facing some challenges in respect to our indigenous fabrics.

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. Among the Yorubas of Nigeria, aso-oke is the traditional fabric weaving that identifies the Yoruba group while okene weaves identify people of the middle belt of Nigeria. Akwete cloth weaving done by women identifies the Igbo. In these cottage industries, Nigerians acquire the skills of weaving by apprenticeship (Olutayo and Akanle, 2009).

According to Afigbo and Okeke (2005) "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). 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 mechanized looms. In the words of Dennis (1903) cited in Isichei (1976), "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 cloth despised...." Thus, the presence of foreign cloth in Nigeria spelled doom for indigenous cloth and its development.

Fashion is the continuous change in the way of living, and dressing that is generally accepted by a large group of people at a particular place and period. This change re-occurs in the industry. Sometimes, casual attire is commonly worn but formal and traditional styles are also worn depending on the occasion. Clothing incorporates a variety of colours, fabrics, and embellishments, accessories such as bags, shower cap (Steele and Major, 2023).



Plate 1: Composition of Fashion accessories. *By Onyejekwe Rosemary Ebele*

This write-up examines the challenges faced by fashion designers in Oko regarding indigenous fabrics and explores possible solutions to enhance their sustainability and global competitiveness

Statement of the Problem

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 with foreign textile and fashion products that come into Nigeria. Thus, fashion designers do not enjoy the luxury of demand they get from foreign fabrics when compared to indigenous ones in the creation of their outfits. This calls for awareness and improvement in the production and usage in outfits. Hence, the need to address the matter to enable our designers boost up their trade.

Objectives

Fashion is in for a difficult year with forecasts and prediction showing a global slowdown as economic pressure grows. Thus, budget as the cost of living rises, sky-high inflation, weighing heavily on brands and intensified concern around issues such as sustainability, inclusivity, fair pay, and good working conditions, businesses cannot afford to let their guard down. This research aim to look at challenges encountered by fashion designers in Oko metropolis with regard to indigenous fabric.

Literature Review

Indigenous Fabric

The Nigerian textile sector in the past was the largest employer of labour after the government and had always been a major player in the manufacturing sector of the economy as it employed over one million Nigerians. It was also a major consumer of a high percentage of local raw materials such as cotton. As far back as 900 years AD or even earlier, Nigerians have engaged in textile and fashion designing. Pieces of cloth woven in different techniques were recovered at the Igbo-Ukwu excavations that took place in 1959 and 1964 respectively by archaeologist Thurstan Shaw (Isichei, 1976). Having gone through magazines, some indigenous fabrics are not produced. They are going into extinction. These fabrics include Adire, AsoOke, Akwa Ocha, Akwete to mention but a few. Adire is a common cloth made by the people of South Western Nigeria using the resist dyeing technique. Akwete and Aso-oke are two similar cloths that are native to Nigeria. They are similar in style but they are indigenous to different ethnic groups. Akwete is traditionally made of a coarse hemp material and woven by Igbo women. Nigeria usually dresses casually because of the hot climates. Traditional garments worn in Nigeria include Agbada worn by Yorubas. The Hausa wear Babaringa and Isiagu worn by Igbo men. The Edo also traditionally used fine beads with raffia work (Abiodun, 2010).

Conversations about Nigeria's fashion industry tend to focus on the luxury and mid-market segments ignoring thousands of value brands representing a large volume of the industry. This value segment serves by far the largest number of people, and though they may be lesser-known than their premium rivals, brands like 21 Attire and Canill, who manufacture and sell thousands of units a month, have proven this to be true (Olalatan, 2015).

Challenges Encountered by Fashion Designers

The fashion industry in Oko suffers from a shortage of capital and quality human resources. The Indigenous fabrics have suffered immensely; the cost of production, and the weavers are still operating with local loom whereas there should be modern technology to help the youths.

According to Akinsola (2022), below are a list of challenges encountered by fashion designers in Oko:

Sourcing and Availability of Indigenous Fabrics: One of the primary challenges designers face is the difficulty in sourcing high-quality indigenous fabrics. Many fabrics are still produced using traditional, labor-intensive methods, limiting mass production and consistency in supply. Additionally, rural production hubs make access challenging, increasing transportation costs and delays.

High Cost of Production: The production of indigenous fabrics often involves manual labor, natural dyeing techniques, and intricate weaving processes, making them expensive. The cost of raw materials, particularly cotton, silk, and natural dyes, continues to rise, leading to higher prices for the final products.

Limited Technological Advancement: The lack of modernization in the indigenous fabric industry poses a significant challenge. Many traditional weavers and dyers still use outdated techniques, making it difficult for designers to scale production and meet large market demands.

Quality Control Issues: Due to inconsistent weaving and dyeing techniques, the quality of indigenous fabrics varies significantly. Designers struggle with defects such as uneven dye application, weak fiber strength, and shrinkage after washing, affecting the final design and customer satisfaction.

Competition with Imported Fabrics: The local market is flooded with cheaper, mass-produced fabrics from China, India, and Europe, which are often preferred by consumers due to

affordability. These imported textiles often imitate indigenous designs, further reducing the demand for locally produced fabrics.

Lack of Government Support and Policies: Despite the economic potential of the textile industry, government policies supporting indigenous fabric production and usage remain weak. The lack of funding, grants, and textile industry regulations hinders growth.

Low Consumer Awareness and Patronage: Many residents prefer foreign-made fabrics over local textiles due to perceptions of prestige, affordability, and durability. This makes it difficult for designers to market indigenous fabrics successfully.

Counterfeiting and Imitation Fabrics: Fake versions of indigenous fabrics, such as machine-printed Adire and synthetic Ankara, flood the market, reducing the perceived value of authentic handmade fabrics.

Lack of Proper Training and Education: Many fashion designers lack the technical knowledge needed to handle indigenous fabrics properly, leading to limited innovation and creativity.

Inconsistent Fabric Quality and Availability: The lack of industrial-scale production means that designers cannot always get consistent fabric quality or supply, making large-scale production difficult.

Difficulty in Standardizing Production Processes: The handmade nature of indigenous fabrics leads to variations in texture, patterns, and durability, making it difficult to standardize products for mass production.

Marketing and Branding Difficulties: Many indigenous fabric producers and designers struggle with branding and marketing their products effectively, limiting their reach to international markets.

Some Capacities of Indigenous Fabrics and Fashion Designers.

The indigenous fabrics and fashion designers in Oko have the capacity of elevating the social and economic status of the local Nigeria weaves which include Akwete fabrics of the Igbo. The Asooke fabrics of the Yoruba and Okene weaves are currently worn only for occasional purposes like weddings, Sunday worship services, traditional coronations of traditional chiefs, ofala festivals, and other indigenous festivals. The fashions come in the forms of "Ojijenantukwasa" (Igbo woman's double wrappers) "buba and iro" (Yoruba top and wrappers) Sokoto (Yoruba trousers) and agbada or babariga (big traditional Nigeria men's gown). Today statistics collected from a survey by some sociologists in the persons of Ohitayo and Akanle (2009) cited in Akinsola (2022) 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 on a daily basis, come in such outfits as jeans trousers, the knicker varieties, western designs of jackets, skirts, and oven office gear like military and police uniforms. This set of outfits can be made from Nigerian local weaves like the akwete, aso-oke, okene clothes adire. For instance, the jeans fabric is a foreign imported fabric that is used to mass produce trousers is a fabric that is practically as thick as the akwete, asooke, and okene weave (Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi, 2012).

Thus, just as people wear jean trousers as daily wears, the akweteasooke and okene clothes can also be mass-produced, fashioned into trousers, and pushed into the Nigeria market to replace jean trousers like jean, akwete, aso-oke and okene are thick and thus durable.

The Issues hindering the advancement of indigenous fabrics in Nigeria.

The weaving technology in Indigenous fabrics in Nigeria suffers negligence as the system of weaving in Indigenous fabrics is still manual in the 21st century mechanized machinery should be locally invented and made available for these Indigenous weavers. Currently, Nigerian local or cottage fabrics are antiquated because of the influx of foreign textiles that have taken over the local markets in Nigeria (Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi, 2012). Cotton is the driving energy of the textile industry in Nigeria, but neglect of agriculture on the part of the government brought about a significant reduction in cotton production. Enhancement of the production of cotton locally is very necessary for Nigeria because cotton is the major fiber that Nigeria's cottage fabric makes use of daily (Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi, 2012).

Methodology

Design and area of the study; the research design was through the use of interview. The area was in Oko in Anambra State of Nigeria. Population for the study: The population comprised of nine fashion design houses. The following are the sampled fashion houses; Divine Fashion and Style Outfit, N and G Fashion, Signature Fashion, Danny Casual, Asherfin Fashion, Dove Outfit, Kalapee Fashion and Mimi's World Fashion. They were selected from the core areas of fashion production in Oko.

Findings

The researcher interviewed 9 fashion designers. During the interaction with the fashion designers in Oko metropolis it was deduced from the responses of the designers that they design with indigenous fabric mostly isi-agu and sometimes aso-oke. The fabrics were usually sourced from Ariara market, Aba and Onitsha main market.

It was found from their responses that people often request for isi-agu fabric for their traditional marriage and chieftaincy title. As regards their cost, it was ascertained that were often purchased at exorbitant costs and were not easily found in many local market. Also, some fabric like aso-oke has the single format so the yardage is not favourable in cutting and designing.

When asked which type of fabric they preferred between the local and foreign ones, many chose the foreign ones because the indigenous fabrics frays and are poorly produced. It was found that the foreign fabrics last longer and does not wash. Some preferred the indigenous fabric because it promotes our culture; people acknowledge it more for traditional occasions. They expressed that people attribute respect to the outfit with the indigenous fabric. They also preferred the indigenous fabric because it is a good way of identifying the tribe of whoever wears them and the personality of the person.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has discussed the status of the Nigerian indigenous cottage fabric. It discussed some samples of the Nigerian Indigenous weave, which include akwete cloth of the Igbo people, aso-oke of the Yoruba group, and the okene cloth of the middle belt group of Nigeria. The study disclosed that cotton fibre is the main thread that these indigenous weaves are made of, the development of cotton should be the top priority of the government. The study revealed that the attitude of Nigerians towards the Nigerian indigenous weaves has relegated the weaves to the background, leaving 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 to elevate the social and economic status of the indigenous fabric for the betterment of the nation.

If the Nigerian government takes the initiative by providing a more suitable environment for fashion and textile businesses to thrive, it could be a way to rebuild the once-thriving industries on a national scale. Decades ago, the country had a relatively booming textile sector, but like most other areas, progress died down with the oil boom, coupled with the Chinese takeover. Reviving the sector is possible, particularly by introducing new policies and improving credit solutions to creative industries.

Recommendations

This research recommends that the government, ministries, and agencies such as the police, customs, immigration, and the army should stop the use of imported fabrics for designing their uniforms; locally, Akwete, Aso-oke, and Okene materials should be used instead.

Assistance and loans should be made available to local textile and fashion designers for them to design and mass-produce garments made of locally woven fabrics like akwete, aso-oke, and okene fabrics.

In addition to weaving the akwete, aso-oke, and okene fabrics such as agbada, babariga, Sokoto, jackets, and shirts is also necessary that Nigerian traders should patronize and stop buying foreign textiles. The Nigerian government can organize awards for local 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 designer.

To overcome these challenges, the government through the Nigerian Ministry of Industries, trade and investment, can grant loans to up-growing designers who want to engage in the production of indigenous outfits. Government support can be vital in securing the confidence of Nigerian investors. Also, technology is paving the way to a more sustainable future for fashion. To ensure all factories have good infrastructures, machines of all kinds to enable productivity, and good sources of power supply with solar systems to ease electricity challenges can be resolved. If the quality of the indigenous fabrics is standard there will be high demand for our products. This is because the fashion supply chain involves a highly fragmented network of manufacturers, suppliers, retailers, and consumers. In the industry diversity and inclusivity are crucial.

REFERENCES

- Abiodun, R. (2010). *Yoruba in Nigeria and Diaspora Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Africa*: 21(2): 297-304
- Afigbo, A., & Okeke, C. (2005). Weaving tradition in Igboland: History and mechanism of Igbo textile industry. Nigeria magazine, Lagos: Nigeria, Department of Culture, Federal Ministry of Information, Social Development, Youth Sports and Culture.
- Akinsola, W. (2022). The state of Nigeria's Fashion Industry. *STEARS NIGERIA*. <https://www.stears.co/article/the-state-of-nigerias-fashion-industry>. Retrieved October 30, 2023.
- Akinsola, W. (2022). The state of Nigeria's fashion Industry. *Stears* <https://www.stears.co/article/the-state-of-nigerias-fashion-industry/>. Retrieved 24 August 2023.
- Isichei E. (1976). *A history of the Igbo people*. London Macmillan.

- Kilby, P. (1969). *Industrialization in an open economy 1945-1966*. London: Cambridge University Press
- Nwachukwu M. &Ibeabuchi A.O (2012). *Igbo TextileArt*. Retrieved from <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/07/cloth-anigbo-textile-at/on6thDecember2023>.
- Olalatan Y. (2015). *Nigeria's Troubled Textile Industry*. Retrieved from <http://yemiolalatan.blogspot.com.ng> on 3rd December 2023.
- Olutayo, A.O. &Akanle, A. (2009). Aso-oke (Yoruba's hand-woven textiles) usage among the youths in Lagos, South-western Nigeria. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 1 (3):062-069.
- Steele, V. and Major, J.S. (2023). *Fashion industry*. Boston: Pearson