

A DEEP DIVE: AKWETE-IGBO WOVEN MOTIF DESIGN SYMBOLS

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Abstract

Akwete, an Igbo woven cloth, is one of the most distinctive textile traditions in Africa, widely recognized for its intricate motif systems. Far beyond mere decoration, the symbols embedded in Akwete fabrics express Igbo philosophy, belief systems, and historical memory. Produced by generations of women weavers, these motifs carry layered meanings, enabling weavers to communicate specific ideas, values, and narratives through their work. They depict human and animal behavior, historical events, geometric patterns, and botanical forms, all rendered in abstract yet purposeful compositions that convey complex cultural messages. This paper investigates the origins of these motifs, arguing that most possess traceable sources and definable histories. It systematically examines the symbols and naming practices employed by women weavers, both historically and in contemporary contexts, with particular attention to borrowed and adapted designs. Using participant observation and a historical lens, the study documents how external patterns have been incorporated into the Akwete weaving tradition, thereby enriching and expanding its visual vocabulary. In doing so, the paper identifies and analyzes three distinct categories of Akwete cloth, each defined by its decorative motifs and weaving techniques. Beyond questions of origin and typology, the study also establishes the cultural significance of these motifs and how they function within Igbo society, including the contexts in which they are used and the occasions they signify. The findings show that Akwete motifs are not static relics but dynamic design systems that continually absorb new influences and ideas. The paper concludes by suggesting that extending the application of these motifs beyond textiles into other design fields may serve as a viable strategy for ensuring their long-term sustainability and cultural relevance.

Key words: Symbols, Igbo Woven Symbols, Akwete Woven Fabric, Modern Transformation

Introduction

An object, word, or image that stands in for something else is a symbol, typically an abstract idea or concept regardless of whether a direct or logical relationship exists between the two. Symbolism, therefore, is the practice of using concrete things to represent abstract meanings. Schultz and Robert (2009) established that symbols form the very foundation of culture. They manifest in diverse forms such as objects, figures, sounds, and colours, and carry meanings that vary across individuals and communities. This variability makes it impossible to predict with certainty how any given culture will choose to symbolize a particular idea. While some symbols emerge from personal experience, others are deeply rooted in collective cultural tradition.

In African societies, symbols have long served as powerful vehicles for expressing cultural ideas across art and design. In Nigeria, the diverse ethnic groups possess distinct symbolic traditions that artists and designers have drawn upon to adorn and produce a wide range of objects and surfaces. These symbols are rendered through multiple mediums, they could be written, drawn, painted, tattooed, embroidered, sewn, carved, woven, printed, dyed, or sculpted on different surfaces, each carrying specific meanings. Crucially, these symbols are best understood and interpreted within the cultural context that produced them; outside that context, their significance risks being lost or misread.

Millar (2011), affirming the position of Schultz and Robert (2009), observed that symbolic representations that identify and articulate cultural ethos remain very much alive in contemporary societies. The Akwete woven symbols of the Igbo stand as a compelling example. Woven directly into the fabric, these symbols give visible form to Igbo ideologies and belief systems. They carry emotional resonance and serve as essential keys to understanding the Igbo worldview. Every symbolic motif on Akwete cloth holds a story or stands for something useful to the Igbo, a narrative encoded in thread and pattern. Anthropologist Victor Turner, in Millar (2011), argued that symbols are not merely passive containers of meaning; through their active use, they generate meaning, deepen understanding, and build solidarity within communities. He further noted that symbols are not fixed or immutable, they evolve across time, shaped by cultural adaptation, shifting contexts, and the ongoing human need to sustain relevance and purpose.

Statement of the problem

The Akwete woven cloth of the Igbo people stands as one of Nigeria's most distinguished textile traditions, celebrated for its intricate motif symbols that encode centuries of Igbo philosophy, history, and cultural identity. Despite its remarkable depth and heritage value, this tradition faces a constellation of serious and interrelated problems that threaten its survival, scholarly understanding, and contemporary relevance. It is these problems that

this study sets out to interrogate and address. There exists a gap in the documentation and scholarly analysis of the Akwete woven motif symbols and their names. Although the weavers themselves claim to know over a hundred different motifs (Lamb and Holmes, 1980; Davis, 1974, Chudi-Duru, 2017), the origins, meanings, classifications, and cultural contexts of a large proportion of these motifs remain insufficiently documented. Weaving techniques and motifs are monopolized by individual weavers, severely limiting knowledge transfer and cultural sustainability (Chudi-Duru, 2021). Certain motifs are treated as divine revelations, with ownership dying with the weaver, making it impossible for other weavers to reproduce them and causing irreplaceable knowledge to be permanently lost (Ikegwuonu, 1999). Despite the richness and versatility of the Akwete motif design vocabulary, its application remains largely confined to the woven cloth itself. Akwete woven fabrics are not frequently utilized in the contemporary fashion scene in the way comparable indigenous textiles are (Chudi-Duru, 2017& Chudi-Duru, 2025), and the broader potential of these motif symbols in graphic design, product design, digital art, branding, interior decoration, and other creative industries remains almost entirely unexplored and unexploited. This underutilization not only limits the economic potential of the tradition but also restricts the visibility and reach of these symbols in contemporary culture. The cultural significance of the Akwete motif symbols is increasingly at risk of being misunderstood, diluted, or entirely lost, particularly as external influences from Indian Madras, George fabric, and some weaving traditions continue to shape and alter the design landscape of Akwete cloth. While cultural borrowing and adaptation are natural and even productive processes, the absence of a clear framework for understanding which motifs are indigenous and which are borrowed, and how the borrowed ones have been transformed, creates confusion about the authentic identity and cultural boundaries of the Akwete design tradition.

It is against this backdrop of inadequate documentation, endangered knowledge transfer, limited design application, and threatened cultural identity that this study becomes both necessary and urgent. By tracing the origins of the Akwete motif symbols, classifying their types and establishing their cultural significance, this study aims to fill critical gaps in knowledge and provide a foundation for the preservation, reinterpretation, and sustainable expansion of this irreplaceable Igbo cultural heritage.

Theoretical Framework

Semiotic theory propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings. It is the most foundational theory for understanding the Akwete woven motif symbols. The twin origins of this field lie in the independent works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who separately articulated the foundational principles of the discipline (Saussure, 1916; Peirce, 1931–58). Saussure proposed a dyadic model of the sign, arguing that a sign consists of two inseparable components: the signifier (the physical or perceptible form) and the signified (the concept or abstract meaning it conveys). According to De Saussure (1916), a sign is composed of both the form it takes in physical reality and how it is conceived or interpreted by its viewer. Applied to Akwete cloth, each woven motif functions as a signifier, a visual material form while the cultural idea, belief, or historical event it represents constitutes the signified.

Peirce, on the other hand, proposed a triadic model that defines a sign as a relationship between the representamen (the form the sign takes), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the understanding generated in the mind of the interpreter) (Peirce, 1931–58). Crucially, Peirce emphasized that meaning is not fixed but continuously evolves through interpretation, forming an ongoing process called semiosis. He further classified signs into three main categories: icons (which resemble their objects), indexes (which have a direct connection to their objects), and symbols (which are based on learned or arbitrary associations). The Akwete motifs function largely as symbols in Peirce's classification, their meanings are culturally agreed upon and must be learned within the Igbo cultural context. Together, Saussure and Peirce's semiotic theories establish that the Akwete woven motifs are not mere decorative patterns but a structured sign system through which Igbo cultural meanings are encoded, communicated, and preserved.

Another is the theory of cultural symbolism as a foundation of culture propounded by Schultz and Robert (2009); Millar (2011). Schultz and Robert (2009) established that symbols form the very foundation of any culture, and that symbolic representations which identify and illustrate cultural ethos are embedded in the social life of communities across the world. They argued that symbols could mean different things to different people, making it impossible to hypothesize how a specific culture will symbolize something, since some symbols are gained from experience while others are sourced from culture itself. Millar (2011), affirming this position, observed that symbolic representations that identify and articulate cultural ethos remain very much alive in contemporary societies, citing woven textile traditions as prime examples. Millar specifically referenced the Akwete woven symbols of the Igbo as expressions of Igbo ideology and worldview that evoke emotional feelings and serve as essential keys to understanding Igbo cosmology. Both scholars align with the broader tradition of symbolic

anthropology in arguing that symbols are not decorative add-ons to culture, rather they are culture itself, encoded in material form. For Akwete weavers, this means that every thread, pattern, and motif is a deliberate cultural statement, not an aesthetic accident.

Literature Review

Africa and symbols

African world view is replete with symbols. African symbols provide insights into African orientation to life. They are used to communicate complex knowledge. They convey information concerning the way of life of a people at every situation they are presented or the history of the society it represents (Dzobo in Isiguzo, 2015). Griffis (2008), believed that the meanings of these African symbols are derived from inspirational proverbs, human attitudes and beliefs, concepts related to abstract shapes, cultural meanings as well as other historical events and religious beliefs. He further gave examples with the Adinkra symbols by the Asante group of Ghana which dates back to around the 16th century. These Adinkra symbols are still widely used to this day to convey specific messages through a wide range of products and crafts including Adinkra cloths, clothing accessories, home decoration items, greeting cards, architecture, pottery, logos, advertising and more. They are a major influence in African art to this day, and can also be found in wood carvings, traditional printed cloths, furniture and other mediums.

In Nigeria, there are lots of symbolic motifs belonging to each ethnic group which are highly appreciated by the different cultures that own them. Cole and Aniakor (1986) describe the symbols of the ukara cloth worn by the ekpe society in Igbo land as the representations of the repository of power in the society. They further stated that the squares or rectangles motifs of the cloth are composed of four design types of concentric rectangular boxes with various chequered patterns, representational motifs such as fish, scorpions, crocodiles, hands in friendship, war and work, masks, moon and stars are dyed on ukara cloths which are symbolic representations of cultic power. Other symbols include abstract or geometric signs from sect writing systems known as Nsibidi. There are naturalistic and abstract references such as the bold, chequered patterns, which symbolize the leopards multiple spots, thus representing the leopards claws and then symbolize the Ekpe society power. The pythons and crocodiles also refer to the fearful and mystical power of ekpe society. Akinbileje (2014) mentioned that ekpe symbols and titles have persisted as an expression of leadership authority even with the advent of missionaries and colonial enterprise in the nineteenth century. Also the Nsibidi symbols have also been explored in art and design by many Nigerian contemporary artists. The Igbo also have the Uli/uri symbolic motifs which are painted on the body, walls of houses and shrines. While all these motifs are drawn and painted on various surfaces including the skin, they are still utilized in art till this day because of their documentation. The Igbo woven symbols found on Akwete fabrics have not been sufficiently documented by contemporary artists and designers for their creative potentials.

Igbo woven motif symbols.

These are the motif symbols woven on Akwete fabrics. Negri (1976) in Aniakor & Ofomata (2002) views the prestigious Igbo cloth as that which utilizes rayon or other synthetic threads to make the floated patterns found on the cloth. And these patterns consist of symbolic motifs which confer status and prestige to the cloth. The woven symbolic motifs are arranged on the cloth to form some patterns in the designs of the fabrics. The symbols are created, woven and developed by the Akwete weavers of Akwete town in Ndoki and Asa areas of Ukwu East local government area of Abia state, Nigeria (Chudi-Duru, 2017). Ikegwuonu (1979), Nwachukwu & Ibeabuchi (2012) believe that this weaving tradition is as old as Igbo land. Ekwueme (2009) narrates that the Akwete clans' ancestors came from Bonny in Rivers state; maybe that could explain why Umuagbai-Ndoki, Ijo and Ogoni in Rivers state also weave a cloth called Akuraku (Ikegwu & Uzuegbu, 2015). They further mentioned that this weaving vocation was projected into limelight globally by the colonial masters. But Ekwueme (2009) maintains that Akwete woven fabrics gained popularity during the oilboom era. This trade was what brought the beauty and creative symbolic designs of Akwete into limelight globally. However, the Akwete woven symbols have always remained popular in the history of Nigerian textiles, woven onto the fabric with the aid of the women's vertical loom (Chukueggu, 2000). They can be used to communicate evocative messages that represent parts of their life or those around them with unique looks and meanings. Some of them represent popular inspirational proverbs and maxims, record historical events, express particular human attitudes or behaviour related to depicted figures or concepts uniquely related to abstract shapes. Some of the woven designs have always been personal expressions of the weavers. According to Ikegwuonu (1979) in Chukueggu and Ogu (2013) Akwete fabric designs are derived from legend stylized human, animal forms, creatures, everyday life, conceptual symbols and inspirations and are associated with rich Igbo tradition dating back to 9th century. They are still woven and used till date to convey specific messages. The woven symbols are not reserved for a particular group of people; is not only the Igbo that utilize the woven fabrics, they are produced in attractive designs with rich colours for male and female (Kashim, 2013).

Roots of Motifs

All the motifs incorporated in Akwete weaving have diverse origins. According to Mrs. Ordor, an Akwete weaver interviewed in 2025, her designs come from dreams, others are self-invented, and many draw inspiration from the surroundings, Igbo beliefs, traditions, folklore, and worldview. Aronson (1979) traced the origin of the popular ikaki motif, noting that Akwete Igbo weavers have appropriated a wide range of foreign patterns, including those from the Ijebu Yoruba area. Ijebu Yoruba women weavers produced ritual attire known as aso olona ("cloth with patterns") for members of the Oshugbo judiciary society. This cloth combined the ooni (crocodile) motif with a shaki (shag) feature, symbolizing power, prestige, and prosperity. Aronson (1980) found that identical patterns appeared among the Ijo people of the Niger Delta, over 100 miles away, spread through the Ijebu Yoruba's active cloth trade. For two centuries, Eastern Ijo kings adopted these patterns as official attire, renaming the motif Ikaki meaning "tortoise" in Ijo symbolizing a revered water spirit known for wisdom and cunning.

By the 19th and 20th centuries, Akwete Igbo women weavers had taken on the role of producing these cloths for Eastern Ijo royalty. Through heavy trade in slaves and palm oil between the Eastern Ijo and the Ndoki people of Akwete, local weavers gained exposure to imported cloth patterns favored by their Ijo patrons, revolutionizing Akwete weaving by the end of the 19th century. Aronson (1980) and Davis (1974) record that oral tradition credits a pioneering weaver, Dada Nwakata, with inventing hundreds of new patterns using imported cotton threads. Afigbo and Okeke (1985) add that she decoded the designs of Indian woven materials sold by the Portuguese and replicated them on the Akwete loom, including reversible patterns appearing on both sides of the wrapper. Since the late 19th century, Akwete weavers have continued innovating. As Aronson (1980), Davis (1974), and Lamb and Holmes (1980) note, no two cloths bearing the Ikaki motif are alike, and new motifs from across West Africa are continually incorporated and renamed in distinctly Akwete terms. In naming these motifs, the creativity of each weaver who introduced them is permanently preserved in Akwete weaving tradition. Chudi-Duru (2017) is of the view that akwete woven cloth come in three main categories. She mentions that this categorization is based on the different design motifs woven on the akwete cloth which symbolize and connote some meanings. They are: George, Popo and Akwete cloths.

George Cloth

This type of woven cloth has design motifs of stripes and checks inspired by Indian madras/plain george known locally as George cloth. These Indian madras cloths are characterized by their colourful plaid designs. Nnadede is an example of this george. It also has an Indian source. All the numerous Akwete plaid and check designs are derived from Indian imports and could have resulted from requests by the Ijo patrons to duplicate designs that were particularly favoured. Cloth designs that have been copied from Indian madras come under this heading. A picture of Nnadede cloth is placed in plate 1.



Plate 1: Nnadede design being woven in a loom. Source: reseacher (2017).

It is one of the few presently known two-faced, or reversible, designs of Akwete cloth in which the woven pattern appears identically on both sides of the cloth. It is usually a symmetrical design composed of rectangles formed by intersecting vertical and horizontal thin stripes. A dot, or "star," is woven alternately in the center of the rectangles. Wider stripes divide the cloth into two sections. A story that was told of its origin tells of Nnadede a famous man in the Akwete area in the 1860s for his victories in war. During one of his triumphal returns, his father presented him with a beautiful cloth designed and woven especially for the occasion. For many years that pattern was reserved as a status symbol and for ceremonial dress, but it gradually took its place among the commonly used traditional Akwete designs. Nnadede cloth symbolizes bravery and victory. Today it is still highly regarded, both because of its lore and because of the skill required to weave the reversible cloth. It is sometimes referred to as "star" cloth after some similarly patterned imported "George" cloth with embroidered motifs enclosed in rectangles.

Akwete

This type refers to the type woven cloth produced by the women weavers using their own thought out designs motifs. Chudi-Duru (2017) mentioned that the Akwete weavers used to make some rather simple cloth of traditional patterns using up to 3,4 or more design motifs usually demarcated by parallel lined design, some have an overall effect of small checks and some with further embellishment of the water stripes with arrays of holes which belong to the wider tradition of the Nigerian woman's vertical loom.



Plate 2: Mrs. Nneoma Okere, an Igbo of Akwete, working on an Akwete cloth, utilizing the ikaki (tortoise), igbe akwukwo (box of books) and ute (mat) designs to weave a design. Source: researcher (2017).

Popo Cloth

Lamb and Holmes (1980) and Talbot in Aronson (1982), mentioned 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 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. It is still held in high esteem among the women of Ijo because of its cultural significance.



Plate 3: Popo design. Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/318451> .

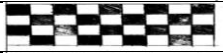




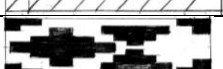


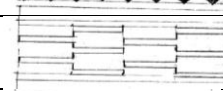




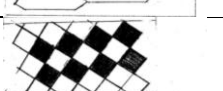

Symbolic Motifs of the Akwete woven cloth





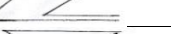




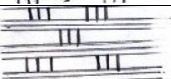
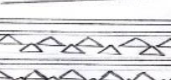


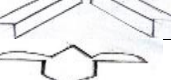

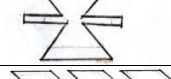
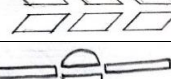
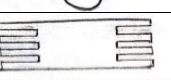
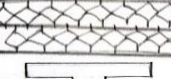
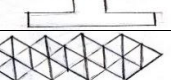


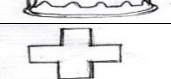
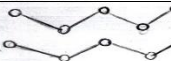

Motifs are decorative figures that are represented in a design. Every good design has repetition as a principle of design. The weavers made good use of motifs repeated all over the woven fabrics. The motif woven onto Akwete cloth and the size are the major features that distinguish it from other traditionally woven cloths in Nigeria. These motifs have a lot of symbolic meanings to the weaver, wearer and the admirers. For one to differentiate one motif from the other, names were given to these motifs and symbolic meanings were attached to them making the motifs to become symbols which are meant to represent another (usually abstract) even if there is no meaningful relationship. Okeke (1996) and Ikegwuonu (1979) lend support to this and agreed that every Akwete fabric bears a name which sometimes is named after the weaver or after the motif used for the design. Lamb and Holmes (1980) and Aronson (1980) reported that the Akwete women have produced a lot of designs (over a 100) using different motifs. This study confirmed this during a research in Akwete town. The weavers have a lot of traditional motifs which have are still being utilized in weaving till date. They also claim that they are capable of creating an almost infinite array of designs and also adopt motifs from all sorts of external sources. They are familiar with copying from prototypes, and this stems from the Ijo people who use varieties of cloth and are always looking for ways to replicate designs that are out of the market. Aronson (1980) mentioned that many designs woven have names relating to object in the weavers environment. They could also deviate from the prototype to create new designs. This study found out that all these designs symbolize one important thing or the other in Igbo land.

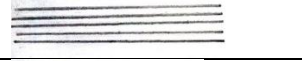

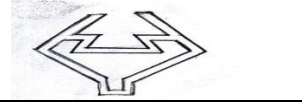



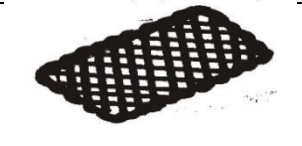


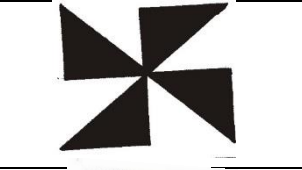


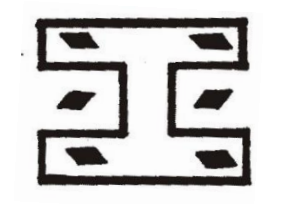
Lamb and Holmes (1980) mentioned that the distinctive symbolic designs which give many Akwete cloths their particular character are attributed to Dada Nwakata as mentioned earlier. During a research by this study in 2025 in Akwete town, a weaver named Mrs. Nneoma Okere confirmed this and rated Dada Nwakata and Madam George Mmeribokwu and as first class weavers. She also mentioned that Dada Nwakata created these designs in secret to prevent others from copying her ideas and when she died she cast a spell on her loom to prevent inquisitiveness. She wove designs that had symbolic motifs woven on one side but can also be seen on both sides while Madam George wove George materials.


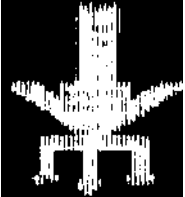
Lamb & Holmes (1980) further noticed that Akwete cloth comes in different patterns and motifs. And this study also found out during a research in 2025 that these motifs have symbolic meanings attached to each and every one of it. Each motif symbols have names attached to it. When they are woven on to the Akwete cloth, they design could be called another name. Up to a number of four different motif symbols could be woven onto a particular cloth after which one name is chosen and given to the design/pattern woven for example. Davis (1974) reported that some Akwete weavers wove a lot of motifs, though they seldom use more than three or four in one cloth. Many motifs are variations of one another, and the ones included here are those most frequently seen. Any special circumstances surrounding the development of a new motif usually involve either the weaver or the wearer, and traditionally the creator of a new motif receives an unwritten "copyright," Some motifs appear to be traditional to certain families, though frequently the same motif may be given different names by different weavers. According to some contemporary weavers, certain motifs were gifts of creative inspiration from a divinity to favoured weavers, and it was forbidden for any other weaver to use such a motif. When that weaver died, the motif could no longer be made, and existing cloth containing it increased in value and prestige. While motif ideas are no longer considered divine in origin, there are a few very old ones that it would be considered unlucky or disrespectful to reproduce. There are some other woven pieces which do not necessary bear the name of what was woven on them. Most of their names could be titles given to a hero and the motif symbols woven onto the cloth represent the name.

Table 1: Some symbolic Akwete motifs. Source Davis (1974) and researcher (2025).

	Checkerboard
	Snake
	Tortoise
	Geometric Flower
	Snake back
	Corn
	Necklace
	Saw
	Key or Children's Fingers
	Chain
	mboisi
	Scissors
	Snake back
	Stool or bow tie
	Variations of Ebe Motif

	“V”
	Knees of the Beautiful people(Ikperendioma)
	Zigzag or (Dakuru) the name of the designer
	Nigerian Coat of Arms
	Z
	Variation of ebe
	Double bell
	Variation of necklace
	Variation of ikaki
	Isi ajuala
	Variation of scissors
	Ahia
	Kpakpando
	Single bell
	Variation of ebe motif
	Broken v
	Ngaji
	Mboisi- isi abuo
	Mkpuru ludo
	Variation of okwuepele
	Mkpekele efere
	Butterfly
	Okpueze
	Cross
	A borrowed Asante motif from Ghana

	Ruler
	Epele
	Iyerinti/olanti
	Ocean in the river
	Heart
	Kuferemmiri (across the river)
	Biscuit
	Hand fan
	Mgbawa tomatoes(broken tomatoes)
	Ceiling fan
	Fancy block
	Nnunu(bird)
	Igbe akwukwo(box of books)

	<p>Variation of block</p>
	<p>Anthropomorphic motif</p>

This study found out that the names of some of these motifs are in ijo language while most of the motifs have Igbo names. While some of them have ijo names stems from the fact that they are Akwete towns neighboring villages, they normally patronize the weavers a lot and these woven cloths play a lot of cultural significance role in ijo areas. Most of these motifs woven on to the cloth attached a lot of importance to the woven cloth and also enabled the weavers to attract more customers because any new design motif woven will be sought for by someone that has never had it before.

Some of the designs and symbolic motifs found during this research in Akwete town in 2025, are as follows:-

1. Akajiaku
2. Volvo
3. Air conditioner
4. Oil boom
5. Nnadede
6. Ikaki
7. Aziza
8. Igbe Akwukwo
9. Ebe
10. Nigerian Coat of Arms
11. Two bells
12. Mkpuru Sugar
13. Fancy Blocks
14. Butterfly
15. First lady
16. Baby lace
17. Ruler
18. Broken plate (Mkpekele efere)
19. Kpakpando (star)
20. Ahia (utilization of many heddles to produce complicated designs that do not have specific names.)
21. Hour glass
22. The knees of the beautiful people (ikpere ndioma)
23. Ute (mat)
24. Fig (popo pattern and its variations)
25. Comb (mboisi)
26. Mkpuru ludo
27. Snake
28. Flower (geometric in nature)
29. Mkpuru oka (corn)
30. Dakuru (zig zag)(she started weaving this design)
31. Popo patterns
32. Checker board
33. Crown
34. Igbe Akwukwo (box of books)
35. Zoomorphic motifs
36. Necklace
37. Saw
38. Key/children fingers
39. Chain
40. Scissors
41. Snake back
42. Stool or bow tie
43. Wine glass
44. Cross
45. Fruit of the oil bean tree
46. "V boot"
47. Christmas tree and parcels
48. Heart/love
49. Azu
50. Pivot
51. Stool
52. Ritual objects
53. Nigerian flag
54. Logo of festac (the 2nd All black festival of the Arts held in Nigeria 1977)
55. Eating utensil (spoon)
56. Single bell
57. Anu Kpo Anu (animal eating animal)
58. Okwa epele
59. Mirror in the sun
60. Nnunu (bird)
61. Ishi ajuala
62. Okwa
63. Double 8
64. Aka abuo (two hands)
65. Ugo (eagle)
66. Ijikoaka onu (unity)
67. Ocean in the river
68. Akisi igbebiri (Ijo name)
69. Eye witness
70. Ajari (George)
71. Rainbow
72. Anya pussy-cat (pussycat eyes)

- | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 73. Flower | 74. Afo ikaki |
| 75. Ukwu bench | 76. Okpuru afo eke (pythons belly) |
| 77. Isafela | 78. Inyingi |
| 79. Madam pass madam | 80. Mgbawa tomato (broken tomato) |
| 81. Ceiling fan | 82. Standing fan |
| 83. Biscuits | 84. Kufere mmiri |
| 85. Ijeagwo | 86. Brocade |
| 87. Dada nwakata | 88. Fancy block |
| 89. Hand fan | 90. Five stars |
| 91. Anthropomorphic motifs | 92. Mkposu |
| 93. onwa | 94. Block |
| 95. Oche eze | 96. ebe afo mkpo |
| 97. ebe olu ngalasi | 98. ebe uhie |
| 99. ebe agharigha | 100. Akpukpa/Ogbanaonweya |
| 101. <i>Agbani</i> | 103. <i>stainless</i> |
| 102. <i>Rekereke</i> | 105. <i>Oceanfish</i> |
| 104. <i>Toll gate</i> | 107. <i>Afro</i> |
| 106. <i>Ifuru Osi</i> | 109. <i>lace</i> |
| 108. <i>Ayarawo</i> | 111. <i>babwaya</i> |
| 110. <i>Fii- fii</i> | 113. <i>Egbe otuzo</i> |
| 112. <i>Okere bebe</i> | 115. <i>Azuerigh agwu</i> |
| 114. <i>Otuzo Umunwaibari</i> | 117. <i>ishianu</i> |
| 116. <i>Ikpere aturu</i> | 119. <i>ifuruosisi</i> |
| 118. <i>Obuenyi</i> | |
| 120. Ovation | |



Plate 4: Some samples of Akwete hand woven cloths. Source: Researcher (2025).

For example the woven symbols found on the Akwete cloth called akajiaku which means a wealthy person does not even comprise of a human being but an intricate complicated design. This shows that for one to afford it, that person has to be wealthy. They further observed that privileged wearing of certain motifs has depended on the wearer's role. For example, some styles of the ebe were traditionally reserved for wear by royalty or for use as talismans in protecting a pregnant woman or warrior going to battle. Ebe motifs symbolize protection. Other patterns were reserved for special families or occasions because of the circumstances surrounding motif origin.

Cultural significance

Akwete cloth serves an important function in the context of royalty as have been observed by Aronson (1980). In Igboland, Akwete cloth is mostly used during chieftaincy titling ceremonies and coronations. All the kings' cabinet members with the Ndinze, Ndiozo and NdiLolo usually adorn themselves in Akwete woven fabrics. Aronson (1980) further stated that elsewhere in the eastern delta in Nigeria, this cloth has assumed a supreme importance and it's often associated with elite segments of the society-kings, chiefs and the priestly class. Ikaki cloth bears the emblem of the tortoise called Mbe or Mbekwu in Igboland. Which to the Rivers people (the Ijo in particular) a tortoise is a wise and cunning creature; the same goes to the ndigbo that weave the cloth. It is understandable that a cloth with this name would be associated with chieftaincy. In Ijo areas, when a king dies, ikaki will be used to decorate his rooms, where he is lying in state and his surroundings. Also during the installation of chiefs in office, Akwete is also used as the attire and also for beautifying their homes and surroundings. It is used as an expression of family wealth, social status and an emblem of power.

According to Aronson (1980) the Akwete woven cloth is utilized by women in some ceremonies among the Kalabari known as cloth-tying ceremonies (egenebite and bibite). These ceremonies are for women who are ready for marriage and childbirth. She mentioned that they are bestowed with recognition as mature women. In a formal

public appearance, a young woman wears selected types of cloth at different stages of the ritual. Ikaki is also worn first before other types of cloth because it is the initial type of cloth brought to the bonny area through trade. She further noticed that among the Kalabari, the ceremony is extended over several months, allowing the woman to wrap one category of cloth for a three –week period before changing to another. Akwete cloth is often one of the first to be tied in the Kalabari event.

Lamb and Holmes (1980) reported that Akwete cloth is worn or tied during ceremonial occasions including attending church and celebrating the major Christian festivals. Prestige can be established by the use of the most elaborate and expensive cloths. They further mentioned that Akwete cloth can also be tailored in to European style clothing though this is neither uncommon nor popular. They mentioned an important role Akwete woven cloth plays in marriage arrangements in Akwete in the past. The dowry of an Akwete girl would have contained ten pairs of cloths of the Akwete category as well as a box or trunk filled George cloths, the possession of a large number of cloths still being equated with the possession of wealth.

They are used as uniforms for group identification. Just like in Yoruba land, societies and associations in Akwete may have a special cloth design. Talbot in Lamb and Holmes (1980) says that in Kalabari, some societies were actually named after the group cloths, some were woven in Akwete. Also different dance groups and cultural organizations identify themselves with a particular Akwete woven design as uniform. They are also used as Ndigbo cultural attire in Nollywood.

geometric patterns achieved by the in-lay technique. This study found out that most Akwete fabrics bear a name. Eicher and Erekosima (1987), Davis (1974), Okeke (1996) and Ikegwuonu (1979) in Chukueggu and Ogu (2013) supported this and mentioned that every Akwete fabric bears a name which is sometimes named after the symbolic motifs used for the design or after the weaver; they may be named by traders or consumers according to the meaning and purpose attached to the design; examples are Dakuru, Dada nwakata and Inyingi and others. Chukueggu (1998) in Chukueggu and Ogu (2013) observed that the women weavers make use of cultural oriented motifs which they combine with modern motifs to create modern forms and concepts. He further noted that there are light weave Akwete fabrics. Which this study believes that this has created room for variety because it found out that during the cause of this study that some consumers still prefer the heavy types while some prefer the light weaves. The insertion of the motif symbols are done using matching colours which are different from the background colours. Atimes the weavers copy some designs from each other especially when the design is in high demand after production; quite unlike in the past when the designs can only be woven by the inventor of that particular design that bears the name of that design.

Conclusion

The Akwete woven motif symbols of the Igbo people are far more than aesthetic embellishments on cloth they are a living archive of Igbo history, philosophy, and cultural identity. This study has demonstrated that these symbols did not emerge in isolation; they have traceable origins, shaped by indigenous creativity, cross-cultural encounters, and centuries of artistic evolution. From the depiction of human and animal behavior to geometric abstractions and botanical forms, each motif carries a deliberate message, functioning as a visual language that speaks directly to those who understand its cultural grammar. The examination of the three categories of Akwete woven cloth has revealed the depth and diversity of this tradition, while the analysis of borrowed and copied motifs particularly those influenced by Indian Madras, George fabric, and Ghanaian weaving practices underscores the dynamic and adaptive nature of Igbo textile art. Rather than diminishing its authenticity, these external influences have expanded the expressive range of Akwete weaving, demonstrating that cultural traditions are not static monuments but evolving systems that absorb, reinterpret, and transform. The cultural significance of these symbols remains deeply embedded in Igbo social life, marking occasions, communicating values, and reinforcing communal identity. However, their continued relevance in the modern world demands intentional preservation and innovation. As this study has argued, the design vocabulary of Akwete motif symbols holds enormous potential beyond the loom in fashion, branding, interior design, digital art, and product design offering a viable pathway for sustaining these symbols in contemporary visual culture. Ultimately, the Akwete woven motif is a testament to the ingenuity and resilience of Igbo women weavers, whose hands have carried this tradition across generations. Preserving, documenting, and reimagining these symbols is not merely an academic exercise it is a cultural imperative. Future research and design practice should continue to engage with this tradition creatively, ensuring that the stories woven into Akwete cloth are never lost to time.

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