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## AKWETE-IGBO WEAVERS AS ENTREPRENEURS AND INNOVATORS AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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In his discourse on trade commodities, Igor Kopytoff argues that commodities assume what he calls a "cultural biography" through which one sees "the social system and the collective understanding on which it rests." (Kopytoff, 1986:89) What Kopytoff means by this is that commodities take on a life of their own based on the social and economic factors that have come to affect them. This paper will address the "cultural biography" of cloth in Southeastern Nigeria from its origins through trade to its various levels of assimilation both in use and production.

The biography discussed in this paper reaches an important highpoint in the late nineteenth century when weaving in the Igbo village of Akwete underwent significant changes. Weavers in this southeastern Nigerian village widened their cloths and began to use factory-produced threads and elaborate weft-float designs traceable to foreign sources. Already by 1915, the ethnographer P. A. Talbot had acknowledged this change when he wrote that Akwete cloth was once a simple-woven cloth used as bath towels but was now becoming more elaborate in design and was worn for occasions of ceremony. (Talbot, 1968:287).

The Akwete people have documented this change as well in a legend about a woman named Dada Nwakwata who they all agree was unsurpassed in her weaving abilities. The legend claims that Dada Nwakwata was able to maintain as many as four looms at once on which she wove a vast array of new and unforeseen weft-float designs with threads unraveled from imported cloths. So expensive were her cloths that the coastal Ijo canoemen sang a song which said EGEREBITE NWADA EREGH MKPOTA meaning, her cloth is difficult to purchase, only obtainable by the wealthy.

The weaving innovations so eloquently expressed in this legend seem to have appeared at the end of the nineteenth century when the British took a more active role in the palm oil trade that had so dominated the economy of Southeastern Nigeria throughout that century. Key players in that trade were the Eastern Ijo (including the Nembe, Kalabari, and Ibani) whose coastal location had always put them at the receiving end of trade goods from numerous trade channels feeding in from almost every conceivable direction.

Cloth was an important category of goods the Ijo received through these various networks of trade. Many of them are now preserved as heirlooms by descendants of trading families. An inventory of the cloths shows them to originate from the very

groups with whom the Ijo were trading, those being the Igbo to the north, the Ijebu Yoruba to the west, and the British along the coast. Through British hands, cloths from Europe, Africa, and India were also added to the Ijo collections.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the profound impact that these imported cloths, once introduced as by-products of the palm oil trade, had both on their Ijo recipients and the Akwete weavers with whom they were trading. As we will see, the impact was felt at two significant stages. The first involves the Ijo who claimed ownership of the imported cloth by assigning them local deities and incorporating them into their various rituals in ways that made them highly cherished if not indispensable commodities. The second concerns the Akwete weavers who subsequently appealed to this newly-acquired taste for imported cloth in an effort to retain their Ijo patronage as their trade with the Ijo was being threatened by the British.

Vast quantities of imported cloths were being traded to the coastal Ijo throughout much of the nineteenth century. Very quickly, the Ijo came to value these imported cloths highly and to use them as mediums of exchange and as social currency. Some of this value derived from the profitable trade through which they had been introduced. Several of the cloths are named according to their points of distribution. For example, the prototype for a strip weave in their collections which they call **popo** was originally traded from a coastal trading port near Togo known as Popo. The cloth, which is now woven in southeastern Nigeria, retains the **popo** name derived from its place of origin.

Perhaps more than economic value, the Eastern Ijo saw in these imported cloths an aesthetic that matched their own visual conceptualization of the spirit world. The Kalabari Ijo, for example, describe the body surfaces of their spirits as **genigeni**, loosely translated to mean "elaborate-patterned and multi-coloured". You can see this sense of patterning on the edges of ancestral screens believed to date to the early nineteenth century. It was patterning such as this that they saw replicated in imported cloth designs to which they would then assign a host of spirits.

This was observed by several nineteenth century English merchants. For example, Waddell noted that the Ibani Ijo perceived any traded items that bore flowered or figured image, such as cloth, as "juju" <sup>1</sup> and would therefore place them in their "juju" house next to locally carved figures. (Waddell, 1863:420).

One particular "juju" or waterspirit applied in this manner was the highly regarded tortoise (**ikaki**). To the eastern Ijo,

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<sup>1</sup> "Ju-ju" was the somewhat misleading term Europeans used to describe African spiritual beliefs.

the tortoise is thought to have superior if not king-like qualities. He is slow and deliberate in his movements and wise, cunning, and superhuman in his behavior. Killing everyone in his path, he regarded himself as a "big chief" and would ally himself with the most powerful including the king or **amanyanabo** himself.

Given its power, the Ijo were quick to assign the tortoise to imported cloth so that its wearer or user could benefit from this cunning, shrewd, and powerful character. Not coincidentally, these imported cloths became the official attire of Ijo royalty and other positions of leadership.

For example, one particular type of cloth of possible Indian origins, is now the official royal attire of the Kalabari king of Buguma who sees in its design a resemblance to the shell of the tortoise. According to Kalabari oral tradition, this cloth was first introduced to the area by the Amanyanabo Amachree IV (Abbi) who brought it to Buguma from Abonnema by boat for his wives and children to use. Formally introduced in a masquerade called **egbelegbe**, it has remained a standard feature of that masquerade as well as the official attire of the Amachree lineage. A photograph of the **amanyanabo** and his family shows his wife wearing the cloth.

Another imported cloth now linked to the tortoise is a weft-float woven example originating from the Ijebu Yoruba area on the western-most fringe of the delta. There, they use it as the official attire of members of the Oshugbo (Ogboni) society which is a secret governing institution at the very core of traditional Ijebu Yoruba leadership.

Once reaching Ijo hands through trade, its Ijebu Yoruba meaning was lost. This change is suggested by the contrasting ways in which each culture names their cloth. Ijebu Yoruba assign different meanings to each of the designs, none associated with the tortoise. By contrast, the Ijo use the term tortoise (**ikaki**) to refer to each of the patterns as well as the entire cloth suggesting that they have infused in it meaning basic to their own ethos and world view.

Bearing the tortoise name, the Ijo use the cloth to identify with or confront spiritual forces. In one Nembe masquerade, **ikakibite** was the only medium sufficient to purchase a spirit masquerade from the shrine priestess. Likewise, among the Kalabari Ijo, their female deity Owomekaso would always wear **ikakibite** as spiritual protection when faced with the ever-powerful python.

Like the gods and goddesses themselves, the Ijo priests and kings took to wearing the cloth to ally themselves with the powerful tortoise. Ibani Ijo Oral tradition tells us that King Fubara, who reigned in the late eighteenth century, not only brought peace and tranquility to his Ibani kingdom, but also introduced **ikakibite** as the official garb of his royal clan. To

this day, all Ibani royalty wear the cloth as their royal attire to continue Fubara's efforts at linking the power of their ruling dynasty with that of the tortoise spirit.

Assigning deities to traded cloth was just one way in which the Ijo took ownership of them. In other instances, the Ijo took to transforming imported cloths to conform them to an existing aesthetic and its related beliefs and rituals. One good example is a cloth the Ijo call **awumiebite** which translates to mean "red cloth." **Awumiebite** is made from a type of cloth traded from India that we generally refer to as Indian Madras and the Ijo as **injiri** or **george**. To make **awumiebite**, the Ijo dye the Indian import with root dyes to give it a reddish-yellow color. Insodoing, the resulting **awumiebite** bears a close resemblance to a raffia cloth known as **okuru** whose role in ritual it may have replaced.

**Okuru** was once thought to be the oldest, most indigenous, and most ritually charged of cloths in the Ijo area. Its basic material was raffia (*raffia vinafera*) which is thought to have protective properties. Such properties were enhanced by weaving the tan-colored raffia together with white or black cotton threads or dyeing it with red camwood.

**Okuru** was inherently female, both in the context in which it was used and its symbolic associations. Women wore it during their coming-of-age ceremonies, and in events surrounding childbirth, marriage and death. Such events often called for the cloth to be rubbed with camwood powder.

**Awumiebite**, the red dyed Indian madras, bears striking resemblance to **okuru**, both in its manufacture and symbolic meaning. Like the latter, it must be rubbed, or dyed, with a reddish powder. Also, like **okuru**, **awumiebite** is the quintessential symbol of womanhood. The Ibani Ijo have a saying: "If you think you are a woman, can you tie **awumiebite**? By such an expression, they are asking if a woman has yet undergone their rite of passage, known as **iria**. It is during **iria** that senior women initially tie the cloth around her body to acknowledge her newly acquired status as an adult woman. Undergoing such a ritual earns herself the right to publicly wear a certain range of cloths in which **awumiebite** ranks among the highest. Worn in designated rituals throughout her life, **awumiebite** will also be the last or outermost cloth in which she is enshrouded before being buried.

We can conclude from this that **awumiebite**, like its **okuru** prototype, is an important expression of continuity from mother to daughter. It is also a significant marker of the most important stages of a woman's spiritual transition beginning with her coming of age and ending with death. Just as **ikakibite** is associated with power and wisdom within the male sphere, **awumiebite** embodies all the nurturing qualities associated with femaleness.

Thus far, this paper has shown that cloths imported into the Eastern Delta area from elsewhere in Africa, Europe, and India were taken in, assigned meaning, and incorporated in traditional practices in ways that made them indispensable for ritual use. Understanding this biographical dimension of imported cloth will help us to understand the innovations in Akwete's weaving.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Akwete weavers began weaving cloths that seemed to conform to this acquired taste. Oral tradition informs us Akwete weavers had once used handspun cotton to weave plain woven cloths that were narrow in width. Occasionally, the narrow panels were sewn together along the salvage to create wider ones. By the turn of the century, however, Akwete weavers were weaving cloths bearing a magnificent array of designs with imported threads and on a warp more than double the size of previous weaving. Museum examples of Akwete cloth suggest such changes.

One Akwete loom in the British Museum acquired in the 1880's shows the change in process. A weaver was attempting the difficult task of weaving three individual strips on a single, wide loom. Once removed, the three panels would have been stitched together along the salvage to create one wide cloth. This mode of construction, in fact, typifies women's weaving throughout most of Nigeria. Eventually, Akwete weavers took to conflating the three pieces to make one wide cloth, as they continue to do today. The Akwete weavers explained to me that they once wove narrow panels which they then sewed together. It was for the sake of expediency that they widened the warp. I would argue that also did it to conform to the two fathom dimension of imported cloths to which they were now gaining exposure.

Along with the dimensions of the cloths, we can trace the colors and designs Akwete weavers began to weave to imported fabrics. A number of Akwete cloths collected at the turn of the century are of a color not unlike the camwood dyed colors of **awumiebite** or **okuru**, implying that weavers might have been appealing to that color sense when selecting an imported thread.

Other late nineteenth century Akwete cloths reveal a relatively solid color field in the center with contrasting colors along each salvage to create a border effect. This aesthetic seems to conform with that of Indian cloths being traded at that time.

At the same time, Akwete weavers begun weaving elaborate weft float patterns traceable to imported cloths and invented complex heddle systems to accommodate them. Another loom collected at the turn of the century and now housed in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh reveals not only the intricacy and color sense of Indian-imported goods but a complex multiple heddle system for implementing the designs.

The one imported trade cloth which seemed to most inspire

Akwete weavers was the **Ikakibite** or tortoise originally traded to the Ijo from the Ijebu Yoruba area. Already appearing in the Akwete weaver's repertoire by the late nineteenth century, this design continues to be the most popular one Akwete women weave. It is interesting to note that they use the Ijo name **ikaki** rather than the Igbo word for tortoise, **mbe**, to refer to the design. This suggests that they learned of this pattern and its name from their Ijo patrons who they know to use it in a variety of spirit-related events.

The popularity of the **ikaki** design among Ijo patrons can be measured by the frequency with which Akwete women now weave the tortoise pattern. At times every woman in a compound will be weaving **ikaki**. When commissioned by the Ijo, Akwete weavers will weave **ikaki** in three sections (**ikaki mkepele**) sewn together to parallel strongly the stylistic and structural aspects of the Ijebu-traded cloth. But more frequently, they weave the original three part pattern in one wide piece, again claiming it is more expedient to do so. And yet, in spite of this change, one can still discern the three-part construction characteristic of the Ijebu prototype.

To this day, Ijo patrons continue to commission Akwete weavers to duplicate cloths, **ikakibite** or whatever, as required for their own ceremonial use. I photographed an Akwete woman in 1978 painstakingly replicating an Indian madras cloth for an Ijo patron. Such trend towards replications to satisfy Ijo need clearly has roots in the time of Dada Nwawkata whose own weaving legend tells us attracted the attention of Ijo canoemen.

The data I have presented suggests that it was exposure to imported cloths that prompted Akwete weavers to innovate in their weaving at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, we know that Akwete had been trading with the Ijo throughout that century. Why then did they respond to Ijo taste for imported cloths only in the decade or so?

One explanation may have to do the shift in trade prompted by British domination after 1890. By then the British had penetrated inland to gain more direct access to palm oil products. By by-passing the Ijo and trading directly with Akwete, the British gave little reason for the Ijo to travel northward in the pursuit of oil. In essence, the British had put a wedge in the trade relations that Akwete and the Ijo had enjoyed for over a century.

We can only speculate that weavers like Dada Nwawkata responded to this change by weaving cloths with dimensions, colors, and patterns that their Ijo patrons would find irresistible. They also adopted new marketing strategies by transporting them to Ijo villages in place of Ijo patrons coming to them. Akwete weavers continue to market their cloth in this manner to the Ijo who remain their chief patrons. In turn, the latter continue to commission them to satisfy their ongoing

ritual needs for cloths of a particular aesthetic based on imported textiles brought about through trade.

In conclusion, the biography of textiles in southeastern Nigeria is a rich and multi-faceted one involving the reaction of one set of cultures who at a strategic point in the history of things come to inspire another. The biography also speaks to the need for cultures, in this case, African ones to absorb outside influences in ways appropriate to their own belief system and only when deemed beneficial to do so.

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