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The Role of Rivers Patronage in Sustaining Akwete Weaving: *A Study of Cultural Exchange and Textile Craftsmanship in Nigeria*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Amanymanabo Edward Asimini William Dappa Pepple III, the king of Bonny in Ovation International magazine, dressed in Ikaki bite (tortoise cloth) which is made in Akwete

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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The Rivers people in Nigeria, historically known for their patronage rather than production of textiles, have played a crucial role in the survival and evolution of Akwete weaving—a unique textile art from the Ndoki region of Igboland. While the Rivers communities, particularly the Bonny and Kalabari people, lacked indigenous cloth production traditions, they developed a strong cultural affinity for fine textiles. This demand for distinctive cloths led them to the Akwete weavers, whose specialized skills created a variety of textiles that aligned with the Rivers State cultural aesthetics and ceremonial needs.

Akwete weaving, a traditional Igbo craft practiced by Ndoki women, stands out for its intricate patterns, vibrant colors, and distinct designs. However, within Ndoki communities themselves, the cloth has not always been widely adopted. An Akwete woman, interviewed by Lisa Aronson in her 1980 study, highlighted that Ndoki weavers, despite their skill, often chose not to use their own cloth, finding preference instead for imported fabrics like Indian madras, which were more popular within the region. This selective usage pattern meant that without the demand from Rivers patrons, Akwete weaving might have diminished, as Ndoki locals alone might not have sustained it.



Young Igbo Weaver Working on a Horizontal Loom. Near Aba, Nigeria. Photo by Jeanne Tabachnick.

The Rivers people's consistent patronage has been vital in maintaining and expanding Akwete weaving's relevance. The demand for these unique textiles has not only kept the craft alive but also influenced its artistic direction. For instance, the ceremonial and royal attire of Rivers kings, such as the "Ikaki bite" (tortoise cloth), often includes elements woven by Akwete artisans. This particular cloth, prized for its beauty and cultural significance, features prominently in attire for Amanyannabo Edward Asimini William Dappa Pepple III, the king of Bonny, as seen in *Ovation International* magazine. His adoption of the Akwete woven "Ikaki bite" showcases the cloth's integration into high-status ceremonial wear and symbolizes the interwoven cultural relationship between the Rivers people and the Igbo artisans of Ndoki.

Through this patronage, Akwete weaving has continued to thrive, adapting its designs to meet the aesthetic and cultural values of its primary clientele while preserving its unique Igbo craftsmanship. The Rivers' appreciation and demand for these fabrics underscore the way



cross-community trade and mutual appreciation of art and culture can shape and sustain traditional practices.

Aronson, L. (1980). Patronage and Akwete weaving. *African Arts*, 13(3), 66

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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