INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM ON TRADITIONAL TEXTILE WEAVING TECHNOLOGY AMONG THE PEOPLE OF AKU IN IGBO-ETITI L.G.A. OF ENUGU-STATE

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Abstract

The fragments of textile recovered from the Igbo-Ukwu Archaeological site (Radio-Carbon dated to the ninth century AD) give some idea of the antiquity of Indigenous knowledge system on Traditional textile weaving technology among the Igbo people. Weaving was done in nearly all the communities of the Old Nsukka Division, but of all these communities, Aku community did more widely and popularly known for weaving than any other. From evidence available at present, Aku would appear to have the oldest traditional textile weaving technology in old Nsukka Division. Cloth-weaving is as old as Aku history. The craft is as old as the land. This paper therefore is designed to bring into perspective the indigenous knowledge acquired by Aku people of Igbo-Eiti Local Government Area of Enugu state in which the people planted cotton to supply the needs of their looms and did most of their own dyeing themselves. The weaving tradition here (Aku) was very strong and has continued to survive with a measure of its earlier vitality in spite of the serious erosion of its base by colonial impact.
Introduction

The Traditional textile weaving technology among the people of Aku is as old as Aku history. The craft is as old as the land. The traditional knowledge of textile weaving technology in Aku has been a long aged means of the production of a particular local cloth called Ajima. In Aku skills and experience are passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Therefore, knowledge is transferred in a top-down manner through training and extension. Ajima is usually the standard size of cloth woven on the loom. It measures about 1.5 metres in length and 0.6m in width and is normally used as wrapper by young men and women. A full time weaver can complete one Ajima in less than two days.

In the early stage of the 19th century, however, this indigenous textile weaving technology grew so rapidly in Aku community, as it became not only a source of revenue but also a source of the production of Ajima textiles. It was also used for some social and ritual purposes especially now that modern technologies have been introduced into the weaving technology, so that different designs and colours of Ajima cloths can be produced. This paper therefore sets to feature the origin of weaving technology in Aku, raw material sources, weaving methods, dyeing process, types, designs and colours of clothes woven. The Economic importance as well as change in weaving technology are briefly treated. Further historical facts can still be obtained in respect to weaving technology in Aku, since this work does not claim an exhaustive treatment of the topic.

Aku is located in the Western part of what is today known as Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State. The people inhabit an area lying approximately 60° 40’ North of the equator and 70° 18” East of the Green which meridian. Aku is surrounded by chains of hills which are in many places over 428 metres high. This area under study is broken and hilly, except in the extreme East where settlers from Umunko and Ukehe have pushed their farms and houses out into the plains (J. Barmby (1974) p.2).

One of these chains of hills starts in the Eastern direction at Amogwu Aku and passes in a south-eastern direction, through Nua, Ugwunani to Oshigo in the West. Fortunately, these hills correspondly have spring waters on them. Such spring waters with their corresponding hills include, “Ase-Nua”, “Aturu-Ugwunani” and “Omani-Oshigo”. The second chain of these hills starts from the same direction at Ohemje in a parallel line to the former chains, till it terminates at “Ezugwu-Mgboko” hills, whose main spring water is “Ujere”.

Aku has a tropical climate with two sharp seasons – the rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season which begins around March and ends around October has two periods of maximum rainfall with a break around August. The town experiences a mean annual rainfall of up to 2000mm. most of this rain falls during the wet season. Temperatures are high throughout the year with only small daily and seasonal variations. Temperature ranges between 75°F and 85°F. The dry season is marked by the great harmattan winds which are hilly and lasts from about November to early March, a period known as “Ohoko Use” in Aku. A climatic condition which favours the growth and production in large quantity cotton wools used in the production of Ajima clothes.

According to conventional Geography, Aku falls within the forest zone of West Africa. This zone was originally characterized by dense perennial vegetation of huge trees, including Alu and Uri trees whose leaves and roots were extensively used as materials for dying of Ajima clothes. This vegetation has however been changed to derived savanna vegetation which has evolved as a result of human disruption of the ecosystem. Only in places as sacred groves (Uhamu), shrines and some water courses as Aturu, Ase, Omani, Adada and Oshaba can relies of
tropical vegetation be seen. Elsewhere, the place has a widely spread of hard trees like Akpaka (oil bean tree) “pentaclethra mucophylla Agirinye – piptadeniastrum africanam, Okeye – Parke clappertoniana, Ahaba – Acioa-barteri, which produced the type of charcoal for iron smelting and smithing. Those hard wood were so thoroughly exploited by the early iron smelters that their tough stumps are quite discernible presently in most Aku iron smelting site (Ezike, 1989 p. 17).

The reconstruction of the early history of the pre-literate societies like Aku presents a lot of difficulties. This is because such societies base their claims on oral traditions and therefore unanimity is least to be expected. Various versions of oral tradition differ in being mainly for internal use within the community and they serve to validate the special primordial rights of the group which preserve them (Jones, 1965).

“Aku Diewa Mgboko Odobo” has no unified tradition of origin from one common eponymous father. Whereas most communities claim that they originated from Igala with Diewa as their founding father, some assert that they originated from nshi (Nri) citing Ijija, a prince of Eze Nri as their eponymous father. Others claim that they were the autochthonous Aku communities citing their onerous roles as both the political head (Onyishi Aku) and the priests of the ancestral god – Ojiyi Aku to support their claim. It is not to reconcile these conflicting assertions on the Aku origin but it is necessary to note that all Aku traditions refer to Aku as “Aku Diewa Mgboko Odobo”, the name by which people from Nsukka and beyond know Aku today.

Aku as a social-cultural and political group has her own peculiarities and philosophy of life with which she is identified and differentiated from other social groups. These peculiarities of life of Aku people are clearly exemplified in their overall social-political and Economic life as well as religion and belief systems. The peoples’ social dress codes were mainly of different design of Ajima clothing materials.

The pre-colonial economic activities of Aku were many and varied and embraced the fields of Agriculture, trade, iron smithing and smelting, weaving, wine-tapping and hunting. Agriculture was the mainstay of Aku economic activities. Preparation for farming, including clearing and burning of bushes was usually done in the dry season. The crops cultivated included yams, cocoyams, beans, maize, melons, Okro, pepper, pumpkin, bambara groundnuts (Okpa) pigeon pea (Mbungbu, Banana, Orange, kolanuts etc. Other category of plants planted as cash crops included oil bean tree, bread fruit-tree, native mango (ujuru) apple tree and pear tree.

Because of the infertile nature of Aku soil, the people made extensive use of green manure and compost manure for planting. The people also practiced terrace farming to overcome the problems of land scarcity created by the hilly nature of the area. Such terrace farming still exists today in Aku. Because of scarcity of land and infertility of the existing ones, up to 50% of Aku great farmers migrated to other fertile areas to acquire fertile lands and established farm settlements, producing cash crops in very large quantities. Such places include “Opanda”, “Adani”, “Daba” and “Ogurugu” all in Uzo-Uwani. Others are at many reserve forests in Benue and Kogi States. Great varieties of local yams were produced, such as “Abi”, “Otikpo”, Egbara, Abala, Adaka, Arafu, Oshioha, Eyeba Obiaru, Ona, and Edu. Varieties of cocoyams (ede) such as Ezi-ede, Agba-Enyima, Ede Idah and Ede-Eru were also produced.

Aku people were successful farmers. Some produced upwards of three or more barns of yams, each measuring about 18m long and 2 ½m high, containing about one thousand big tubers of yams.
Farm tools used by Aku people includes; Matchets Hoes, Weeding Knives (Mkpu) Tapping knives (umango), Dibbles (Ngwu), Sickles (Nkugoro) etc. The importance of agriculture to Aku people is seen in the feast of Fijioku as celebrated by the people. Livestock farming was also practiced in Aku. It was usual for family heads to keep cows, pigs, goats, rams, dogs, fowls and sheep.

Aku people are very famous traders. Like other towns in the Old Nsukka Division, Aku took part in the local regional or central and inter-regional trades. Aku trade route, in the 19th century stretched from the extreme North of Ejure to the extreme south of Bende with Nkwo Ibagwa as the focal centre of the Nsukka marketing system (Afigbo). This stretch of route covers such commercial towns as Enugu-Ezike, Idoma, Ichi, Ankpa, Ejure, Idah, Adoru, and Obimo. Aku people equally travelled to other communities and towns for trade purpose.

The extended family nature of the people of Aku, coupled with their compactly clustered living patterns, as well as their common tradition and beliefs are the major instrumental factors for the high level of various social lives activities being practiced by the people of Aku. Certain assertions by Aku people such as “Nwanne ka Oyi” – a relation is more endearing than a friend, and “Iwe Nwanne anagi n’ Okpukpu” – the quarrels with a relation donot last are all social adages meant to be used to unite the entire families of Aku as a single unit, hence, the strict adherence to the extended family system.

The back of the social life of Aku people is clearly exemplified in their performance of certain social activities. Such activities include feasts and festivals – “Ama” festival, “Odu-aha” festival, “Ivu-ndu” (outing ceremony or naming ceremony of a child), Fijioku festival, Odo (Masquerade) festival, marriage ceremonies etc. each of these feasts is usually marked with a variety of shows, observable rites and rituals, cultural humour, feasting, dancing as well as exchange of gifts and visits. Other aspects of the social life of Aku people are seen in title taking such as the “Ozo” title taking “Lolo-anyi”, “Obodo” and Ogbajiri title taking. These title taking ceremonies involve a lot of food items, drinks and the expenditure of huge sums of money. In the Ozo and Lolo-Anyi title taking, the main dress code was Ajima clothes, decorated with Ufeyi dye during the entire period of incubative initiation (Mbuba) which lasts from ‘Onwa-Eto’ (3rd month of the year) to onwa Ise (the 5th month of the year), about 18 native weeks.

Prior to the coming of the Europeans, the primordial political institution in Aku was “Gerontocracy” which was later modified into village democracy (Oha-Aku). It was a government by the elders (the Onyishis) who met formally and frequently to interprets the “laws and sanctions” handed down from the supernatural world through the ancestors. These elders were recognized not as chiefs but as intermediaries between the dead ancestors and the living, a fact that made the politics of the time purely based on fair play and on the principles of equity, devoid of bickering, abusive words and aggressions. They formed a council of elders known as Oha-Aku”. To them consensus was reached by the thorough examination of the truths projected without biases. The quorum for their formal meetings were formed only when all the section – Akibute, Akutara and Ejuna were represented. The decision of Oha-Aku on any matter becomes the final verdict and must be implemented.

Aku women – (Ndiomu Aku) were not the least in Aku politics. Their “Onyonyo muru Nwa ya” syndrome and demonstration to the Divisional Officer at Nsukka in 1924 over the inadvertent conscription of their sons for the railway construction at Eha-Amufu could be equated to the Aba women’s riot of 1929 over their suspected multiple taxation. The present political setting and consciousness in Aku is a direct brain child of the series of political
evolution of Aku body politics, and typified by the later formation of political parties from the seventies (Okikpe vol. I, 1974).

Apart from Christianity, Aku people have their own traditional religion whose mode of worships are typified in the rituals of homages to their many gods and goddesses. Aku people are traditionally religious by nature. The core traditionalists combine religion in all their lives activities. The view of Mbiti (1975) about Africans is true of Aku people when he says; “wherever the Africans are, there is their religion, they carry it to the fields where they are sowing seeds, harvesting a new crops, he takes it with him to a party or to attend a funeral”.

In Aku, religion is taken as an instrument for attaining socio-cultural goals, and forms the strongest element in the traditional background of the people. This is seen clearly in their yearly festivals of Fijioke (New yam festival or feast of harvest), “Ojiyi” (father of gods) festival, “Onwa-ato” and “Onwa-asaa” (third or seventh months) festivals respectively, in belief that they can through these practices, come in terms with the powers above for the solution of their life problems. In the people’s religious beliefs and practices, the belief in the supreme being (chi), ancestors and mystical powers constitute the main pillars of the religion of Aku people.

Like other Igbo ethnic groups, Aku people worship “Chukwu”, the supreme being. He is called “Eze-chite-oke”, creator of the whole universe. CHUKWU (God) is regarded as an invisible spirit as well as the author of life (Eze Chitoke-Abiama) (Mbiti, 1975). There are also divinities in Aku, such as “Ojiyi”, “Egwunshi”, Offienyi “Ezugwu Mgboko”, “Aturu Ugwunani”, “Omani Oshigo”, Ekumeha Amogbo”, “Ase nua”, “Ujere”, Nshi Aku-Obie, “Ejiri Umu-Ezike”, Chikere Eguru Umu-Odeke”, etc. These divinities are so dreadful that they are feared and believed to be the powers that look after the villages under them and solve individual problems. Most shrines and the houses of the gods and goddesses are decorated with Ajima clothes.

General background of the area of study

Aku, popularly known and addressed as “Aku-Diewa” is at present in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State. Aku is almost completely surrounded by chains of hills, thus, it has a very good defensive position at times of inter community war and raids. Aku is almost the largest town in the Old Nsukka Division.

The people of Aku live in a somewhat compact and clustered form of settlement more than a few metres apart between groups of houses and villages throughout the whole town. The name Aku is a very common term, not only in Igboland but in many parts of Nigeria. In the Igbo context, the word Aku has three popular meanings. These include wealth, palm kernel and the edible ants. There is a town in Awka, the capital of Anambra State that bears the name Aku. There is still another town at Okigwe in Abia State bearing the name Aku. The name Aku is also used to denote the whole of a Yoruba creed who migrated into the Yoruba land from free town (Okikpe vol. I (1974) p. 39).

Aku is equally a designation for some kings in Northern Nigeria, such as the “Aku of Wukari”. In Igala land, most people answer the name Aku. To my own people however, the name has no special interpretation nor has it any historical connection with any town or person that bears the name. Simply put, my people understand the name to mean wealth. The full name is “Aku Diewa Mgboko Odobo” “Diewa Mgboko Odobo” abbreviated to “Diewa” is historically known to be the father of Aku.

There are thirteen villages in Aku, viz, Use, Amabokwu, Mgboko, Umu-Ezike, Ohemje, Offienyi, Nua, Ugwunani, Obie, Amogwu, Oshigo, Orda and Ugwuegede, listed in order of
seniority. The first six villages are called “Akibite”, the next four “Akutara” and the last three “Ejuona”. The three sons of Aku, therefore include Akibite, Akutara and Ejuona in that order. The first son of Akibite was Mgboko, who gave birth to ten other children, the second son; Akutara had four sons while the last son Ejuona had three sons.

**Origin of weaving technology**

The massive production of cotton as raw materials for the weaving of Ajima textile apparels was long established in the socio-economic and cultural foundation of Igbo people. The fragments of textile recovered from the Igbo Ukwu Archaeological site (Radio-carbon – dated to the 9th century AD) give some idea of textile weaving technology among the Igbo (Afigbo, 1985 p. 7).

It is safe to assume that centuries of experimentation and adjustment must have passed before the sophisticated level revealed by the weave of the Igbo Ukwu textile was attained. As a result of insights gained from the Igbo Ukwu excavation it can now be assumed that textile industry in Igbo culture is much older than the period which witnessed the rise of centralized state systems among the Edo and Igala. Also as a result of insights gained from the more extensive and scientific exploration of oral tradition, it is now established that cloth-weaving was more widely practiced in Igboland than the scanty colonial records on the matter wrongly suggest (Afigbo, 1985 p. 12).

Further, the pre-1950 colonial record reveals that the weaving communities of Igboland whose textile industries received even the most casual mention includes Old Nsukka Division. Among the communities which made up the Old Nsukka Division, the village groups more widely known for weaving include, Aku Ibagwa-ANI, Edem Ani, Enuug-Ezike, Okpuje, Nsukka and Obukpa.

More importantly, oral history records that of all these communities, Aku people did more weaving than any other, due to the fact that Aku people were very conscientious, pragmatic and took everything they did very seriously. A critical analysis of the oral tradition regarding the origin of Aku textile industry shows that weaving is as old as Aku history, the craft is as old as the land, that is, the arts of weaving had a local origin. It might be that Aku people evolved and developed the technology of weaving.

**Sources of raw materials**

The primary raw materials for the production of Ajima textile is the cotton wool. There has not yet been any substitute nor additive to cotton wool as a primary raw material. Aku textile weavers produce for themselves greater quantity of cotton wool which they need for their weaving work. Evidence from oral sources was emphatic that the cultivation of cotton was taken seriously in Aku, so that raw materials for weaving was not lacking (see fig. 1).
Presently, agriculturists have joined in very large cultivation and production of cotton wool, either to sell to the weavers or to use for spinning threads which weavers use for their stitching. Aku people grow cotton, not only as inter-crop but also in plantations set aside for this purpose. Apart from their own source, there are equally supply of cotton from neighbouring towns which also plant cotton in large quantity for the purpose of supplying to Aku people. The best period to grow cotton is between May and June while the best period for harvesting is between the Ama Ibute and Ama Obie which falls between December and early march (Afigbo, 1985, p. 19). After planting, cotton may last about seven months before harvest. The growth of the plant is controlled by proper spacing and constant clipping of the branches to avoid vertical shooting to the skies and encourage horizontal growth.

During harvest, sharp knives are used to remove the bolls with the stable. This is sunned to split-open, producing the cotton fibre which is needed. Further sunning makes the fibre whiter. The harvested cotton contains the seeds as well as some trash. Small quantities are cleansed at a time using hands to get rid of the trash and seed contents, the latter being stored for future planting in Aku (see fig. 2).
Spinning

This is the final process in the transformation of cotton into yarn or thread before dyeing in Aku. The object of spinning and of the processes that precede it is to transform the single cotton or fibres into a cohesive and workable continuous length yarn. Processes that staple cotton fibres go through vary according to the type of cotton /fiber. In Aku, before the age of machinery, spinning was done by hand with the spindle locally called “Ntuturu in Aku and the distaff (see Fig. 3 - 5).
Fig. 3: Showing an Aku weaver in the process of spinning her cotton fibre into thread for the traditional cloth weaving. Thus yarn is spun from the mass of combed cotton lint on the “Urua-owu” held above the rotating spindle “Ntuturu”. This is locally known as “Itu-Owu” in Aku.
Fig. 4: Showing the Aku weaver spinning the thread into double threads which is the final spinning. The actual spinning is commenced by bringing the spindle into contact with the thigh and rubbing this spindle “Ntuturu” sharply against the thigh with the open palm of the hand. Three spindles “Ntuturu” are involved in this process, two spindles “Ntuturu” each with thread are raised up above the left hand while the remaining one is being held by the right hand and is into contact with the thigh and rubbing this spindle sharply against the thigh with the gripe palm of the hand with this, the actual spinning has commenced. This is locally known as “ifia-owu” in Aku.
Fig. 5: Showing the Aku weaver in the actual final of finals of spinning the thread. Here the weaver stretches out the actual length that will be spun into the spindle called “Ntuturu”
The latter was a stick or staff upon which a bundle of the cotton or fiber to be spun was loosely bound and it was either held in the left hand or stuck in the belt. The spindle “Ntuturu” was a rod or a stick, usually weighted at the end to make it spin like a top. The spinning action further drew out the cotton or fibers and wound the resulting thread around the spindle “Ntuturu”

**The process of dyeing**

The Aku craftsmen and women the Aku weaver have a wide variety of domestic sources for dye. The dyeing process in Aku involves the use of dye pots by Aku women. The materials and tools used are pestle and mortar, leaves and barks of many plants and trees which includes sap of old physic nut tree (Jatropha curcas) as well as “Alu” leaves (Lonchocarpus cyenesuens) Afigbo, 1985) (see fig. 6)

![Fig. 6: Showing “Alu” plant (Lonchocarpus cyenesuens) of which the Aku weavers used for dyeing process only to get Blue dyeing colouration](image)

Blue dyeing is always done by women in Aku. The fresh green leaves called “Alu” are used to produce the blue dye. Soon after picking, the leaves are pounded in a wooden mortar with a heavy wooden pestle. The leaves are quickly bruised and a blackish coloured juice so produced. The stem and leaves turn black soon after picking from the plant. A woman would collect a bundle of “Alu” leaves and work in a shady place, pounding till she has made the quantity she needs. When the leaves are well pounded, a blue-black mass is left in the mortar. This she scoops out with her hands and moulds into balls which are dried after few days of fermentation.

Another raw material, normally life plants such as oil bean tree (Pentaclethra macrophylla) “Akpaka”, “Uchakiri”, Iroko “Uroko” tree and mango tree are cut into logs and burnt to recover the ashes are then added to the grounded and moulded “Alu” leaves in a big pot
and again kept under the sun to ferment. The solution should be vigorously stirred intermittently for about three days when it will turn dark blue or indigo colour. Dyeing of threads is three times daily – morning, afternoon and evening, each lasting for a period of one hour. This involves also turning the threads in the “Alu-pot” till indigo colour is obtained, after which the threads are dried and ready for use in weaving. When the indigo colour is obtained, the dye is ready for use.

The article to be dyed is totally immersed in the dye. A busy dier works three articles simultaneously. Two articles are left dripping on the draining board of the pots while the third is in the dye. The object to be dyed is held in the liquid for about two minutes, then lifted onto the draining boards. Each article is dipped three or four times, then carefully laid on stones or spread on hangers to dry in the sun.

This process is repeated five or six times until the required colour is obtained. To test the colour, the dier squeezes a small pieces of the article between her fingers. During this process the dye pot is kept covered and never stirred. When the dyed articles are first brought out of the dye into the light, they are a greenish colour but soon change to blue. When a deep blue – black is needed, the second Deepings are made in a pot of new dye. Some dyers use tinned chemical dye. Once the dye is in the pot, the process of dyeing is the same as that for real indigo. Red was obtained from camwood (“Uhie” or Ufie) which could be ground on stone and reduced to a pastey state to be mixed with water according to need. The Aku weavers also prepared a red dye by boiling the bark of a tree called “Okpeye” (see fig. 7)
The yellow dye was obtained also by grinding a certain wood in the same manner as canwood. Alternatively either wood could be soaked for long periods in water or boiled to extract the required colouration. The Aku weavers did most of their own dyeing themselves (Afigbo, 1985 p. 20).

For Aku weavers, their real dye never rubs off, even when first sold, never fades nor damages the fabrics. They do not grudge over the time spend in its preparation or use and are completely satisfied with their effects. They are proud of their crafts.

**Methods of weaving**

Cloth production essentially involves the interlacing of a set of horizontal threads (termed weft) with a set of vertical threads (termed warp) in a planned order. This order of planning is also referred to as the design or weaver structure of the particular cloth. The passing of the weft threads between the warp threads to form cloth would mean practically lifting every alternate warp threads and depressing the other. Over a very long period of time weavers have ingenuously devised some means of giving tension to these warp threads and making them to put in a planned regular order, so that the weft could be passed across in one movement. The means so devised is the loom. The loom is known by different names in the different parts of Igbo land where it is used. The loom is generally a rectangular framework (Okeke, 1985 p. 44).

Weaving is the process which involves the use of a loom for the production of local textiles. In Aku, a true loom must have heddles which separate groups of warp yarns between which the wefts pass. The practice of weaving can be considered to be characterized by the presence of heddling devices, although finger weaving is not within the context of my discussion.

In loom-weaving, the yarns or strands are of infinite lengths so that the need to add another length is not pressing. The yarns can be spun to any length, limited only by one’s patience and the capacity of one’s yarn-handling equipment – wrapping, loom beams etc.

In Aku, the local name for a loom is “Ogwere”. They are of different types and are normally set up inside the living hut or under the eaves of the roof of the living hut or inside the kitchen, out of the reach of children. The type of loom Aku weavers use is the vertical broadloom type but with some individual difference in the choice of wood used for the loom frame work and constructional differences (see fig. 8).

**Fig. 7:** Also showing the “Okpeye” plant (“Parke clappertoniana) that the Aku weavers equally used in dyeing process when they want to obtain Red dyeing colouration
The upright posts of the rectangular loom are mostly of either Indian Bambo ("Oja or Otosi") or New bouldia leavis ("Ojinoshi" or "Ogirisi" or India bamboo "Oja" or "Otoshi"). Though other types of wood may be used, "Oja and "Ojinoshi" are not often prone to insects or ants attack. The upright posts have their bases dug into the ground inside the living hut.

Indian Bambo ("Oja or Otosi") or New bouldia leavis ("Ogirisi or Ojinoshi"), though other types of wood may be used. "Oja and "Ojinoshi" are not often prone to insects or ants attack. The upright posts have their bases dug into the ground. The raffia palm beams, one near the top and the other near the bottom, run horizontal to the two upright posts. The top cross bar is lashed to the upright posts with a tough rope "Udo" while the bottom cross bar, with a uniform cross-section connects the two upright posts through holes bored at their lower ends. The bottom cross-bar give tension to the loom (see fig 9a & 9b)
Fig 9a: Showing another different type of loom “Ogwere” the Aku weavers use. Here weaving has already commenced and the cloth being displaced on the loom “Ogwere”
Between the top and bottom bars are the warp and cloth beams. The warp beam is positioned some centimeters below the top cross bar and parallel to it and lashed to the upright posts. In some cases the weaver bores another pair of holes, one each on the upright posts just under the top cross bar. Through each holes, she suspends a loop of strong cord “Udo” or “Ukpu” with which she fastens the ends of the warps beam “Oholu-Enu Ogwere” to facilitates adjustments of the warp beam to varying height the upright posts according to the length of cloth desired (Okeke, 1985p. 59).

The cloth beam “Oholu-Eni Ogwere” is positioned a few centimeters just above the bottom bar and is connected to the warp beam by the warping ropes and to the tensioning bar by tensioning cords. The warp and cloth beam called “Oholu-Enu Ogwere” and “Oholu-Ani Ogwere” respectively are made of the raffia palm midrib, locally called “Ohoro”. Some other accessories used are:

(1) Warp space - Mbuba Elu
(2) Weaver’s sword - Mbuba Ani
(3) Shedding stick - Mpa Ekwa
(4) Warping stick - Mbuba
(5) Lease rod - Eyo
(6) Shuttle - Ukara
(7) Warping stick - Mgbakpa

During the initial process of stretching the warp threads over the warp and cloth beams, two lease rods are introduced to separate the warps. The lease rods are made of flat blades of raffia palm mid – rib with blunt edges. Each lease rod carries the warp threads of one of the two basic sheds, one consisting of all the even numbered threads, the other, the odd numbered ones (see fig. 10).

The friction caused by the rods keep the threads from crossing and in position for the warping order. After warping the lease rods are pushed up, close to the warp beam. Behind the lease rods, alternate warp threads are carefully selected and lifted by the finger and simultaneously a flat thick wooden rod is inserted under the raised warp threads across the width of the warp. The opening created by the separation of the raised and lowered warps by this rod is the shed, and the rod itself, shed rod locally called “Mpa”. This shed-rod or “Mpa” remains permanent in its position till weaving is completed (see fig. 11).
Since the fundamental forms of weaving in Aku operates on the principle of opposites, a device for counter shedding becomes necessary. To achieve this, the warps under the shed-rod are attached by means of a string forming loose loops around each of them, to a pair of thin flexible reel lying on top of the warp behind the shed rod. This device is the heddle locally called “Eyo” which when pulled produces a counter shed. The method of introducing the weft thread alternately into the shed formed by the shed-rod “Mpa” and that formed by the heddles “Eyo” causes the warps to interlace with the wefts to form cloth.

A shuttle, locally called “Ukara” is slightly longer than the width of the warp for easy picking from one hand to other through the shed

For beating in every newly inserted wefts into the fell of the cloth, a batten is employed. This is made of strong wood, usually from camwood. It is made flat and smooth to enable it enter into an open shed and slide through across the width of the warps (see fig. 12).
It is slightly longer than the width of the warps to enable the weaver hold it at both ends during the action of beating in the wefts. Both edges are blade-like but blunt to enable it reach deep into the cloth fell. It is also referred to as the weavers sword because of its sword-like shape. It is also used in keeping open the shed by setting it in edge between the parted sets of warp. When in this position, the weaver’s hands are both free to introduce elongated wefts-carrying shuttle locally called “Okara” with one hand through one end of the open shed, pulling it right across the shed from the opposite end to insert each pick (see fig 13).

Fig. 12: Showing how the shuttle (Ukara) is being picking by the Aku weavers during the process of weaving in Aku. Here the shuttle locally called “Ukara” is being warp from right hand side and then to be picking from the left hand side through the shed.
Most often, a wooden instrument locally called in Aku “Mgbakpa” is employed. This is as long as the warp is wide and has regular indentation along its whole lengths into which the warp threads are made to enter in order to space out. In the absence of the warp spacer, warp and weft would adjust themselves to each other naturally and skip together with the result that in the fabric, threads could easily draw apart or pile up, thereby destroying the appearance aesthetically (see fig. 14).

Fig. 13: Showing the Aku weaver operates on the principle of opposites. Here the shuttle “Ukara” is being warp from left hand side and then to be picking from the right hand side through the shed.
As a tensioning device, a straight wood is firmly nailed new the base of the two upright posts below the cloth beam and parallel to it. The cloth beam is linked to this bottom bar with strong cords locally called “Ukpu” or “Udo” for tensioning.

Weaving starts from the bottom and progresses upwards and when it gets to a point where the length of the warp threads between the woven cloth and the warp beam is too short to allow easy shed formation, weaving is stopped.

The tensioning cords “Ukpu” or Udo are loosened to slack the taut warps and fabric so that the woven parts is manually pulled under the cloth beam to the back of the loom while simultaneously more warp lengths are lowered from the top. This process is repeated till the warp threads are use up. The average length of woven clothes is about two metres. The yarns largely sued are locally hand spun and dyed indigo.

**Types of cloths woven in Aku**

Aku people weave only one kind of cloth. This is the traditional cloths and they are of three types: They are:

(a) **Uja** – for tying babies at the back, Ugodu as male pants
(b) **Mbubu** - As wrapper
(c) **Okpurukpu** – for funerals and mourning period

“Mbubu” are produced in strips, often in white and indigo (dark blue) colouring order using locally spun and dyed yarns. The “Mbubu” cloths are used as lion cloth, towels, work cloth, wrapper, easy chair cloth “Ngada-Ekwa” and sleeping cloth depending on their sizes.

“Okpurukpu” is also woven with locally spun yarns but in this case, the yarns are not dyed. “Okpurukpu” are usually woven in solid dark blue and very heavy. The cloth is generally
used for masquerading, in funerals and in performing certain traditional rite such as burial rites (see fig. 15).

**Fig.15:** Showing a masquerade “Manwu” completely dressed in the traditional textile woven clothing, weaving brightly coloured cloth “Ajima” and at his hands are wharp which it uses to scare people away.

Generally, Aku weavers produce two designs of cloths:

(i) Oja: this is narrow in width and serves miscellaneous purposes including work – cloth, towel, easy chair cloth (Ngada-Ekwa) and for tying babies on the back by nursing mothers.

(ii) Ajima: This is usually the standard size of cloth woven on the loom “Ogwere”. It measures about two metres by sixty centimeters and normally used as wrapper by young women and men. A full time weaver can complete on “Ajima” in two days or less.

**The economic importance, problems and prospects**

The economic importance of weaving technology in Aku lied in the fact that weaving technology served as source of employment, mostly for women, yielded a big revenue for Aku weavers and provides greater majority of our population with Ajima textile clothes, according to their needs. In the old days, greater majority of our young ladies and men were employed in the weaving technology as the main source of their living. Since they had very good market for their product, they wove in large quantity sold and made big money. As at the time, more than 60% of the total annual revenue for an individual weaver came from weaving. Further only few other cloths were bought from neighbouring towns, the rest cloths worn by Aku people were produced by Aku weavers.

The problems of weaving technology in Aku lied in the defeat which it suffered from other industrial and commercial activities in Aku. The sudden wave of change by Aku weavers from weaving to Agriculture and Trade automatically slowed down the growth of the arts of weaving. This major factor helping to depress indigenous textile weaving industry in Aku was as a result of the growth fast of western fashions textile industries and as well as the competition of...
European fabrics and fashions. These fabrics were not only cheaper and more fanciful but were imported in such large quantities that they simply swamped the products of the local handlooms. In this situation the local weavers came to be despised as dull and too heavy for easy wear (Afigbo, 1985 p. 31).

Further, lack of proper market, inconsistency in the procurement of raw materials, poor storage facilities, and lack of interest by men as well as increasing taste for modern textiles all constituted hindering forces to the growth of traditional textile weaving industry in Aku. In the light of these, the prospect of traditional textile weaving technology in Aku was bleak. General interest has fallen to hopelessness. This industry may no longer have a thriving ground in Aku.

Change in weaving industry

The traditional Igbo looms as well as the weaving industry were deficient in many respects. Modern technology has introduced modern horizontal treadle loom as well as modern weaving equipment. In the modern treadle hand loom, a contrivance known as the reed is employed. This consists of narrow strips of metal arranged in a vertical position above the loom so that it oscillates freely; making the reed to pound every new weft in the shed into the cloth fell evenly across the entire width of the warp. The treadle loom is a great improvement on the traditional loom type as far as increase in rate of cloth production is concerned.

The weaving loom today has been completely mechanized and some are so sophisticated that the need for man power in the weaving industry has been reduced. In the recent times, the innovations and contrivances in the mechanized power loom has attained such phenomenal heights that the power loom appear to have all the answers to the problems saving time and labour.

In the light of the above, it would appear that the need for traditional loom for cloth making is meaningless. This is not so because the type and quality of cloths produced without traditional loom remains unique and spectacular and satisfies the need of the people. Various fabrics of great beauty are being produced with the traditional looms without much mechanical aid and yet producing results of great craftsmanship in contemporary traditional cloths which distinguishes themselves from the modern mass-produced, machine-made, factory cloths, it is therefore, worthwhile to modernize the traditional loom to take account of its limitations while maintaining the uniqueness of the product.

Conclusion

In conclusion this work, it is necessary to state that there were some difficulties in tracing the historical origin of weaving technology in Aku. Although, a fair attempt has been made in this respect exact date(s) and manner of origination were not on records. However, oral history reveals that the technology is as old as Aku, being safe therefore, to assume that the technology has a local origin.

Aku people were very conscientious and serious minded because during the boom of weaving industry, Aku people were able to supply all the necessary raw materials and labour needed for weaving. Aku weavers were artistic and crafty, judging from the aesthetic nature of cloth they produced which yielded them fat revenue.
Weaving industry in Aku, though has been prosperous, has its own set backs. Foreign competition, presence of white kola jobs, western civilization, flare for foreign and cheaper cloths all slowed down the development of weaving industry and so renders its prospect bleak.

It is important therefore, to revive and modernize the weaving industry in all the sub regions of West Africa where the technology was developed before so that it will thrive as our own local industry.
References


Jane Barbour & Doig Sinmonds (Editors-in-chief) *Adire cloth in Nigeria*.


