

## **The Transition of Traditional Nigerian Textiles and Their Role in Contemporary Fashion**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the transition of traditional Nigerian textiles and their role in contemporary fashion. Textiles are not merely fabrics; they are powerful storytellers, communicating authenticity, heritage, and community values through intricate patterns and vibrant colors. In recent decades, there has been a notable revitalization of traditional textiles, with designers blending conventional techniques with modern aesthetics to create pieces that resonate with both local and international audiences. Focusing on Indigenous fabrics such as Adire, Aso Oke, Akwete, and Ankara, the paper analyzes how these fabrics have evolved from traditional ceremonial uses to central elements in modern fashion narratives. It highlights how Nigerian designers incorporate conventional techniques into contemporary designs, presenting a living expression of Nigerian heritage. Despite challenges such as mass production, cultural dilution, and loss of authenticity, traditional Nigerian textiles have successfully adapted to the demands of contemporary fashion. The paper finds significant opportunities for cultural revival, sustainable fashion, and economic empowerment through renewed appreciation of Indigenous craftsmanship. The paper

concludes by stressing the importance of collaborative efforts among artisans, designers, policymakers, and educators to preserve and promote traditional Nigerian textiles. It recommends that cultural organizations and media initiatives launch public awareness campaigns to highlight the historical, artistic, and economic significance of these textiles. This effort will foster national pride, ensure the continuity of Nigeria's rich textile traditions, and strengthen their relevance in the modern global fashion landscape.

**Keywords:** Contemporary, Cultural, Craftsmanship, Fashion, Sustainability,

### **Introduction**

Nigeria's fashion is a dynamic landscape shaped by history, culture, and innovation. At the heart of this evolving industry are traditional textiles such as Adire, Aso Oke, Ankara, and Akwete, each a testament to the rich heritage and artistic expression of various Nigerian ethnic communities. These textiles transcend their function as clothing materials; they are cultural artifacts that communicate identity, social status, and communal values through intricate patterns and vivid colors, as noted by RexClarkeAdventures (2024). In recent years, there has been a marked resurgence in the appreciation and incorporation of these traditional textiles in contemporary fashion. This continued interest is fueled by a collective commitment to preserving cultural heritage, fostering sustainable practices, and affirming a distinctive Nigerian identity on the global fashion scene (OkayAfrica, 2024). Designers are increasingly merging traditional craftsmanship with modern design sensibilities, creating garments that appeal to both local and international markets (TheCable Lifestyle, 2025). By exploring the confluence of culture, sustainability, and innovation, this paper seeks to highlight the enduring relevance of traditional Nigerian textiles in today's fashion industry. These textiles remain central to the nation's cultural identity.

According to Saheed (2013), Adire is a resist-dyed fabric traditionally created and worn by the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. The term "adire," meaning "tied and dyed," refers to indigo-dyed cloth featuring decorative resist patterns. The city of Abeokuta is widely regarded as the center of Adire production in Nigeria. Another famous Yoruba textile is

Aso Oke, described by Ogechi (2020) as a handwoven cloth used during major ceremonial occasions. Its variants, such as Sanyan and Alaari, differ in material and color, each carrying specific cultural symbolism (Agbadudu & Ogunrin, 2006). In response to practical demands, advancements in weaving and fabric composition have been introduced to reduce the traditionally heavy, thick texture of Aso Oke. As Oji (2007) explains, the use of lighter materials has improved the garment's wearability, particularly in Nigeria's tropical climate. In southeastern Nigeria, the Igbo people's Akwete cloth is celebrated for its elaborate weaving techniques and vibrant motifs.

Initially crafted from raffia, the cloth has evolved to combine cotton and silk, reflecting both its historical roots and its adaptability to modern textile trends (Chuku, 2013). Although Ankara is not indigenous to Nigeria, it has been widely embraced as an expression of African identity. Nwosu and Eze (2019) note that its distinctive prints and versatility have solidified its role in both traditional and contemporary Nigerian fashion. The resurgence of interest in traditional Nigerian textiles can be attributed to several compelling factors. A significant influence is the growing global preference for fashion that values cultural authenticity and environmental sustainability. Ibrahim (2024) reports that Nigerian consumers increasingly favor fashion labels that integrate traditional techniques, such as tie-dye, Adire, Aso Oke, Ankara, and Akwete, into modern styles. He further explains that incorporating these elements into contemporary designs not only preserves cultural identity but also offers economic opportunities for local artisans. Designers are thus encouraged to draw on traditional motifs to meet rising demand for garments rich in cultural expression. The broader global shift toward sustainable fashion practices has also played a crucial role. As Asunmo (2025) observes, many Nigerian designers are now adopting environmentally conscious approaches, utilizing traditional textiles and minimizing waste in their production processes. Complementing these trends, the Nigerian government has enforced policies to revitalize the textile sector by supporting local production and reducing dependence on imports. According to Daka (2024), such enterprises focus on empowering indigenous artisans and safeguarding cultural heritage, thereby fostering an environment conducive to the continued growth of traditional textile industries. Contemporary Nigerian designers have played a significant role in reimagining and preserving the

nation's traditional textiles within modern fashion narratives. Designers such as Amaka Osakwe, the creative force behind Maki Oh, are seamlessly integrating traditional techniques, such as the Yoruba resist-dye method known as Adire, into their collections. Osakwe's pieces feature indigo-dyed fabrics adorned with motifs that symbolize themes such as survival and chaos, all tailored into contemporary silhouettes. Her work stands as a clear example of how traditional methods can be merged with modern aesthetics, creating a dynamic fusion of past and present.

### **An Overview of Traditional Nigerian Textiles**

The term "textile" derives from the Latin *textere*, meaning "to weave." Historically, textiles referred to fabrics woven from fibers. This concept is deeply connected to traditional Nigerian textile practices, where weaving, dyeing, and other techniques are fundamental to creating iconic fabrics such as Adire, Aso Oke, and Akwete. According to Vocabulary (2020), textiles are produced through processes such as knitting, weaving, or crocheting, which align with the traditional techniques used to craft fabrics like Aso Oke, a handwoven material central to Yoruba culture. The Business Dictionary (2020) defines textiles as materials made from synthetic or natural fibers, including cotton, linen, and wool, all of which play significant roles in producing traditional Nigerian fabrics. In Nigeria, textiles go beyond their utilitarian use in clothing. They are also imbued with cultural significance. For instance, Adire, a resist-dyed fabric popular among the Yoruba people, features intricate patterns that carry symbolic meaning, representing survival, chaos, or unity. As Okeke (2002) notes, traditional Nigerian textiles are not only produced through mechanical means but are also crafted by hand, preserving age-old techniques that continue to define Nigerian identity and heritage. These textiles serve as a bridge between functional design and cultural expression, making them a key element in the narrative of Nigerian fashion.

The role of textiles in Nigerian culture extends beyond clothing. As Banjoko (2000) notes, textiles in Nigeria are also a form of art, with techniques such as batik, tie-dye, and block printing used to decorate fabrics. These processes are integral to traditional fabrics like Akwete cloth, woven by the Igbo people from cotton or raffia, and Adire, which features designs created through resist-dyeing. The intricate designs and vibrant colors often reflect the stories and values of those who wear them,

consistent with Sampson's (2016) view that textile design is both functional and expressive. As Nigerian textile design continues to evolve, it maintains its cultural roots while embracing modern techniques. The shift toward sustainability and eco-conscious fashion has led to a resurgence of traditional techniques, with contemporary Nigerian designers incorporating elements such as tie-dye and embroidery into their work (Ganagana, 2014). These traditional techniques, grounded in the rich history of Nigerian textile design, continue to express identity and pride while aligning with the global shift toward environmentally sustainable fashion. Textiles, as Cyril-Egware (2013) and Onobrakpeya (2009) highlight, are not only materials for clothing but also powerful means of identity expression. In Nigeria, the colors, patterns, and techniques used in traditional textiles tell stories about social status, cultural heritage, and personal identity. The intricate weaving techniques of Aso Oke and the symbolic patterns of Adire exemplify how textiles communicate cultural values. These textiles, therefore, represent more than just fabric; they are cultural artifacts that connect individuals to their heritage, environment, and community values. In the broader context of textile production, traditional Nigerian textiles also have practical applications beyond clothing. Techniques such as batik and appliqué are used to create decorative pieces for the home, such as upholstery, curtains, and bedding, blending cultural heritage with functional design. This aligns with the broader definition of textiles as materials used in various industries, from fashion to interior design (Banjoko, 2000). Moreover, the inclusion of traditional textiles in modern Nigerian fashion further emphasizes their versatility and relevance in both local and global contexts, as seen in the work of contemporary designers such as Amaka Osakwe, who incorporates Adire into modern fashion; Lisa Folawiyo, who elevates Ankara through intricate beading and embroidery; and Akunna and Idaja, who have successfully bridged the gap between the past and the present, proving that traditional Nigerian textiles can flourish in a modern world without losing their cultural importance. Their collections not only preserve Nigeria's rich textile heritage but also offer an ingenious, stylish alternative to global fashion. Through their art, they are redefining how traditional techniques can be used to express contemporary African identity, making a lasting impact on the global fashion industry.

## **The Transition of Traditional Nigerian Textiles into Contemporary Fashion**

The global fashion industry has increasingly embraced traditional textiles with contemporary design aesthetics. In Nigeria, this shift has evolved into a dynamic movement that not only reimagines fashion but also functions as a means for cultural preservation, sustainable development, and economic empowerment. The adaptation of traditional Nigerian textiles into contemporary fashion narratives exemplifies the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems and the enduring adaptability of cultural identity in an ever-changing world.

### **1. Cultural Preservation Through Fashion**

Traditional textiles in Nigeria, such as Adire, Aso Oke, and Ankara, embody centuries of cultural heritage and often serve as symbols of identity, status, and communal history. As globalisation speeds up cultural homogenization, preserving these fabric-making techniques and motifs has become increasingly essential. Nigerian designers are using fashion as a platform to conserve and celebrate cultural memory. Lisa Folawiyo, for instance, has revolutionised the perception and use of Ankara fabric. Once viewed as an everyday material, her designs elevate it to high fashion through the use of hand-beading, embroidery, and print layering. According to Lisa F. (2023), her work has transformed Ankara into luxurious, ready-to-wear garments that captivate a global audience. This reinvention highlights the evolving relevance of traditional textiles in contemporary fashion systems. Chukueggu (2002) affirms that Nigerian textile patterns often function as communicative tools, narrating community-specific stories, customs, and values.

He argues that their inclusion in contemporary fashion sustains indigenous knowledge, particularly for younger generations who may otherwise lose connection with their cultural roots. Similarly, Okeke (1994) contends that traditional African art forms, including textiles, act as historical documents. Their reinterpretation in fashion design represents an ongoing cultural conversation and identity construction. In his view, fashion serves as both a medium for personal expression and a form of cultural resistance and reclamation, particularly in postcolonial societies. However, contemporary artists such as Onyeocha Cynthia Akunna and Idaja Abel have also played a vital role in this cultural preservation. Their

innovative Unix clothing lines integrate traditional techniques and earthy colour palettes with modern tailoring. Drawing on Yoruba-rooted practices such as Adire and batik, their collections feature intricate resist-dyeing techniques, bold indigo hues, and symbolic patterns that convey narratives of identity and social status. The incorporation of batik and Ankara adds further richness, with vibrant designs that evoke pride in African history and heritage. Their work exemplifies a seamless blend of the past and present, affirming that traditional Nigerian textiles can not only survive but also flourish in contemporary fashion landscapes. These collections preserve Nigeria's textile heritage while offering fresh, creative alternatives to mass-produced global fashion. Through their artistry, Akunna and Abel are redefining how traditional techniques are used to articulate contemporary African identity, thereby reshaping global perceptions of Nigerian fashion.

## 2. Sustainability in Fashion

As the fashion industry increasingly prioritises environmental responsibility, there is a growing recognition of traditional practices that naturally align with sustainable values. Traditional Nigerian textile techniques, characterised by handcrafting, natural dyeing, and locally sourced materials, are inherently sustainable. These methods reduce reliance on synthetic inputs and minimise industrial waste, offering environmentally conscious alternatives within the fashion sector. Textile remnants, often perceived as waste, can be repurposed into garments and interior decor items, as stated by Akunna (2023). This not only celebrates Nigerian cultural heritage but also contributes to environmental conservation by reducing textile waste. Her approach also underscores the importance of participatory, community-based practices, which can foster social development by empowering youth and emerging artists in contemporary society. Supporting this perspective, O'Neill (2018) describes traditional textile practices as an early form of eco-conscious design. She argues that when these methods are incorporated into modern fashion, they create a dialogue between past and future, allowing for continuity that honours both ecological and cultural principles. However, the environmental benefits of indigenous textile production can serve as viable models for sustainable development across Africa, as noted by Chukueggu and Cyril-Egware (2008). With consistent support from

fashion designers and consumers, such practices can help build a fashion ecosystem where both the environment and local communities thrive.

### 3. Economic Development and Empowerment

Fashion, beyond its aesthetic and artistic appeal, has become a powerful source for economic growth. In Nigeria, the renewal and growth of traditional textiles into contemporary fashion have not only reawakened cultural heritage but also stimulated job creation, artisan empowerment, and strengthened local economies. One prominent example is Kenneth Ize, a contemporary Nigerian designer acclaimed for his collaboration with Aso Oke weavers in Kwara State. Thus, his inclusive production model emphasizes the importance of indigenous craftsmanship, ensuring fair payment and global visibility for local artisans. Through such collaborations, traditional skills are preserved while contributing meaningfully to the economic fabric of communities. However, Chukueggu and Cyril-Egware (2008) emphasize the need for sustained governmental and private-sector support further to integrate these artisans into broader national and international markets. He argues that when fashion houses adopt authentic sourcing and foster community-based partnerships, the benefits wave across the entire value chain, from rural dyers and weavers to urban retailers and fashion houses. Additionally, events such as the Lagos Fashion and Design Week (LFDW) have become essential platforms for showcasing designers who embrace traditional techniques. However, this process will attract international buyers and investors; such events significantly increase market exposure and promote sustainable investment in the Nigerian textile and fashion industry (Chukueggu, 2002)

### 4. Academic Contributions

Nigerian academic institutions and scholars have played a paramount role in recording and analysing the evolution of traditional textiles within modern fashion contexts. Universities such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Ahmadu Bello University; and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education have contributed enormously to research in textile history, material culture, and symbolic meaning. One of the most influential figures in this area was Uche Okeke, a founding member of the Zaria Art Society, who advocated the "Natural Synthesis" ideology. This approach has deeply inspired textile artists and fashion designers committed to preserving

cultural authenticity while embracing innovation (Okeke, 1994). Through academic programs in textile design, cultural studies, and visual arts, a new generation of designers is emerging, one that views fashion as a form of artistic expression and a tool for cultural advocacy. In this regard, Nike Davies-Okundaye's involvement in arts education and community-based workshops underscores the value of transmitting traditional techniques through experiential learning and mentorship. Despite these efforts, Chukueggu and Eguare (2008) advocate for a more integrated curriculum that combines hands-on training in indigenous textile methods with contemporary design principles. Such an approach equips students not only with technical skills but also with a deeper understanding of the cultural and ecological significance of their creative practices.

## **Challenges and Prospects in the Transition of Traditional Textiles into Contemporary Fashion**

### **1. Globalisation**

Globalisation, while fostering the exchange of business ideas and expanding fashion influences, has also negatively impacted indigenous textile industries. Inexpensive, mass-produced fabrics from Asia have flooded African markets, intensifying competition for local artisans (Osei-Bonsu, 2020). These imported textiles are not only more affordable and widely available but are often perceived as more fashionable, particularly among younger consumers influenced by Western trends. As a result, the demand for traditionally made local fabrics has diminished, placing the economic viability of indigenous textile producers at serious risk.

### **2. Inadequate Facilities and Technological Limitations**

A significant barrier to the growth of Nigeria's traditional textile industry is inadequate infrastructure. The production of hand-dyed, hand-woven, or hand-embroidered fabrics requires not only artisanal skill but also access to proper working conditions and modern tools. Unfortunately, many Nigerian artisans operate within informal systems, utilising basic equipment in non-standardised environments. Access to essential resources, such as modern dyeing facilities, sustainable raw materials, and well-equipped production spaces, remains severely limited. Okundaye (2019) emphasises that this deficiency hampers scalability, making it challenging for artisans to meet the volume and quality demanded by contemporary fashion designers, especially when attempting to fulfil

large-scale or international orders. Consequently, traditional fabrics struggle to secure a strong position within the global fashion industry (Okundaye, 2019). To address this issue, O'Neill (2018) advocates for a multi-stakeholder approach. Bridging the infrastructure gap will require strategic collaboration among government agencies, educational institutions, and private-sector stakeholders. Without such coordinated efforts, innovation and growth in traditional textile production will continue to lag, limiting its potential contribution to sustainable fashion and economic development in Nigeria.

### 3. Budgeting and Ethnic Collaboration

In the 21st century, the increasing popularity of Nigerian textiles on international platforms has brought cultural budgeting issues to the forefront. Numerous global fashion brands frequently utilise Nigerian textile prints and designs without providing appropriate credit or compensation to the communities responsible for their creation. This lack of recognition not only undermines the cultural significance of these textiles in Nigeria but also deprives artists, artisans, and their communities of potential financial gains. The fashion industry often overlooks the cultural significance and contributions of the artisans and craftspeople involved. According to Mulderrig (2020), there is a pressing need for ethical sourcing, transparent collaboration, and the protection of the philosophical rights regarding Nigerian indigenous designs. The absence of legal frameworks in many African countries facilitates the exploitation of traditional motifs by external brands without accountability. Furthermore, establishing proper documentation and organising textile designs under a cohesive umbrella are essential to mitigate the risk of compromising originality. If traditional motifs are to maintain their relevance and prestige within contemporary fashion, agencies dedicated to the protection of cultural ownership must be implemented, as asserted by Chukueggu and Eguare (2008)

## **The Prospects in the Transition of Nigeria's Textile**

### 1. Education and Skills Development

Education plays an important role in preserving traditional textile techniques, ensuring that these valuable skills are passed down to future generations. However, a significant challenge is the lack of structured training programs that impart this knowledge, placing these rich traditions

at risk of fading into obscurity. Despite this concern, there are promising signs of revival propelled by both educational institutions and dedicated individuals. Textile departments at esteemed universities such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Yaba College of Technology in Lagos are taking proactive steps to integrate traditional textile techniques into their academic curricula. This initiative not only enhances the preservation of these indigenous skills but also fosters a modernisation approach that equips students with the necessary tools to thrive in contemporary artistic environments.

Prominent artists such as Nike Davies-Okundaye have made significant strides in this field by establishing community-based training centres. At her centres, young individuals are taught traditional techniques such as Adire, a resist-dyeing method using indigo, and Batik, which involves applying wax to fabric before dyeing. This innovative approach, as highlighted by Okundaye (2019), effectively merges art education with entrepreneurship, providing participants not only with the knowledge of traditional crafts but also with viable income-generating opportunities. The philosophical concept of “natural synthesis,” advocated by Okeke (1994), states that the unification of traditional and modern art practices. This ideology serves as an ongoing source of inspiration for contemporary textile educators and practitioners who perceive traditional methods not as outdated relics but as vibrant and dynamic tools for artistic expression and economic empowerment. Through these collaborative and educational efforts, there is hope for a flourishing future where traditional textile arts can thrive and evolve.

## 2. Global Market Access

The international fashion market is brimming with opportunities for traditional textiles, particularly in today's digital marketing and e-commerce landscape. As consumers around the globe increasingly seek ethical fashion, sustainability, and cultural authenticity, African textiles are rising in popularity. Designers such as Kenneth Ize, Lisa Folawiyo, Duro Olowu, Urekwere Joe-Mgbakiri, Onyecha Akunna, and Idaja Abel have effectively brought Nigerian aesthetics to both international and local runways. Their brands serve as cultural ambassadors for Nigeria, demonstrating that tradition and modernity can coexist harmoniously rather than being at odds. According to The Guardian (2024), tapping into

global markets requires logistical support, branding expertise, and trade facilitation. By providing local artisans with opportunities to showcase traditional Nigerian textiles at major events like Paris Fashion Week, we could see a significant boost in their international prominence.

## **Conclusion**

The transition of traditional Nigerian textiles into contemporary fashion reflects a powerful collaboration among cultural heritage, artistic originality, and responsiveness to modern design. This blending has not only revived indigenous artisanship but also elevated Nigerian fashion within global dialogues on ethical production by reinterpreting fabrics such as Adire, Aso Oke, Ankara, and Batik for modern audiences. Textile designers are preserving time-honored techniques while adapting them to evolving tastes and global market demands. This cultural renaissance carries deep significance. It safeguards cultural heritage, strengthens community creativity, and affirms cultural pride. Economically, this transition has created jobs, nurtured entrepreneurship, and contributed to the growth of Nigeria's creative industries. Ecologically, the focus on local materials and traditional methods aligns with sustainable fashion ideals, offering a compelling alternative to the negative impacts of industrial mass production.

Collectively, it offers a stand against the cultural integration often driven by globalization. However, to sustain and expand this momentum, urgent challenges must be addressed. These include limited infrastructure, inadequate policy protections, undervalued indigenous knowledge systems, and risks to cultural budgets. Without purposeful and collaborative efforts, the refinements that breathe life into traditional textile practices may lose their resilience. Looking ahead, the future lies in an extensive strategy that incorporates assets in education, skills development, global market access, and supportive government policies. Collaborative efforts among designers, artisans, scholars, and policymakers are essential to bridging generational divides and facilitating creation rooted in tradition. By respecting artisans as custodians of culture and supporting their transition into contemporary fashion systems, Nigeria positions itself not only as a steward of heritage but also as a vibrant global fashion arena, where tradition and originality serve as twin pillars of advancement and cultural continuity.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. Textile and fashion designers in Nigeria should form regional associations under a national body to regularly meet and develop policies that protect traditional textiles from piracy and promote their preservation.
2. The government should prioritize investment in Nigeria's textile and fashion industries by providing modern infrastructure, advanced equipment, and AI technology. This support will enhance the quality and visibility of traditional designs, enabling them to compete effectively both locally and globally.
3. Textile and fashion designers in Nigeria should actively collaborate with international partners and participate in global exhibitions. Such platforms will enrich the perspective of traditional Nigerian prints and foster their preference on the world stage.
4. Nigerian institutions should assimilate traditional textile techniques into their fashion and art curricula to ensure that these skills are passed on to younger generations. Additionally, all universities offering art programs should include both textile and fashion departments, as this combined approach will facilitate deeper knowledge exchange and collaboration.
5. Launching public awareness campaigns to highlight the historical, artistic, and economic significance of Nigerian traditional textiles. These efforts will foster national pride, increase local demand, and strengthen partnerships with local artisans that prioritize authenticity, fair compensation, and cultural respect.

## Photo Collection



**Artist:** Onyeocha, Cynthia Akunna  
**Title:** *Ngongo Nwanyi* (Female Periwinkle)  
**Media:** Batik  
**Size:** 3 Yards  
**Year:** 2023



**Artist:** Onyeocha, Cynthia Akunna  
**Title:** *ìhè ọnwá* (Moonlight)  
**Media:** Batik  
**Size:** 5 Yards  
**Year:** 2024



**Artist:** Onyeocha, Cynthia Akunna  
**Title:** *Ezigbo Enyi M* (My Best Friend)  
**Media:** Tie Dye  
**Size:** 3 Yards  
**Year:** 2023



**Artist:** Idaja Abel  
**Title:** Harmony  
**Media:** Batik  
**Size:** 3 Yards  
**Year:** 2024



**Artist:** Onyeocha, Cynthia Akunna  
**Title:** *Njem* (Journey)  
**Media:** Tie Dye  
**Size:** 5 Yards  
**Year:** 2024



**Artist:** Idaja Abel  
**Title:** *Eni Chigbe* (Confidence)  
**Media:** Batik  
**Size:** 3 Yards  
**Year:** 2024

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