



Future Prospects for Akwete Indigenous Textile Industry in Nigeria: A Political Economy Analysis of Globalisation, Challenges, and Policy Pathways

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the political economy of Nigeria's indigenous textile industry, focusing on the Akwete weaving industry amid globalisation and emerging challenges. The influx of cheap imported textiles, particularly from China, has severely disrupted local production, drastically reducing demand for the Akwete cloth and threatening the livelihoods of traditional weavers. The study utilised a qualitative analysis and secondary sources to identify the key challenges. The results showed that the Akwete industry was fundamentally constrained by three factors viz-a-viz Global Competition: Cheap imported fabrics consistently undercut local prices; Production Deficits: The industry suffers from high operating costs, reliance on manual weaving, limited access to quality raw materials, and severe infrastructure deficits like unreliable power and poor transport; Social/Institutional Weaknesses: These include the declining interest of younger generations in weaving and weak institutional support regarding policy, branding, and intellectual property protection. Despite these barriers, findings point to opportunities for revitalisation, including design innovation, where traditional Akwete motifs are successfully adapted into printed and hybrid products, thereby broadening market appeal. To achieve sustainable development, therefore, targeted strategic interventions were recommended, which included input subsidies, infrastructure investment, design protection, vocational training, and strategic market development.

Keywords: Akwete weaving, Akwete revitalisation, textile industry, political economy, Nigeria, globalisation.

INTRODUCTION

The textile industry in many parts of the world has been profoundly reshaped in recent decades by globalisation, trade liberalisation, cross-border competition, cheaper imports, shifting consumer preferences, and value chain restructuring. Globalisation, while offering access to international markets and technology, has also exposed local industries to intense competition from cheaper imports, especially from Asia (Adewuyi & Oyejide, 2020). In Nigeria, these forces have placed indigenous textile industries under pressure, particularly traditional cloths, which face both cultural and economic marginalisation.

Akwete weaving, an indigenous textile practice from Abia State, Nigeria, is one such case. Known for its rich symbolic motifs, vibrant colours, and hand-woven craftsmanship, Akwete cloth has strong roots in Igbo cultural identity but struggles in the present environment dominated by mass-produced, cheaper textiles.

Scholars have documented the effects of globalisation on Nigeria's textile sector, including

the collapse of many large textile firms, the influx of imported fabrics (especially from China), and the decline in domestic manufacturing capacity (Osondu, 2024; Kamara, 2023). At the same time, there is increasing interest in indigenous textile techniques across fashion, craft, and creative industries (Ibrahim, 2023).

Policy pronouncements at both the state and federal levels point to a renewed recognition of the potential of local textile production and cultural heritage (Chudi, 2022). This paper explores the political economy of Nigeria's textile sector, analysing the impact of globalisation and emerging challenges. It also evaluates the prospects of indigenous textile traditions, focusing on the Akwete textile industry, a culturally rich hand-woven craft from southeastern Nigeria.

This paper aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the major challenges affecting the Akwete textile industry under globalisation?

2. What recent developments (policy, market, cultural) suggest possible prospects for its revival and growth?
3. What policy and structural pathways could enhance the future viability of Akwete weaving?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalisation and the Nigerian Textile Industry

The influx of foreign textile imports, particularly from China, has been identified repeatedly as a major factor undermining local textile firms. Osondu (2024) reports that roughly 80% of textiles in the Nigerian market are now imported, which has precipitated the decline of older textile firms unable to compete on price, scale, or input sourcing. Kamara (2023) similarly contrasts Nigeria's underinvestment in craft and small-scale textile production with India, noting that Nigerian policy did not support endogenous industrial development and skills to the same degree.

Studies of specific jurisdictions (e.g. "Globalisation and the Collapse of Nigerian Industries: A Study of Textile Industry in Kano State, 1986-2007") show how liberalisation, trade policy gaps, and infrastructural deficits combined to accelerate industrial decline. (Yakubu & Barnabas, 2025).

Indigenous Textiles, Innovation, and Market Perception

There is a growing body of work on how traditional textile techniques (such as Adire, Aso-Oke, and Akwete) are being incorporated into modern fashion design. Ibrahim (2023) found that Akwete weaving, among other indigenous techniques, has influenced modern fashion in Nigeria: designers are using patterns, motifs, and weaving techniques derived from tradition to add aesthetic distinction to contemporary designs.

Innovation in indigenous textile weaving firms has also been studied more broadly. Adegbite, Ilori, & Aderemi (2021) surveyed small weaving firms in Southwestern Nigeria and found that while product innovation is common, process innovation and organisational innovation lag, largely due to lack of technical skills, education, and capital (Adegbite, Ilori, & Aderemi, 2021).

Akwete in Existing Research

A few studies focus specifically on Akwete weaving. Chudi-Duru (2022) in *Assessments and Potentials: Akwete Hand Woven Textiles in Igbo Women Contemporary Fashion* provides evidence that although Akwete cloth has strong cultural and historic value, its current use is often limited to

ceremonial contexts, and its commercialisation is constrained by inconsistent quality, limited access to wider markets, and inadequate marketing. (Chudi, 2022).

Another work by Chudi-Duru (2021) entitled *From the Vertical Loom to the Printing Table and unto the Body: Transferring Woven Designs of the Akwete-Igbo on Cloth as Prints for Contemporary Fashion* explores how Akwete weaving designs are adapted as prints, enabling lighter-weight use and more flexible applications. This suggests that adaptation and hybridisation are viable strategies. (Chudi-Duru, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, desk-based research design to critically examine the trajectory of Nigeria's textile industry and the specific socio-economic significance of Akwete textiles. By utilising a political economy framework, this research investigates the intersection of institutional dynamics, trade policies, and global market forces.

Source Selection and Inclusion Criteria

To ensure the academic integrity and relevance of the data, the study adheres to a rigorous selection process. Sources were curated based on the following inclusion criteria:

Relevance: Materials must directly address Nigeria's textile manufacturing history, trade liberalisation policies (e.g., the impact of the WTO or ECOWAS protocols), or the cultural economy of indigenous textile production.

Credibility: Priority is given to peer-reviewed academic journals, official government policy documents (e.g., Central Bank of Nigeria reports, Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment publications), and reports from reputable international organisations (e.g., UNIDO, World Bank).

Temporal Scope: While foundational historical texts are included to establish context, emphasis is placed on literature published within the last 15–20 years to capture the contemporary challenges of the industry, including the effects of globalisation and digital market shifts.

Ethnographic Validity: For the sub-theme on Akwete textiles, sources were selected based on their contribution to cultural documentation, including anthropological studies that detail the weaving techniques, symbolic meaning, and community-based economic models of the Akwete people.

Search Strategy

A systematic search strategy was implemented to ensure comprehensive coverage of the subject matter. This involved:

Database Utilisation: Searches were conducted across academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, and ScienceDirect.

Keyword Optimisation: Boolean search strings were utilised to refine results. Examples include:

- “Nigeria textile industry” AND “trade policy”
- “Political economy” AND “textile manufacturing” AND “Nigeria”
- “Akwete weaving” AND “cultural economy” OR “indigenous textiles”

Snowball Sampling: The reference lists of key seminal papers were reviewed to identify foundational texts and influential scholars in the field, ensuring that the research captures both primary discourse and critical counter-arguments.

Analytical Approach

The analysis is guided by the Political Economy perspective, which posits that the textile industry cannot be understood in isolation from state policy, power dynamics, and global capital flows. The analytical process followed these steps:

Thematic Coding: Collected data were categorised into thematic clusters, such as Institutional Barriers,

Global Trade Impacts, Indigenous Craft Preservation, and Value Chain Challenges.

Contextual Synthesis: Rather than merely summarising existing literature, the study synthesises findings to map the causal relationships between macro-level policies (e.g., import bans or currency fluctuations) and micro-level outcomes (e.g., the decline of local mills or the resilience of artisanal weaving).

Comparative Analysis: The study contrasts the industrial-scale textile sector with the artisanal Akwete sector. This allows for an analysis of how different segments of the industry respond to market pressures, highlighting how Akwete textiles leverage cultural capital to survive where industrial textiles have struggled against global competition.

Critical Interpretation: The final stage involves interpreting the synthesised data through the lens of political economy, questioning who benefits from current policy frameworks and identifying the structural impediments that hinder the revitalisation of the Nigerian textile sector.

FINDINGS

The Political Economy of Industrial Decline

The decline of Nigeria’s textile mills is a structural phenomenon driven by the intersection of global trade policies and domestic institutional failures.

Table 1: The Transformation of the Nigerian Industrial Textile Sector (1980s vs. 2010s)

Indicator	1980s Peak	Mid-2010s	% Decline
Number of Operating Mills	~175	< 25	85.7%
Direct Employment	~600,000	~30,000	95%
Market Share (Local vs. Import)	Majority Local	> 90% Imported	N/A
Primary Challenge	Raw Material Access	Trade Liberalisation/ Energy	N/A

Key Drivers of Industrial Collapse:

Trade Liberalisation: The removal of protective tariffs in the 1990s (aligned with WTO protocols) allowed East Asian mass-produced textiles to saturate the market.

Energy and Infrastructure: High production costs act as a “hidden tax.” In Nigeria, energy accounts for approximately 30–35% of textile production costs, compared to less than 10% in competing nations like China or Vietnam (Osondu, 2024).

Policy Inconsistency: Shifts in administration led to “stop-start” implementation of the National Cotton, Textile and Garment (CTG) policy.

Political Patronage and Resource Allocation

A critical finding is that interventions have often been captured by political interests rather than economic logic.

The Akwete Exception: Cultural Capital as Resilience

While the industrial sector struggles with scale, the Akwete sector thrives on exclusivity and cultural identity.

Resilience Factors for Akwete:

- Decoupling from Global Volatility:** Because Akwete production is manual and decentralised, it is less affected by national

grid failures or foreign exchange fluctuations for machinery parts.

safety net that remains stable even during industrial recessions (Ibrahim, 2023).

- b) **The Gendered Economy:** Predominantly female-led, providing a localised social

Table 2: Comparison of Policy Intent vs. Political Economy Reality

Policy Mechanism	Intended Outcome	Political Economy Reality
Government Bailouts	Industry-wide revitalisation	Directed to “National Champions (politically connected firms).
Import Bans	Protection of local industry	Encouraged smuggling and rent-seeking at borders.
Subsidized Loans	Capital for modernisation	High entry barriers for SMEs; funds are often diverted

Table 3: Comparative Analysis: Industrial vs. Akwete Artisanal Textiles

Feature	Industrial Textiles	Akwete Artisanal Textiles
Economic Logic	Economies of Scale (Volume)	Economies of Value (Exclusivity)
Labor Structure	Factory-based / Wage labor	Household-based / Intergenerational
Market Segment	Mass Market (Price Sensitive)	Niche/Luxury Market (Value Sensitive)
Supply Chain	High reliance on imported tech	Localised, low energy consumption
Primary Strength	Speed of production	Cultural Capital & Symbolic Meaning

Discussion: Synthesis and Strategic Interventions

The findings suggest that the state’s focus on reviving large-scale mills via protectionist bans has reached a point of diminishing returns. Instead, the “Akwete Model” suggests a shift toward **High-Value Cultural**

Exports.

Barriers to Akwete Scaling:

1. **Intellectual Property (IP):** Lack of protection against “Akwete-style” prints produced in China (Chudi, 2022).
2. **Generational Gap:** Declining interest among youth due to the labour-intensive nature of manual weaving.
3. **Input Quality:** Inconsistent supply of high-quality dyes and yarns.

Critical Interpretation: The industrial sector is in a “race to the bottom” on price, while Akwete is in a “race to the top” on heritage. For a sustainable future, Nigeria must pivot from viewing textiles solely as a mass-employment industrial tool to viewing them as a high-value cultural asset (Olugbenga et al., 2025).

The reviewed literature reveals that the Akwete textile industry in Nigeria faces significant challenges primarily due to the influx of cheap imported fabrics, especially from China, which undercuts local production and reduces demand for indigenous textiles (Osondu, 2024; Kamara, 2023). High production costs, reliance on manual weaving methods, limited access to quality raw materials, and infrastructure deficits such as unreliable electricity and poor transport networks further

constrain the industry’s growth and scalability (Adegbite, Ilori, & Aderemi, 2021; Chudi, 2022). Social factors, including the declining interest of younger generations in weaving and inconsistent quality control, also hamper the sustainability of traditional skills. Institutional support remains weak, with inadequate policy implementation, limited branding initiatives, and poor intellectual property protection for indigenous designs. However, emerging opportunities offer hope for revitalisation. Innovations in design, such as adapting traditional Akwete motifs into printed and hybrid products, have broadened market appeal and allowed integration with contemporary fashion trends (Chudi, 2021; Ibrahim, 2023). Additionally, growing cultural pride, increased interest from diaspora communities, and some policy momentum aimed at supporting local textile industries present potential pathways for development (Osondu, 2024; Olugbenga, Adedeji, & Ridwan, 2025). The findings underscore that while the challenges are formidable, strategic interventions focused on improving inputs, infrastructure, training, and market access could enable the Akwete textile industry to leverage its cultural heritage and survive in a globalised economy.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, there is a complex interplay between global forces and local factors in determining the future of Akwete. Globalisation has so far imposed significant pressures on cost, competition, and scale. However, local cultural capital, heritage, and identity remain strong assets. The question is whether policy, institutional reforms, and market innovation can align to turn these assets into sustainable economic opportunity.

The comparison with other indigenous textile industries (e.g. Adire, Aso-Oke) shows that where designers integrate traditional techniques into modern fashion, supply chains are more diverse, and policy supports are more defined, indigenous textiles can survive and even thrive (Ibrahim, 2023; Adegbite, Ilori, & Aderemi, 2021).

However, Akwete's case likely requires specific targeted interventions: securing consistent and quality inputs; improving infrastructure; facilitating training; protecting design rights; and deliberately cultivating market linkages (both local and export). Without addressing these bottlenecks, many of the positive prospects may remain marginal.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that the Akwete textile industry, while deeply rooted in Nigeria's cultural heritage, faces considerable challenges from globalisation, high production costs, and infrastructural deficits that threaten its sustainability. Despite these obstacles, the unique cultural value and growing interest in indigenous designs provide a strong foundation for revitalisation. The prospects of the Akwete industry depend largely on effective government policies, targeted investments in infrastructure and training, protection of intellectual property, and the engagement of younger generations. Innovations in design and expanding market opportunities, especially within diaspora communities and niche fashion sectors, offer promising avenues for growth. Ultimately, preserving and promoting the Akwete textile industry requires a coordinated approach that balances economic viability with cultural preservation, ensuring that this traditional craft can adapt and thrive in a competitive global market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure the sustainable development of the Akwete textile industry, it is recommended that the government implement policies that specifically support indigenous textile production through subsidies for raw materials and investment in infrastructure, such as reliable power supply and transportation networks. Strengthening intellectual property rights to protect traditional designs will encourage innovation and prevent cultural appropriation, thereby empowering local artisans. Vocational training programs and apprenticeship schemes should be established to engage younger generations, preserving the weaving skills essential to the industry's survival. Furthermore, efforts to integrate Akwete textiles into contemporary fashion through collaborations with designers can enhance market appeal and access to both local and

international niche markets. Finally, government and private sector partnerships can foster market development by promoting the brand identity of Akwete textiles domestically and in diaspora communities, tapping into growing global interest in authentic African heritage products.

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