

Revitalizing Okun Traditional Woven Fabrics: A Comprehensive Study of Socio-Cultural and Economic Impacts in Southwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors contributing to the decline of traditional Okun weaving and aimed to document and revitalize the craft to prevent its extinction, while it adopts methods to revive this cultural practice. Using a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection, the study gathered responses from weavers, users, lecturers, and students through interviews, questionnaires, and observations. Likert scale ratings were utilized to analyze the perceptions and attitudes towards the potential revival strategies for Okun woven fabrics. Findings reveal significant cultural and economic impacts and suggest strategic measures for resuscitation.

Keywords: Revitalization, Woven Fabrics, Socio-Cultural, Economic Impacts.

Introduction

Nigeria has various traditions in the production of fabrics; which have contributed to the socio-cultural and economic development of many ethnic groups. Nowadays, hand crafted woven fabrics have remained popular despite the intense competition with foreign textile products as efforts must have been made to preserve traditional values of Nigerians. This study is not aware of such efforts on the traditional methods and techniques of producing Okun indigenous fabric which is fast disappearing and not properly documented. In many Yoruba cities, towns, and villages in South-Western State of Nigeria and Kogi State which include Okun, Ebira and Igala in

particular. Weaving and dyeing were practised among the people. Most compounds used to have weaving looms and dyeing pits behind their yards or close to their compounds, where most weavers; men, women, young and old actively practiced. Examples of some works on other Nigerian traditional clothing cultures that have been documented include Maiwada (2001) who studied Hausa silk woven garment, Ada (2006) studies Idoma traditional weaving fabrics, Idiogu (2003), “the traditional cloth of Tiv” and Saliu (1984) “Okene traditional Weaving” to mention but a few. The Okun are located at the Western part of Kogi State in the following Local Government Areas: Kabba-Bunu, Ijumu, Yagba East and Yagba West, Mopa-Amuro and Lokoja. Simoyin (2002) reports that, people of Okun are Yoruba speaking extraction, currently occupying the Western area of Kogi State, Nigeria. The area was formally referred as Kabba Division during Colonial period. The word “Okun” was coined from the people’s mode of greetings. The introduction of the Western education, especially the Christian Missionaries, affected virtually every aspect of their social life, *visa viz* the social, spiritual and occupation, and their activities which include cloth weaving as examined and discussed in this study.

Weaving was another industry that witnessed spectacular change after the introduction of Western education. According to Roseline (2018), few educated females who went back to cloth weaving did not depend on the local way of weaving. The Western education has had negative impact on the indigenous textile production, and traditional dress of Okun people (Roseline, 2018). The author states that, due to the change in the taste of cloth worn by the educated elite, Okun people began to buy imported cloths, generally known as *Aso Oyinbo* (foreign fabrics) which gradually replaced their own hand woven cloth known as *Kijipa*, *Kente*, *Aso-oke*, and *Ari Kubu*, which were

previously worn as every day dress. With such cloths, the people instituted new fashions including the weaving of wrappers known as *Iro* (separate blouse) – like tops known as *Buba* for women and tailored shirts known as *Awu*, and trousers known as *Sokoto* for men. For this reason, Roseline (2018) concludes that, the people of Okun land had expressed their identification with the outsiders, and their approval of changes introduced by missionaries and colonial masters. Hence, Okun woven fabric is no more popular among the people that it meant for. Cloth weaving served as one of the major sources of revenue generation for about 80% of the women folk in the land, and cotton served as raw materials for cloth weaving.

This is the concern of this research that, the weaving fabric of the Okun should be documented and resuscitated back to life for the present generation, so that the woven fabric will not go into extinction, unlike their sister neighbouring town that produces ‘Okene cloth’ practiced by the Ebira cloth weavers. It is noted by Saliu (1984) that, Ebira traditional cloth weaving is one of the major occupations engaged by Ebira women. It is against this background that, this study seeks to venture in to this research in order to reawake the lost glory of Okun woven textiles.

Methodology

Research Design: The study is qualitative and descriptive, using a survey method.

Population and Sampling: The population includes weavers, users, students, and lecturers in Kogi State Polytechnic and surrounding areas. A sample of 367 participants was selected using purposive sampling.

Data Collection: Data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, and observations, with a focus on primary data from respondents and secondary data from various literature sources.

Data Analysis and Results

The data were analyzed using a Likert scale to measure agreement levels on proposed revival strategies. Each item was rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The mean scores for each item were calculated to determine overall attitudes.

Table 1: Likert Scale Analysis of Revival Strategies

S/N	Items	Mean	Remarks
1.	The innovation produced in Okun woven fabrics will be produced for regular use in contemporary fashion of wears	4.37	Accepted
2.	The use of industrial yarns will aid the weavers to produce more fabrics instead of using traditional methods	4.26	Accepted
3.	Innovation by the weavers in terms of weaving types of yarns, colours, and embellishment in order to stand any other ethnic group	4.25	Accepted
4.	The Okun woven fabrics should be attractive and appealing to buyers	4.23	Accepted

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5.	Through training of students, Okun woven fabrics will convey messages of promoting the culture of Okun people by the weavers	4.19	Accepted
6.	Okun weaving fabrics will be available to people of Yoruba and the immediate boundary of the Okun	4.09	Accepted
7.	Okun people have not gotten woven fabrics produced for fashion by contemporary weavers	4.06	Accepted
8.	Okun weavers should incorporate various new ideas to make Okun fabrics more acceptable	4.05	Accepted
9.	Okun hand woven fabrics have not been well utilized in Okun contemporary fashion	3.89	Accepted
10.	Okun hand woven fabrics have not been showcased in fashion shows in Nigeria	3.15	Accepted
	Only few Okun fashion designers display Okun fabrics on the internet	3.10	Accepted
	Grand Mean	3.97	Accepted

Source: Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work (2023)

Table 4.1 portrays the response on the utilization of Okun woven fabrics in contemporary fashion. The respondents strongly agreed to the following items: the innovation produced in Okun woven fabrics for regular use in contemporary fashion has a mean score of 4.37; the use of industrial yarns will aid the weaver in producing more fabrics, instead of using traditional methods, with a mean score of 4.26; innovation by the weavers in terms of weaving types of yarns, colours, and embellishments to stand out among other ethnic groups has a mean score of 4.25; the Okun woven fabric should be attractive and appealing to buyers, with a mean score of 4.23; through training, Okun woven fabrics will convey messages of promoting the culture of Okun people by the weavers, with a mean score of 4.19. Additionally, Okun woven fabrics will be available to the Yoruba and neighboring towns, with a mean score of 4.09; Okun people have not gotten woven fabrics produced for fashion by contemporary weavers, with a mean score of 4.06; Okun weavers should incorporate new ideas to make Okun fashion more acceptable, with a mean score of 4.05; Okun hand-woven fabrics have not been well utilized in Okun contemporary fashion in Nigeria, with a mean score of 3.89; Okun hand-woven fabrics have not been showcased in fashion shows in Nigeria, with a mean score of 3.15; and finally, only a few Okun fashion designers display Okun fabrics on the internet, with a mean score of 3.10. Based on the weighted mean average of 3.97, it can be deduced that Okun woven fabrics, which are going into extinction, can be revived through the production of fabrics for day-to-day use in fashion styling. This will increase their popularity among people who do not know that Okun woven fabrics still exist. These people have not appreciated and worn Okun woven fabrics, most of whom live within and outside of Okun land and Nigeria.

Interpretation of Results:

High Mean Scores (4.37 - 4.19): The highest scores indicate a strong agreement that innovation, use of industrial yarns, and training can significantly aid in the revival of Okun woven fabrics. These strategies are perceived as vital for making the fabrics relevant and attractive in contemporary fashion. Moderate Mean Scores (4.09 - 3.89): The moderate scores reflect a general consensus that while contemporary production and new ideas are crucial, there are existing gaps in the utilization and visibility of Okun fabrics within the fashion industry. Lower Mean Scores (3.15 - 3.10): The lower scores suggest that current efforts by Okun fashion designers to showcase and promote these fabrics, especially through modern platforms like the internet, are inadequate.

Studio Exploration 1: Workshop training of students in utilizing traditional Yoruba patterns for Okun contemporary woven fabric.

The utilization of traditional Yoruba patterns for Okun contemporary woven fabric was done in the studio of the School of Art, Design, and Printing (Textile section) at Kogi State Polytechnic, Lokoja. Yoruba woven patterns where contemporary Okun woven fabric is developed are discussed in the findings below:

i. *Sanyan*: *Sanyan* was woven with raw wool that has not been treated, mainly in beige colour with a little white. The beige colour took a larger part, while white was used at the center or as double white lines as warp for weaving. The weft has the same beige colour as the warp. It features a plain weave, and the fabric is expensive.



Fig. I: Old *Sanyan* of Yoruba woven fabric

Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work (2023)

ii. *Ayirin*: *Ayirin* is a Yoruba word for glittering woven materials. Such weaves were always glittering, usually referred to as *Oju to nsoro* ('shine-shine' design). Any attractive colours can be used by the weavers. The woven fabric can be used during weddings by the bride and little bride. While the shining thread of any colour can be used, the shine-shine effect will still appear. Plain weave can be used, but the weaver can interchange colours with one or more colours. The warp carries all the attractive colours, while the weft of the shuttle carries black, although sometimes little black can be used to outline the warp.

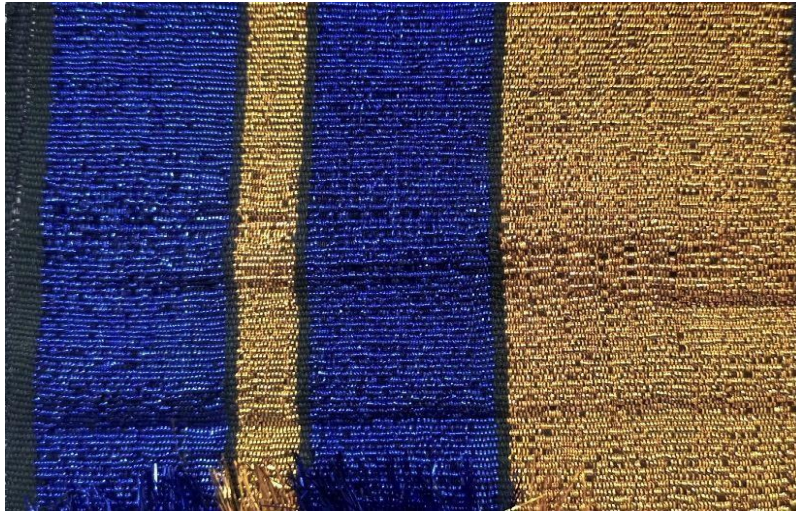


Fig. 2: *Ayinrin* Woven Fabric. **Source:** Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work (2023)

iii. *Eleya* (lace design): The weave appears like lace, with areas that look like lace holes, manipulated during weaving. In Yoruba, this is known as *Eya*, meaning it has holes. The weaver can choose the colour for the warp, while the weft shuttle may carry black.



Fig. 3: *Eleya* woven fabric.
Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work (2023)

iv. *Olono* (pattern weave): In Yoruba, Ono means design or patterns. It is always a plain weave, and colours can form the design on the fabric, which is why black is used for weaving with the shuttle as the weft. Mainly, black can be used as the weft to make any colour stand out, also used as the warp. Therefore, two, three, or more shuttles were used. The first one is the black used for weaving, and the second shuttle can take any other colour such as gold, silver, *ayirin*, and others.



Fig. 4: *Olono* woven fabric.

Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work (2023)

v. *Eyinre* (Cricket teeth): This fabric combines warp and weft colours used as a design. The design starts from the beginning of the warping and wefting to be woven to form the design. It takes time to weave, and the design is in small units of colours. *Eyinre*, known as cricket teeth, has a small design, and any colour can be used by the weaver.



Fig. 5: *Eyinre* woven fabric. **Source:** Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work (2023)

vi. *Eleko* (Ikat weave): The tie-dye method is used by the weaver. The warp yarn will be dipped into 'Eko,' which prevents any dye from penetrating the wool when dipped in the dye. After that, the warp will be soaked to remove the 'Eko' from the yarn. Then dark colours will be used as the weft to bring out other colours.



Fig. 6: *Eleko* (Ikat weave)

Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work (2023)

vii. *Aso-oba*: *Aso oba* is known as modern *Sanyan*, mixed with one of the royal colours, usually sky blue. Sky blue is used to design objects of the royal costumes such as *Irukere*, *Ade*, *Ileke*, and more on the *Sanyan*. When the fabric is seen, people will understand it to be for royalty.

The Weaving Process and Techniques

The horizontal loom has simple devices with a considerable development in the warp of length and with two heddles that are used, as well as a reed for beating the woven cloth. The weaving process involves interlacing a set of threads (warp and weft) at right angles to form fabrics (Adepeko, 2016, and Ada, 2006). The weaver's sitting position and the method of preparing the yarn are similar to other communities. During the fieldwork, the researcher observed that warp yarns laid out on the ground are predetermined by the weaver, indicating that the woven fabrics are designed before the final creation.

Warping training of the contemporary Okun fabric

The three short rods (*Sanrin*), 45cm long, were nailed to the ground, one at the lower side, while the remaining two were on the upper side of the ground. The one on the lower side was nailed to the ground diagonally, facing each other. The space between the two spaces is known as *aya-aso*. From the widest point was about 25cm, with the distance between the lower and the upper iron rods (*Sanri*) was 40ft; 45 inches was the length of the warp yarn for the samples produced during the field work. The colours follow each other as planned by the researcher, then after warping the various colours accordingly, each colour was carefully removed from the rods and tied at one end; and folded ready for the next spit in the weaving process on the horizontal loom. This was known

as sorting (*sis*). The yarns were sorted from the untied end. This was done according to the design layout.

The next step of the weaving process was the hecking called (*riri*) of the warped yarns put into the heddles (*omu*). The heddles have two layers, while the hecking started on the right side with the five greenish yarns. Each of the wrapped yarns was cut into two at the edge, one was tied to each of the heddles threads. This processes continued till the last, as well as the single beige wrapped yarn on the left. It is very important to understand that, hecking yarns must not be one sided in the heddles. Moreso, if there are hecking holes (unhecked holes), this should be in between the hecking ones hence, hecking must start from both ends of the heddles. This is very important so as to achieve the selvedge on the both sides of the woven fabric.

Furthermore, after the hecking, the yarns were hurry on the loom, whereby, the other end of the warp (unhacked end) was tightened with a small stock called *ukeke* and therefore, placed on the frag stone. As the warp was on the loom, the hacked yarns were re-arrayed properly according to the design layout for modern Okun woven fabric samples. The hacked yarns were then pulled gently through the beater (*asa*) while the huddles will push the rough end (where the heddles threads and the warped yarn were joined together one after another). Progressively, before the weaving took place properly, the weft yarns (filling yarn) (only black) was needed and prepared for the workshop of Okun woven fabrics, this was wound on a small stick known as (*akawu*). In order for the winding to be easier, the *akawu* was inserted into *kokogun* (a simple narrow rod that has a base at end about 25cm long). This *kokogun* is a locally made device used for flat purpose. After this method, the wound *akawu* was inserted into a shuttle (*oko*). To commence the weaving,

two sticks of broom were cut (each was about 20cm long), which were inserted into the end of the warped yarns on the loom in order to separate the begging of the waving from the rough ends. The weaver then sits on the bench fixed in the loom frame, then fixes his or her toes on the *atase* and starts manipulating the alternate opening of the heddles and simultaneously throws the shuttle (*oko*) through open heddles from the left to the right, then from the right to the left continuously.

As the weaver makes noticeable progress, he or she rolls the woven part and the cloth beams are possibly rolled by the help of the device called *ayiso*. *Ayiso* is a locally made rod of about 30cm long and 1.25cm thick, having one of its end fettered and inserted into the hole on the right side of the cloth beam. The weaver turns the *ayiso* down and then up to roll the woven part on the cloth beam during the weaving process. This process continues till the yarns are completely woven into the design pattern of Okun fabric, then it is cut from the cloth beam.



Fig. 7: The modern Okun woven fabric with coloured yarn displayed by the researcher
Source: Photograph by Adebayo Ruth: Field work (2023)

Meanwhile, four colours were utilized in the production of this modern pattern namely: blue, green, beige and white with symbolism. For instance, white symbolizes peace of Okun, blue represents the presence of Almighty God and beige stands for fertile land, while green symbolizes agriculture because Okun people are predominantly farmers. The combination of this four colours makes an interesting contemporary weave as shown in the images below:



Fig. 8: *Ayanrin* and *Sanyan* Design

Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work (2023)

Products from contemporary Okun woven fabrics:



Fig. 9: Hand bag of Okun fabric

Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work, 2023



Fig. 10: Shoe and Cap of Okun fabric
Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer:
Field work, 2023



Fig. 11: Cap of Okun fabric
Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer:
Field work, 2023



Fig. 12: Shoe and Cap of Okun fabric
Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer:
Field work, 2023



Fig. 13: Twins dressed in Okun fabric
(Gele, Iborun, and bata) in a standing show
Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer:
Field work, 2023



Fig. 14: Twins dressed in Okun fabric (Gele, Iborun, and bata) in a sitting show.
Source: Photograph by Alesagba Ebenezer: Field work, 2023

Discussion

The training of the students for resuscitating of Okun traditional woven fabric technique follow the procedure objective on 3.19 in chapter three, “The process of weaving Okun fabrics by Modern weavers in Okun land”, indicating the techniques and method of weaving on horizontal looms and the warping respectively.

Yahaya Bello, a weaver expressed during the interview that, the modern Okun woven fabrics were developed from the Yoruba Pattern to create the present Okun woven fabrics. Okun people are using the woven fabrics for the yearly pageant completion of Yeye Oge of Okun land. This study revealed that, with the creation of this modern pattern from *Sanyan*, *Eyinre*, *Ayinrin*, *Olon* and *Eleya* respectively, beautiful designs and colours will be acceptable by Okun people and the world at large. Apart from the Okun weavers, this study engaged the students of Kogi State Polytechnic, Lokoja by training them to understand the techniques and patterns which culminate various wears, such as shoes, shirts, and trousers top wrappers, head gears, and caps. Also, the study revealed a great deal of accessories while using green, beige, white and blue colours for warping and weft shuttles combine with black colour.

Yahaya further explained that, custodian of Okun culture chose the following colours for the modern Okun woven fabric: green, white, beige (carton colours) and sky blue for the weaving of the fabrics, then the weave numbers of each colour were chosen for 6 inches of a complete design: Green - 15 strips, Blue - 8 strips, White 3 - strips, Beige - 8 strips, the colours can then be distributed from a complete composition as:

Green White Blue Beige White Green

15 3 8 8 3 15 and for a complete weaving fabric wears, it will be:

Green White Blue Biege White Green

20 5 10 10 5 20

The width of the fabric is 23cm, the length depends on the weaver's choice, but 72cm or 39cm for the width can be woven on horizontal loom. For the vertical loom, Madam Aishat (2024) provided the following processes for weaving on vertical loom.

Green White Blue Biege White Green

25 10 20 20 10 25 to produce 110 strips for 6 inches weave.

Aishat explained during the interview that, part of these colours, beige are used for the king's cloth in Yoruba tradition (see Fig. I).

Conclusion

To prevent the extinction of Okun traditional woven fabrics, it is essential to document and innovate the weaving techniques. Training programs and strategic marketing efforts can revitalize this cultural heritage, ensuring its sustainability for future generations.

The Likert scale analysis reveals a positive attitude towards the proposed strategies for reviving Okun woven fabrics. The study concludes that with targeted innovations, use of modern materials,

and effective training programs, the decline of Okun traditional weaving can be reversed. Enhanced visibility and utilization of these fabrics in contemporary fashion are essential for sustaining this cultural heritage.

Recommendations:

i. Establishment of Training Programs: Develop comprehensive training programs aimed at young artisans to pass on traditional weaving techniques. This could involve workshops, apprenticeships, and partnerships with educational institutions to ensure that the skills and knowledge are preserved and adapted to modern contexts.

ii. Use of Modern Materials and Techniques: Encourage the integration of modern materials, such as industrial yarns, with traditional weaving methods. This could increase production efficiency and the durability of fabrics, making them more competitive in contemporary markets.

iii. Promotion and Marketing Strategies: Implement strategic marketing campaigns to raise awareness and appreciation of Okun woven fabrics. This could include fashion shows, online promotions, collaborations with contemporary fashion designers, and showcasing the fabrics at cultural festivals and exhibitions both locally and internationally.

iv. Development of Cooperative Societies: Form cooperative societies among weavers to pool resources, share knowledge, and collectively market their products. This could provide financial support, enhance bargaining power, and create a sense of community among weavers, which is crucial for sustaining traditional practices.

v. Documentation and Research: Undertake extensive documentation of the weaving processes, designs, and cultural significance of Okun fabrics. This could be in the form of books, digital archives, and multimedia content. Continuous research should be conducted to explore new ways to innovate and improve traditional weaving practices.

vi. Government and NGO Support: Seek support from government bodies and non-governmental organizations for funding, resources, and policy initiatives that protect and promote traditional weaving. This could include grants, subsidies, and the establishment of cultural preservation programs.

vii. Incorporation into Educational Curricula: Integrate traditional weaving techniques and the history of Okun fabrics into the educational curriculum at various levels. This would ensure that younger generations learn about their cultural heritage and the importance of preserving it.

viii. Creating Sustainable Business Models: Develop sustainable business models that balance traditional practices with commercial viability. This could involve eco-friendly production methods, fair trade practices, and partnerships with fashion brands committed to ethical sourcing and production.

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Serah Omoboja Idowu, February 27, 2023, the mother of Kabizesi, 92 years old, and 15 years old when she learnt weaving and brought to Ekinrin-Adde, Kogi State
Yahaya Bello, February 20, 2021, technician, weaver at Kogi State Polytechnic, Lokoja, Department of Industrial Design (Textile Section) Lokoja.