

# CLOTHE INDUSTRY IN ABA, NIGERIA: AN EXPOSITORY STUDY

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## **Abstract**

*After food and shelter, clothing is the next most important basic need of man. Kent in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria is the melting pot of clothe making, a hub of fashion, design and creativity. This is an expository investigation of the clothe industry in Kent in Aba, aimed at highlighting the industry and setting forth arguments concerning the industry. It adopted a participant observation technique to garner information, based on which it discussed the current challenges faced by the industry and tried to proffer solutions for the way forward.*

**Keywords:** *Aba clothe making industry, Economic diversification, Economic self-reliance, Employment generation.*

## **Introduction**

After food and shelter, clothing is the third basic need of man since the creation. Clothe making in Aba takes seeks to meet this vital need of man. It believes that good dressing adds flair and glamour to the physical, cultural and social look of people. Dressing speaks of a person, hence the saying that people address one the way one dresses.

Kent in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria is the melting pot of clothe making, a hub of fashion, design and creativity. A visit to Kent-Aba is thrilling, exciting, gripping, rousing, sensational, stimulating and stirring with African culture, tradition and pride expressed in made-in-Aba clothes. Kent is obviously comparable to Milan of Italy, where Domenico Dolce and Stefano Cabbana lived to make

their marks in fashion designing (Ifeanyi, 2017).

The maiden edition of the nation-wide Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) Clinic held in Aba, March 20-30, 2017 is an event to ever remember. Following his admiration of the display of creativity, craftsmanship, ingenuity, inventiveness, resourcefulness, talent and artistry of the clothe making industry in Aba, Abia State, Southeast geo-political zone of Nigeria, Professor Yemi Osibanjo, the Vice/Acting President of Nigeria, could not hide his feelings, but said, "Aba exemplifies such Nigerian attribute of being inventive. Aba has what it takes to compete with China" (Ifeanyi, 2017).

In a time the dwindling Nigerian economy has hit a recession mark from which it is just recovering and the federal government is touting diversification of Nigeria's monolithic (petroleum) economy, a highlight on Aba cloth industry is essential. This study is an expository report on the cloth industry in Kent in Aba. It is aimed at investigating the

industry, evaluating its evidence, expounding on the industry, and setting forth arguments concerning the industry in a clear and concise manner. It adopted a participant observation technique to garner information for an analytical report that also discusses the current challenges faced by the industry and tries to proffer solutions for the way forward.

### **Review of related literature**

Cloth industry has a long history in Aba and Igbo land in general. The earliest type of cloth was made from animal skins, the bark of trees, such as *aji* in Igbo land, and raffia palm tree leaves. Later, locally grown cotton became the main raw material for cloth making (Eluwa et al, 2005).

There is no doubt that cloth making is a great antiquity in Igbo land. An excavation at Igbo-Ukwu, Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, Southeast geo-political zone of Nigeria, dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD shows that by that time cotton cloth was already being produced in Igbo land. Among the Igbo people, the Elugwu people of northern Igbo land, Akwete women and the West Niger Igbo produced cotton cloth. Akwete cloth has remained popular and unique because of it lends itself to product differentiation based on colour and pattern. It is now regarded as a symbol of Igbo culture (Eluwa et al, 2005).

At the time, cloth making industry was seen and described as indigenous for a

number of reasons. The raw materials and tools required for the industries were generally locally produced. They were usually small scale and their organization was closely tied up with the lineage organization in which the skills and technique were passed on from father to son or from mother to daughter. Moreover, this industry pre-dated the coming of the white man in Igbo land and so could be regarded as not foreign but local and indigenous. Historians would prefer to call them local industries or local craft (Eluwa et al, 2005).

It was this local cloth craft industries in Igbo land that transformed and metamorphosed into the modern day Aba cloth making industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the coming of the European colonial masters to Igbo land, the Aba clothes industry has been blended and intermixed with post-colonial experience, fashion, civilization and modernization, even though the industry is propelled and driven by Igbo ingenuity and

creativity. Today, the clothe making industry in Kent in Aba comprises mostly large clothe production concerns that are closely tied to modern skills and technique of fashion designers (Ifeanyi, 2017).

### **Research methodology**

The expository study adopted the participant observation technique to garner information for analysis with simple statistical tools and for discussion of the current challenges faced by the industry and an attempt to proffer solutions for the way forward.

### **Results and discussion**

#### ***Products of Aba clothe industry***

The products the clothe industry in Kent in Aba include diverse apparel, attire, custome, dress, garments outfits, togs, vesture, wardrobe, shirts, trousers and weeds for men and women.

#### ***Operation pattern and style of the clothe industry in Kent in Aba***

Most of the Aba clothe makers or fashion designers do not produce to sell. Kent in Aba, like Ariaria, also in Aba, is not purely a market. The market part is only for clothe making materials, while the industrial part is where production and sale of different clothes take place for both national and international outlets. However, Kent is not the only clothe making cluster in Aba, but only used as a casestudy in this research. The close location of Kent to the raw materials used in clothes making makes it the most vibrant among the rest and ideal for a casestudy. Fashion designers in Kent work in three patterns and

techniques, namely customer specification, manufacturer design and market taste examination.

#### ***Customer specification***

Most of the customers who come to Aba to get their clothes give their specifications and characteristics of the designs they order. The Aba cothe industrialists work with these specifications and demands for the customized wears. Customers from America and other places send their suits and shirts designs in drawings to the Aba cothe industrialists. When the industrialists are done with the production of the prescribed order, the customers pick the goods from Aba for sale in their countries.

A taste made known to Aba tailors, whether in drawing or in oral description, will be produced to the satisfaction of the customers. Customers specification is the major line for most tailors in Aba. Customers come because they know and trust that whatever they ask for shall be produced

creatively for them. So, customer specification is the largest method of production in Kent and other cloth making clusters in Aba.

#### *Manufacturer design*

Most of the Aba fashion designers or tailors make clothes for people who only know the name of the type of cloth they want, but have no picture of what they have in mind. A manufacturer creates a design and picture from the customer's expressed imaginations.

Most people just come around and want to wear clothes, but lack the ability to paint a picture of what they want. Trained designers look at them and make designs that appeal to their imaginations and taste. Fashion designing is rooted in creativity, artistry, imaginativeness, inventiveness and talent. People who are not abreast with fashion and cannot describe to the tailor what they want to wear for a specified occasion are helped by manufacture designers. For example, a customer who is unsettled about what attire to wear for traditional marriage will get satisfactory help from manufacture designers, who suggests fabric, colour and designs based on either occasional demands or trends that fit the occasion.

#### *Market examination*

On their own, Aba tailors create designs in attempt to attract some segments of the market. The designs may entice prospective customers, magnetize them, induce patronage. This is a favourite method that allows some of the Aba cloth industrialists to give to the

society rather than just producing what the society specifies to them. Aba designers love to know the current market taste, especially for students. It is important to note that most fashionable fashions in vogue, modish, stylish, swagger, and up-to-date students want to try crazy things that no one has done before. Most Aba fashionable products in this regard are shifted to Lagos, Port Harcourt, Enugu, Calabar, Abuja and Kaduna where you have more students and from where dealers access them for distribution to other markets.

For example, when the University of Nigeria, Nsukka hosted the West African University Games, Aba designers used that opportunity to show students from other countries what they are missing as they rushed for the Aba-designed stylish, popular and prevailing wears. In this way, Aba designers usually produce and liaise with wholesalers, retailers, boutiques and other cloth sales outlets to sample the designs for profitable sales for them. If the demand for the designs are high, mass-production follows to the magnitude of the demand.

The mass-production is guided by the mean body measurement for large-scale construction of garment. Ohaka, Iloeje & Lemchi (2018) established the mean body measurement for a large-scale garment construction for school-age boys in Imo State, Nigeria.

The creation of designs based on the observation of market taste by Aba tailors seems to derive from the contextual concept of

technology. According to Eneh (2011), the contextual concept places emphasis on the cultural factors which have influenced, and have been influenced by, the the design. The economic, social, and political ambience in which the fashion or taste develops influences the design.

#### ***Sources of raw material for clothe making industry in Aba***

Most of the raw materials used by the clothe making industry in Aba are sourced from Aba. Usually suppliers take them to the industrialists. Akwaete, Nsulu and Eke-Oba are available in notable markets in Aba city, like shopping centre and Ariaria market. Aba shopping centre has a variety of quality materials, such as buttons, zips, leather, fabric, wool materials and others.

#### ***Patronage for made-in-Aba clothes***

Patrons from the neighbouring West African and Central African countries constitute the bulk of customers for the products of Aba clothe industry. The international business and commerce connections between the Abiriba people of Abia State and most countries like Togo, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Cameroon, Mali, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon make Aba clothes making industry attractive and well known by these African countries (Ifeanyi, 2017).

Most Aba fashion designers at Kent do not engrave their names and trademarks on their products. Rather, they engrave the label and trademark of the dealers, most of whom are big boutique owners in Africa and Europe. Both national and foreign dealers in made-in-Aba clothes get their stocks from Aba. Some of the Aba-based businessmen and women act as agents and middlemen between the Aba skillful industrialists and the dealers. Some of the sample clothes brought to Aba skillfi<sup>1</sup> tailors have Indian, American and Europea<sup>50</sup> fabrics, showing their foreign origin.

The Aba clothe making industry gives the best design with the skillful and talented tailors at Kent-Aba. There is hardly any design of dress one cannot source from Aba. Consumers troop to Aba to get the best clothing for their loved ones. Aba is indeed the Japan of Africa.

#### ***Challenges facing Aba clothe industry***

The most profound challenge of Aba clothe making industry is lack of electricity power supply. Eneh (2011) and Isife (2010) submitted that Nigeria is unable to provide sufficient energy for domestic and industrial uses of its citizenry. In most parts of Nigeria, citizens receive an average daily supply of 6 hours of electricity. National electrical power grid is yet to reach many rural areas in the country. Only 60% of the 150 million Nigerians are connected to the grid system. About 40% of the population connected to the grid

lack power supply over 60% of the time. Low access to electricity remains a constraint to social services, such as health and education. Most citizens still rely on some other sources of energy, like fuel-wood combustion, which results in emission of poisonous gaseous substances. Nigeria is one of the world's largest producers of carbon emissions, closely associated with global warming. Citizens, who can afford it, acquire privately owned electric power generators, which are barely cost-effective, and emit poisonous gases that pollute the environment. According to Eneh (2017), electric power per capita consumption in Nigeria is a paltry 0.03 KW, as against 0.265-3.2 KW for other countries. Yet, there is the major issue of pollution of the environment by smoke from the generator which is dangerous to human health

The industrialists have clusters that collaborate to provide electric power generating sets and fuel as standby alternative source of electric power. However, the cost of generator maintenance and fueling is too high and in most cases unaffordable.

Poor transport and communication is another challenge and facing the Aba clothe making industry in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. There

are no airport, seaport and functional railway system in the state. The roads are in bad shape. Hence, movement of people and goods is hindered.

The talented and skillful Aba tailors lack the capital to import modern factory machines used by fashion designers in Europe and America. This is a huge setback for Aba clothes making industry. With all their creativity, the products of Aba tailors lack the refined finishing touches for smoothness and perfection of masterly proficiency of the products, in line with international best practices of world class fashion designers.

Aba clothe making industrialists lack the collateral security required by banks to access loans. Worse still, the interest rate charged by the commercial banks, which is about 28-40 per cent, is too high, compared to 3-5 % interest rates obtained in other countries of the world. Most of the industrialists have no assets to serve as collateral security, and property owners have no need for bank loans (Eneh, 2017, 2005). Sometimes, the Aba clothe makers lack clarifications on loan facilities of government financial institutions, like Bank of Industry that assist small industries to grow their enterprises. There is also the problem of high and multiple taxations.

### **Recommendations on tackling the challenges: Way-forward**

- Government should achieve uninterrupted power supply. Until this is done, touting industrialisation and diversification of the economy will remain lip-services.
- Provision of good roads network, airport, seaport and functional railway system and rehabilitation of existing roads in Abia will help boost Aba clothe business.
- Government should partner with Bank of Industry to assist Aba clothe making industry for the much-needed loan to access modern factory clothes producing machines. This will improve the quality of the Aba clothe products to meet up with their counterparts from other climes.

- Government should also establish industrial training centres where skillful and talented tailors can impact the spirit of economic self-reliance and entrepreneurial development to young tailors in Aba, so that the clothes making industry ingenuity, innovations, invention and originality shall not die, but the skills should be transferred from one generation to the other as a legacy, endowment, inheritance bequest to the younger generation in Igbo land.
- The government should promote and encourage ease of doing business among Aba clothes makers and other professional creative talents. It is the responsibility of the government to protect infant industries to grow from strength to strength, to ensure employment generation and poverty reduction in the country, in order to curb the menace of social vices in our society.

## Conclusion

The study has highlighted the clothe making industry in Aba in Abia State, Southeast Nigeria as a welcome development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but needs government encouragement and support for growth. To address the challenges of the industry, the government should be committed to fixing the commercial city of Aba to become the Japan of

Africa. This is in line with government diversification policy and international best practices for industrialization. This is the right step to take now that the Nigerian economy is experiencing serious challenges due to the unabated fall in global oil prices and unemployment problems.

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