

## **AKWA-OCHA (HAND WOVEN CLOTH) OF DELTA STATE**

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The Enuani, an Igbo speaking people, are found in over two hundred towns and villages in Delta State of Nigeria west of the Niger, located within nine Local Government areas: Aniocha South, Aniocha North, Osomili South, Osomili North, Ika East, Ika West, Ndukwa East, Ndukwa West and Ukwani. According to oral tradition narrated by Obi Ofulu II of Ubulu-Uku and Chief Osodi of Ogwashi-Uku, some clans migrated from places such as Nri and Onitsha in Anambra State, Benin in Edo State and Ife in Osun State while others claim to have migrated from the Middle East, passing through Ife, Benin, Afor and Ubulu-Unor to their present settlements. Others migrated from one part of Enuani to the other. Okeke (1977), quoting an oral tradition says:

Nine types of settlements can be distinguished depending upon the origin of the founders: Ogwashi-uku, Ibusa, Ogboli groups claim East Niger Igbo origin; Otolokpo, Akumazi, Igbodo and Mbiri claim direct Benin origin; Agbor and other Ezechima groups claim indirect Benin origin; Oyebu Owa claims East Igbo origin; some Owa villages, Ubulu settlement and Okpanam claim West Niger Igbo origin; Odiani claims Yoruba origin; Ute Ogbete Akuku, Nsukwa, claim mixed Igbo and Benin origin; Illah and Ezi claim mixed Igbo, Benin and Igala origin; Idumu Asa claims Ishan origin.

The main language of the people is Igbo, although the Ika and Ndukwa clans differentiate themselves from the Igbo east of the Niger. They refer to themselves as the Ika and Ukwuani, sharing boundaries with Edo and Anambra States respectively. They are mainly Christians and traditionalists. Most of the people in rural areas are farmers whilst those who received western education choose civil service jobs because of job security. Weaving is part of the rich cultural heritage of the people, performed exclusively by women on a part-time basis when they are not farming, trading and carrying out domestic work. According to Picton and Mack (1989) weaving is not the full time speciality of any woman, but is numbered among the range of domestic skills proper to women.

The vertical loom for weaving *Akwa-Ocha* (*akwa*: cloth; *ocha*: white) is of simple design, constructed from wood and the weaver sits on a mat on the floor. The loom has two main parts called *nsu* and *nkpokor*. *Nsu* are the two vertical props which hold the crossbeams in position. *Nkpokor* are the two crossbeams which carry the warp yarns. The *nsu* are placed parallel to one another, about 1.5 metres apart then leant against the wall and nailed or tied to the roof beams. The bases of the props stand on the floor or are sometimes dug into the ground. The *nkpokor* are fastened with a rope near the top and base of the *nsu* and are unfastened and stowed away when the weaver is not at work. There is no definite

measurement for spacing the *nkpokor*, because it is determined by the length of the cloth to be woven. The cloth produced on the loom is approximately twice the length of its work area on the loom. This is because the warp goes over the front and back of the *nkpokor* in a continuous spiral. The textile woven on the vertical loom varies in width from twenty to forty-eight inches and in length from four to six feet.

Women weave mostly with cotton yarn, produced locally by women in the past. It was carded and spun by female weavers themselves, who often dyed their own yarn indigo and brown the most common colours besides undyed off-whites (Jenkins 1984). Nowadays the weavers rely mostly on factory-produced yarn, in bright, aniline colours, which enables them to compete with brightly coloured machine-made textiles. Women weave on a commission basis and market their cloth individually in the market or at home. They also teach their young daughters to weave *Akwa-Ocha*. Sometimes personnel from the cottage weaving industries in communities like Ubulu-Uku market the local weavers' *Akwa-Ocha* alongside their own, according to Mrs. Utomi Ngozi, of Ubulu-Uku cottage weaving industry.

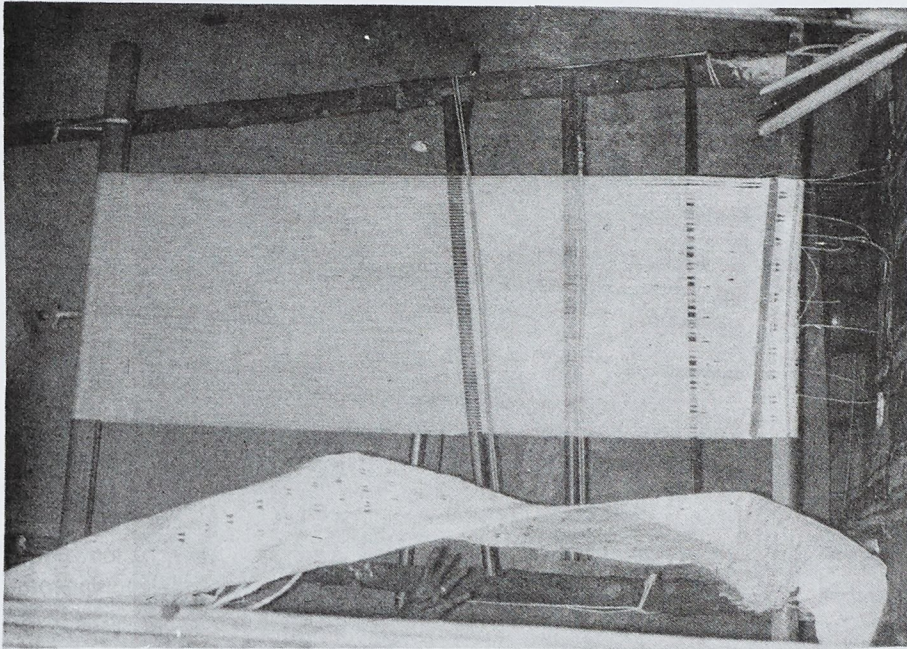
#### **Names and significance of colours in Enuani**

*Akwa-Ocha* weavers believe that nothing in nature exists in isolation; that is why *Akwa-Ocha*, though predominately white, has other colours on it. The colours are applied in stripes such as *Akwa Ejekomubeloya* (going to see the lawyer), patches as in *Akwa Enyi* (elephant) or a combination of stripes and patches as *Akwa-Osikapa na Apaka* (rice and beans). Colour is an important part of our lives. Colour can set moods and create impressions. Red and yellow are warm, advancing colours, whilst blue and green are cool, receding colours, which have a relaxing effect on us.

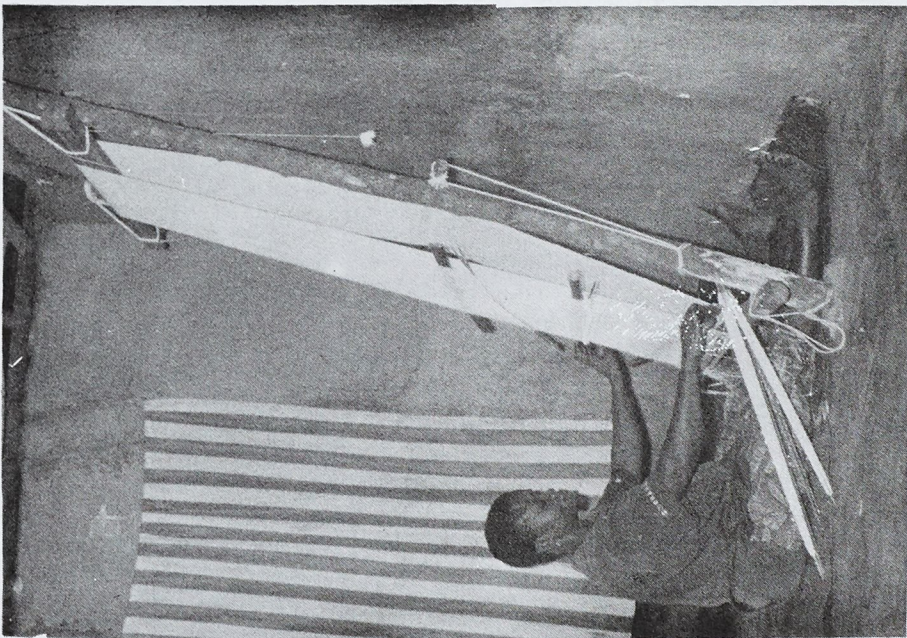
The predominant colour of *Akwa-Ocha* cloth is white, as its name indicates (*akwa*: cloth, *ocha*: white). White connotes holiness and purity to the Enuani people. According to oral tradition as told by Mrs. Monye Maria, a weaver of *Akwa-Ocha* cloth from Ubulu-Uku, the colours on *Akwa-Ocha* serve two purposes. First, they enhance aesthetic appeal and secondly they complement the white background of *Akwa-Ocha* cloth: holiness and purity symbolised by white cannot exist in isolation. The complementary role of colours on *Akwa-Ocha* is exemplified in the combination of red and white used for *Ejekomubeloya* (going to visit the lawyer). This design was made when the people were taken to court for refusing to pay *Utuisi* (poll tax) to the colonial masters. During the court sessions, the people wore *Akwa-Ocha* with a red decorative motif. Red on *Akwa-Ocha* here signified danger and blood for the people because they feared that if they were tried and found guilty, they would either be jailed or executed. The dispute over poll tax led to armed conflict (*Aya ekukumeku*) between the colonial masters and the people.

#### **Source and significance of motifs on *Akwa-Ocha***

The motifs on *Akwa-Ocha* are drawn basically from nature. Igbanugo (1972) notes that the



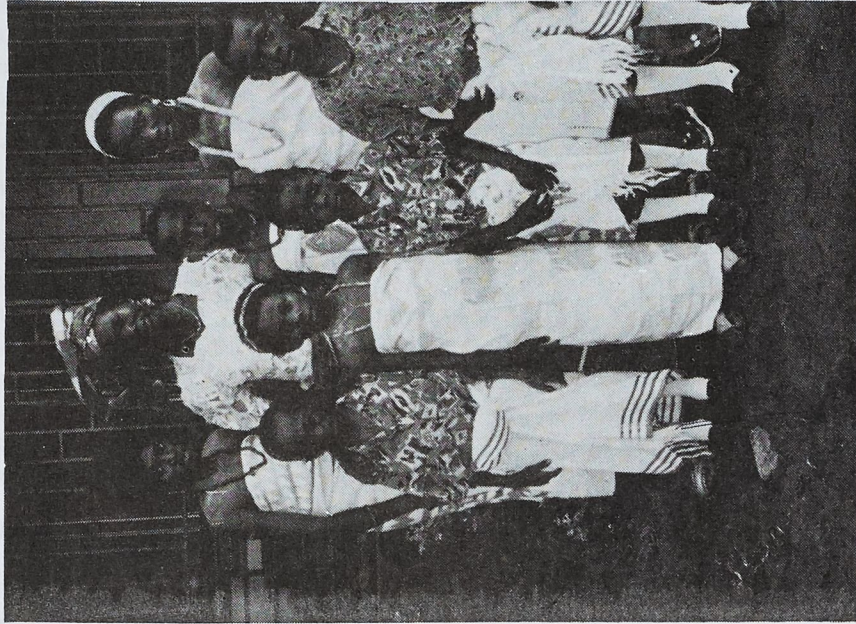
(Plate 2) *Akwa-Ocha* loom and accessories



(Plate 1) Weaver sitting at her loom



(Plate 3) Young man wearing *npe* (smaller than single piece wrapper)



(Plate 4) Boy wearing *npe* in Ejekombeloya design in combination with printed shirts for a funeral. The girls are wearing *ofu ibe akwa* (single piece wrappers).

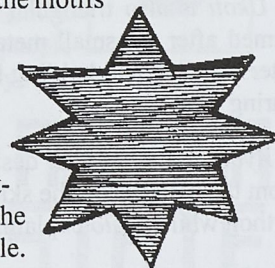
Igbo recognise that flora and fauna are decorated with visual elements that are pleasing to the eye. The weavers of *Akwa-Ocha* believe that the supernatural world is the ultimate source of their designs and they are inspired through their environment, dreams or imagination. Okeke (1982), notes that,

Igbo ethno-aesthetics attribute to the Earth Goddess, Ana, the dual role of beauty-giving and moral keeping. Art which springs from Mother Nature is seen as a social system or as a means of fostering the spiritual and physical well being of the kindred communities, because life in the rural societies is necessarily one with nature.

The weaver's perception of all aspects of life and nature, and most notably, of ideas and objects that are held to be particularly important and representative of Enuani culture, is translated into visual form. The motifs come in simple shapes like the triangle, square, rectangle, and rhombus, which are incorporated into the cloth. These motifs are manipulated adeptly to suggest organic and inorganic forms such as *nkpulu-obi* (physical heart) and *kpakpando* (star). Some designs on *Akwa-Ocha* are abstracted zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs. The design may highlight a part of or the entire animal body, the movement of a particular animal or a part of the human body. Essential household objects such as *akangweose* (grinding pestle) *nmaa* (knife) *nha* (comb) are also used as motifs on *Akwa-Ocha*. Sometimes representational imagery or inscriptions such as "Long life and prosperity", "Anioma State" (*anioma*: good land) and "Hope in God" are used to convey messages, advice or aspirations. The Anioma State motif originated in the 70s when the Enuani people anticipated the creation of Anioma State in Nigeria which was to comprise the entire Igbo speaking people of the then Bendel state. Historical events are also sources of motifs on *Akwa-Ocha*. Examples of such motifs are *Ejekomubeloya* (going to see the lawyer) and Flag. The flag motif was introduced in 1960 to commemorate Nigeria's Independence. Motifs are not naturalistic, but stylized and adapted to form suitable artistic designs on textiles. However, most of the motifs can be deciphered and their significance appreciated within the context of tradition and cultural values.

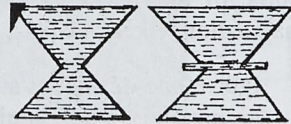
Some design motifs on *Akwa-Ocha* are symbolic and their meanings are determined by their source of inspiration. These symbols are ideas drawn from the community, the people's life experience and the cosmos. Whatever their origin, the motifs on *Akwa-Ocha* cloth are used for their aesthetic value. (See Ezeoke (1982), Cole and Aniakor (1984), Ukeje (1962) and Borgatti (1982). Some of the design motifs on *Akwa-Ocha* hand woven cloth are as follows:

1. *Kpakpando* (star) is a motif which has the shape of an eight-pointed star, derived from the glittering myriad stars lighting the heavens, which connote divine destiny among the Enuani people.



2. *Akangweose* (pestle) is an X shaped motif, derived from the double-headed pestle used for grinding in the kitchen. It used to be an important kitchen utensil before the introduction of the electric blender and was very much valued in the house.

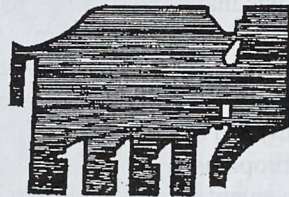
There is a saying among the Enuani people – “*odi nma opoho obuna dina ukoni*” (the pride of every woman is in her kitchen). This reflects the concept that the kitchen is the domain of women.



3. *Ije-agwo* (snake movement) is a zigzag motif used mostly in border designs. It is derived from the zigzag trail left behind on the sand by snakes, and is now interpreted as the graceful swaying of a dancing woman.



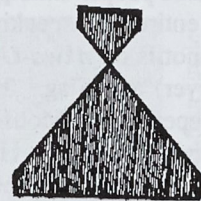
4. *Enyi* (elephant) is a motif in the shape of an elephant. The massive stature of the elephant is a symbol of strength. Elephant ivory (*oduenyi*) is used for chiefly regalia among the Igbo, and is worn as bracelets and anklets by women as a symbol of wealth and status.



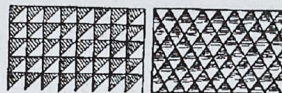
5. *Ejekomubeloya* (going to the Lawyer's house) is a design of horizontal red lines found on the border of plain white *Akwa-Ocha*. It is connected with a historical event when the people were taken to court for refusing to pay *utuisi* (poll tax) to the colonial masters.



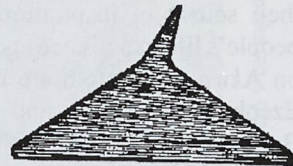
6. *Nmaa-eku* is a triangular shaped motif. It is derived from the local knife used for peeling cocoyam, cassava, and yam.



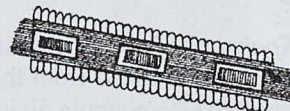
7. *Ukwu-efi* (cow leg) is the shape produced by the forelegs of a cow while in a resting position. The cow was one of the most common domesticated animals among the Enuani people.



8. *Ukoti* is also triangular in shape with a pointed top. It is named after the small metal knife used for cutting warp yarns after weaving and holding broken warp ends firmly in position during weaving.



9. *Ayolo-eke* is a linear design elaborated with holes derived from the patterns on the skin of the python. *Eke* refers to the python while *ayolo* explains the structure of the patterns.

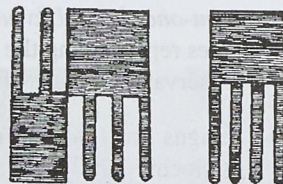


10. *Okwa-oji* (kolanut bowl) is oval in shape with two projections. It is adapted from the wooden bowl with two handles used for serving kola nuts. It is a general belief among the

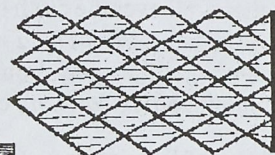


people that "he who brings kola nut brings life". Because of this, *Okwa-oji* is a symbol of life.

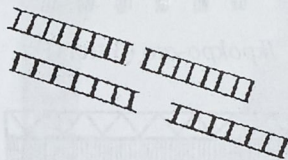
11. *Nha* (comb) is derived from the comb used to beautify the hair for social events (*uta*) and ceremonies (*emume-ife*).



12. *Ugba-afa* (divination tray) is derived from the tray with hollows used by the priest (*dibia*) for divination, which is significant in the cultural life of the people.

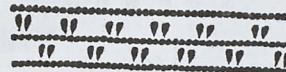


13. *Oboaka* (palm of the hand) refers to the saying that "in the palm of the hand lies every man's destiny". This is similar to the Igbo concept of *Ikenga*, which attributes a man's success to the strength of his hand.



14. *Nkpopu* (holes) is a motif made up of holes, which are arranged in lines. The holes can be broken up into different sized units, depending on the effect the weaver desires to achieve.

15. *Osikapa na apaka* (rice and beans) This design is in the form of twin holes suggesting the shape of rice and beans.

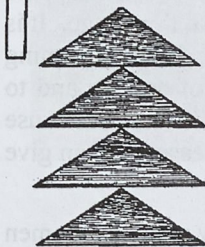
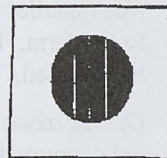


16. *Nkpulu-obi* (physical heart) is a heart shape. Enuani people believe that "from the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks". This motif on *Akwa-Ocha* connotes purity of mind.



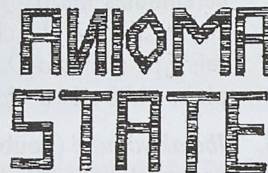
17. *Okoloto* (Flag) it is a representation of the Nigerian flag, although colours may differ.

18. *Ubor* (thumb piano) is a musical instrument. The Enuani people say "*Egwu bu ndu*" (music is life).



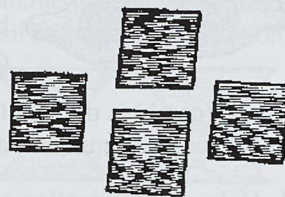
19. *Step* is a series of triangles arranged vertically. There is a general saying among the Enuani people "*wanyo, wanyo ka okeyi je elu beojeko* (step by step, a man achieves his destiny).

20. *Anioma* State woven in letters of red, blue, and lurex thread on white represents the anticipated Anioma State of the Delta Igbo speaking people (Enuani). *Anioma* means good land.

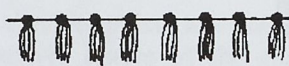


21. *Ukwu-onogbo* or *Ukwu-pussu* is a motif consisting of four rectangles representing the paws of a cat. The motif emerged from observations made of the paw-marks of a cat on sand.

The designs on *Akwa-Ocha* are simple both in content and style (Onochie 2000). The motifs are organized in repeated patterns all over the cloth but a weaver can incorporate several motifs into *Akwa-Ocha* as she weaves and still maintain balance and harmony. Some of the motifs are restricted to border designs. The arrangement of motifs on *Akwa-Ocha* creates an optical illusion of movement when closely observed.



### Types of Igbaiseakwa (knotted fringes)



*Ofu-ikpokpo*



*Ikpokpo-nanbi* (2 tiers)



*Ikpokpo-ato* (3 tiers)



*Ikpoko-ano* (4 tiers)



*Ikpokpo-ise* (5 tiers)



*Ipupa* (woven)

### Types and uses of Akwa-ocha

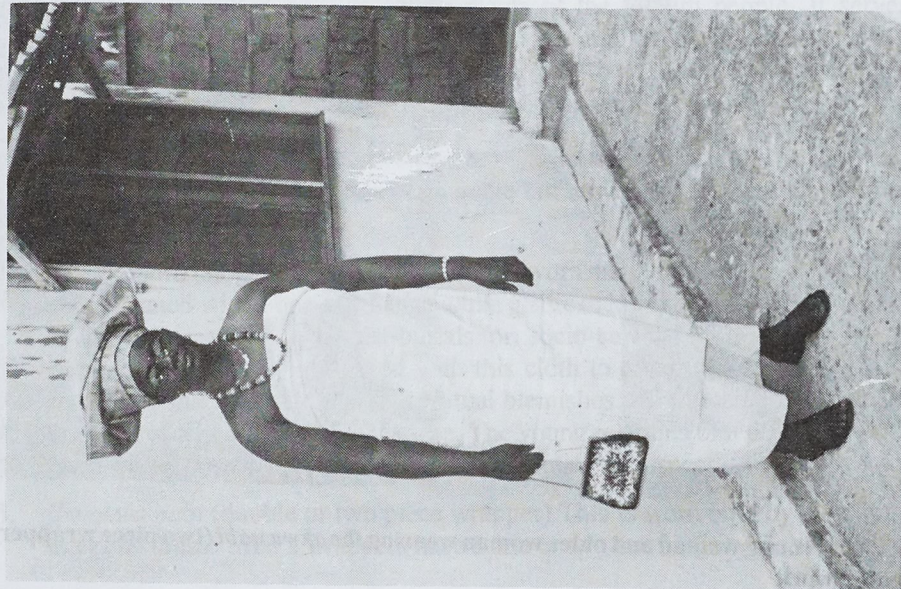
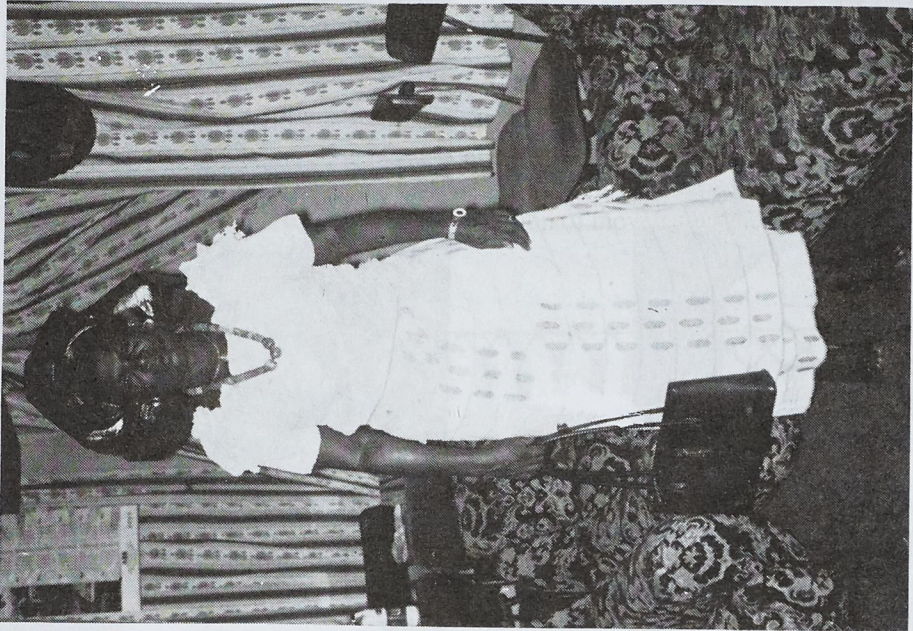
*Akwa-Ocha* covers all the textile requirements of the Enuani people. It serves many purposes including domestic, festival, religious and funerary. The number of *Akwa-Ocha* cloths owned by an individual is an indication of wealth or status. For easy understanding of the uses of *Akwa-Ocha*, types, users and occasions will be considered.

1. *Npe* (smaller than a single piece wrapper) This is worn by men and boys when they go to the farm. In the past, it was plain white but now decorative coloured motifs have been added.
2. *Ofu ibe akwa* (single piece wrapper) This is worn mainly by children. Boys' wrappers are decorated with a one-tier fringe while girls can have a one or two tier fringe. It is worn for occasions such as burials or socio-cultural events. During naming ceremonies the baby is covered with this cloth to revere the act of naming and to emphasize that the child has no spiritual blemishes. Both men and women also use this type of *Akwa-Ocha* as a head-tie. The young relations of a deceased person give plain white *Akwa-Ocha* to the deceased as a mark of respect.
3. *Ibe akwa nabi* (double or two piece wrapper) This is worn both by men and women as casual dress. Men's wrappers have a one or two tier fringe while women have two

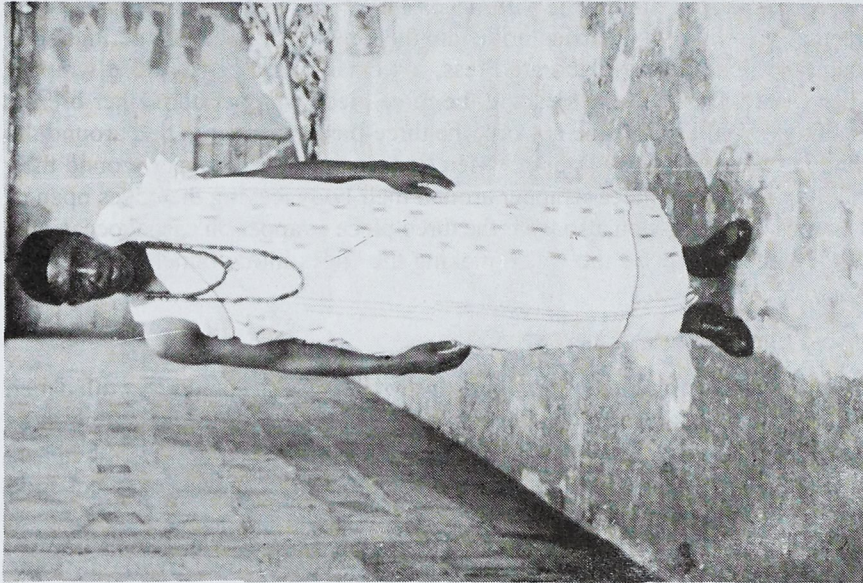




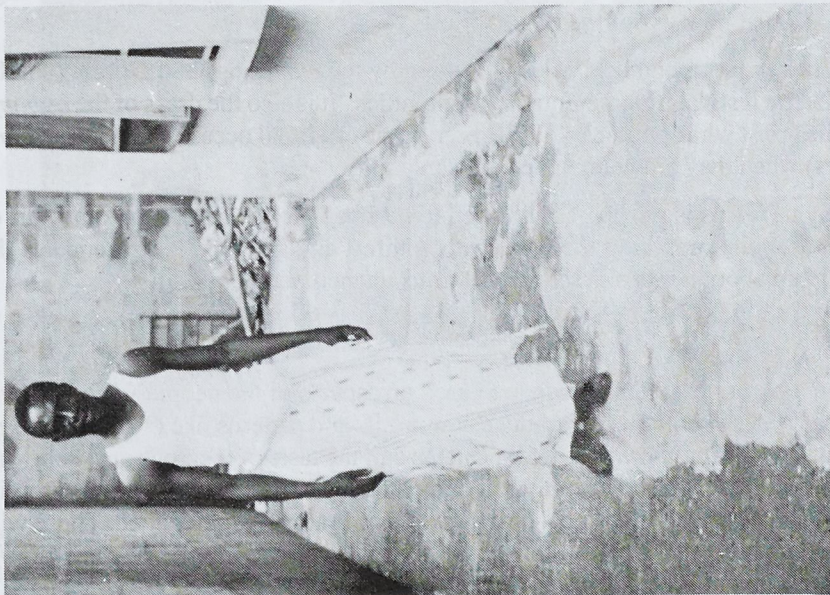
(Plate 5 A,B) A young woman and older woman wearing *ibe akwa nabi* (two piece wrapper) for domestic work



(Plate 6 A,B) Women in formal dress of *ibe akwa ato* (three piece wrapper) over *ibe akwa nabi* (two piece wrapper)



(Plate 7 B) Man in formal attire wearing *ibe akwa ato* (three piece wrapper) with *ibe akwa nobi* (two piece wrapper) knotted on the shoulder.



(Plate 7 A) Man in *ibe akwa ato* (three piece wrapper) showing *mpulu-aku* (bunch of cloth in front)

or three. On more formal occasions, this two-piece wrapper is worn in combination with the three-piece wrapper and bead ornaments around the neck, wrists and ankles. Women may also adorn their head with beads for occasions such as *igwu-eku* (the social integration of a newly married bride into the family). At social gatherings such as marriages, which call for elaborate dress, a woman ties the two-piece wrapper around her waist to reach the ankles and the three-piece wrapper above her breasts without a blouse. When a blouse is worn, the three-piece wrapper is tied around the waist on top of the two-piece wrapper. Men tie the two-piece wrapper around their waist and drape the three-piece wrapper around their body leaving the edges open or knotted on the shoulder. Men also wear the three-piece wrapper on casual occasions. They tie the wrapper around the waist, making the edges into a bunch in front (*itu nmpulu aku*).

4. *Ibe akwa ato* (three piece wrapper) See C above.
5. *Akwanni-ukoni* (kitchen attire) Women wear this wrapper when cooking for titled men and priests. Such men do not eat outside their homes to prevent defiling their holiness by eating food prepared by women who do not wear *akwanni ukoni*. In some homes where this practice is strongly upheld, husbands have been known to reject food cooked by wives who do not wear *akwanni ukoni*.
6. *Izazu* (tunic) This is worn by the priests at the New Yam festival (*iwu*). In some communities where this festival is celebrated, the wearing of *Izazu* is restricted to the days of public celebration of the festival. A virgin or a woman who has attained menopause weaves *Izazu* in the form of a tunic with lots of floats. The weaving of *Izazu* being restricted to this category of weavers is believed to help maintain a high state of spiritual holiness of the *Ihene* (priests).
7. *Nbulu-ukwu* (wrap-around skirt) This is worn by the *Obi* (king) and *Olizele* (chiefs) during the *Ine* festival in some Enuani communities. It is also the dress of the *ogbanje* priest (the priest who appeases children born to die) on ritual occasions and the *Agana* (warriors) when they are being invested with a title.
8. *Oja* (baby tie) This is a strip of cloth used to tie a baby to the back of a young girl or a woman. While providing the baby with comfort and security, it also enables the woman to go about her business with her arms unencumbered.

### Conclusion

The motifs on *Akwa-Ocha* cloth, which are based on aspects of the people's life, are ever changing. The weavers continue to introduce new motifs and patterns like *Osikapa na akpa* (rice and beans) and *Nkpulu-obi* (physical heart) to suit the taste of their patrons, believing that new designs and motifs, colourful yarns and patterns are necessary for the continuity of the *Akwa-Ocha* heritage. Traditional designs and motifs are also maintained. Those with a sense of history and those who cherish the continued flowering of the *Akwa-Ocha* heritage jealously guard the talent of weaving.



(Plate 8) *Ithene* (priests) wearing *Izazu* (tunics)



(Plate 9) *Ohene* (priest) dressed in *Izazu* (tunic) with *mbulu ukwu* (wrap-around skirt). The *eze iwu* (guard of the priest) is wearing *npe*



(Plate 10) A young girl wearing *Akwa-Ocha* with *akangweose* (pestle) motifs about to take part in a cultural dance.

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