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IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA AFTER 1900**

By Lisa Aronson

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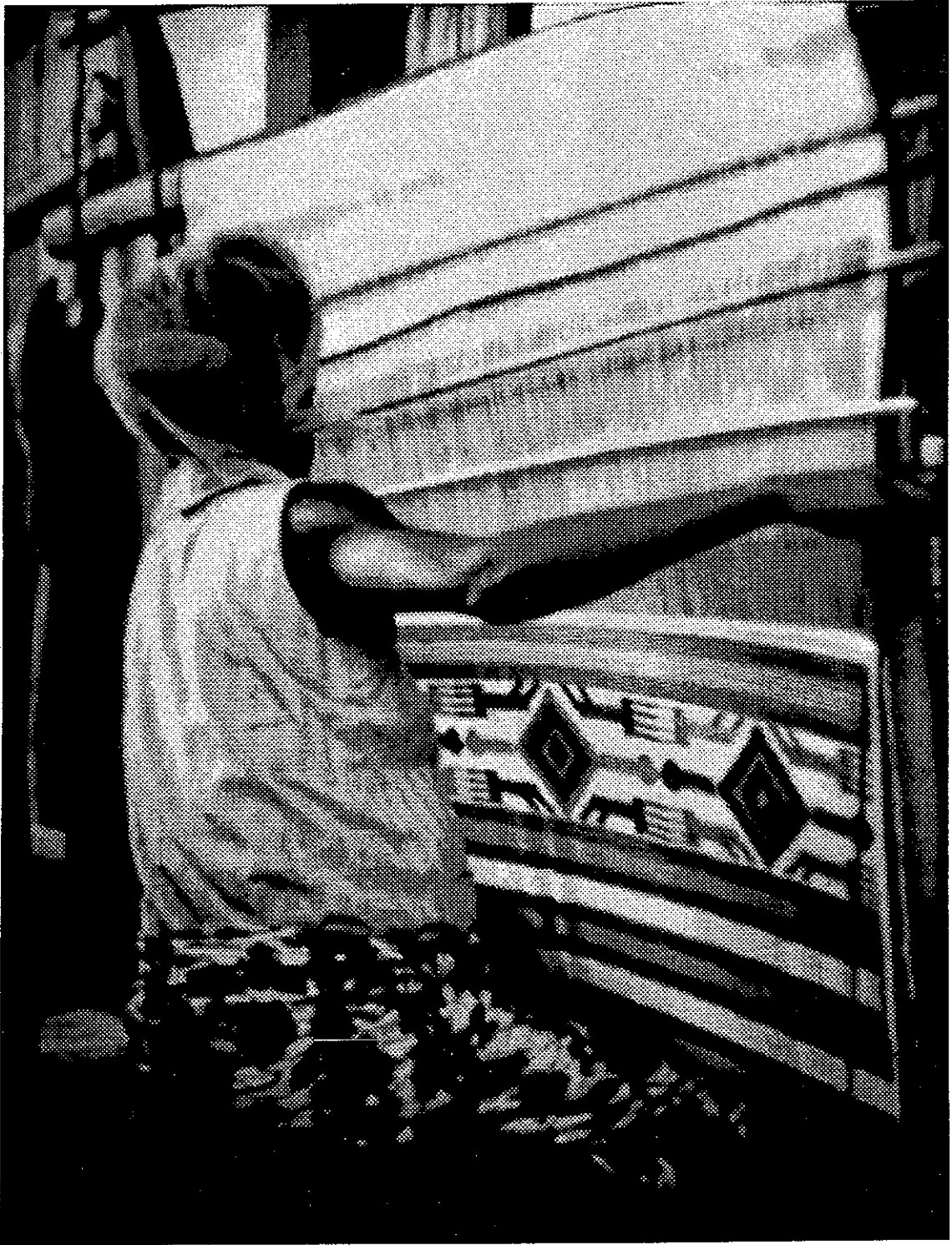


Figure 1 - Akwete weaver at her loom. Photo: Aronson, 1977-78.

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In 1893, the British formed the Oil Rivers Protectorate in Southeastern Nigeria in their effort to impose power and take control of the prevailing and prosperous palm oil trade. As part of their strategy, they designated the coastal Ibani Ijo town of Bonny,¹ then a leading center of the trade, as one of the district headquarters. The Igbo village of Akwete, an important intermediary market located fifty miles up the Imo River, became one of their sub-district headquarters. It remained as such for only seven years. In 1900 the British shifted the sub-district headquarters from Akwete northeast to the town of Aba, where they felt that they could have better access to the interior (Nwaguru, 1973).

This paper considers the impact of this British presence on two local weaving traditions. One of them, situated in the village of Akwete and its surrounding Ndoki clan, was already active in the late nineteenth century when the British arrived. The other, called Popo weaving, comes from the Ijo-speaking area of Bonny on the coast. Unlike the weaving from Akwete, Popo weaving would not see its beginnings until the late 1930s. Both Akwete and Bonny had been actively involved in the palm oil trade throughout the nineteenth century, which is why the British chose those areas to establish themselves in. In previous studies, I have examined the effects of the trade itself on the evolution and growth of the two above-mentioned weaving traditions

¹ The Niger Delta is comprised of a number of Ijo sub-groups, each with their own histories and dialects. The Ijo of Bonny are referred to as the Ibani Ijo, a term from which their village name was derived. Throughout this paper, the term *Bonny* refers to the village whereas the word *Ibani* is a reference to the people who live in it.

(Aronson 1989a, 1989b, 1982, 1980a, and 1980b). This paper looks at these traditions in light of the period following British arrival, after 1900.

Akwete Weaving and the British

When the British came to Akwete, they encountered a flourishing weaving industry serving mainly Ibani Ijo patrons. The cloths were highly colorful, often woven in imported threads and bearing weft-float patterns of the most fanciful sort (Figure 1). The British may not have realized that the inspirations for many of these designs were the vast array of African, European, and Indian fabrics already being traded for some time to their Ibani Ijo patrons. These included Ewe cloths that the Ibani people had named *Popo* because of their point of distribution from the *Popo* port southeast of Togo, through which Ewe cloths were being traded. Another variety, locally called *Injiri* or *George*, was a cotton plaid traded by the British from India. Yet another bore the name *Blangidi* (Figure 2), a wool cloth with roller-stamp designs of British manufacture. Over time, the Ibani Ijo came to value and revere these and other varieties of cloth as family heirlooms and as expressions of wealth and status. Presumably it was in response to the demands of Ijo patrons that Akwete weavers began assimilating and drawing their inspiration from these designs.

Myths collected in Akwete give insight into this innovative period. Akwete people credit the origins of this fanciful form of weaving, which is still active today, to the legendary *Dada Nwawkwata* who, they say, invented the art of weaving new patterns in her dreams. Other versions say her ancestors taught her. Whatever her source, *Dada Nwawkwata* was a remarkable weaver. According to myth, she invented numerous designs that she could weave at once on four different looms. Also, she acquired the threads for making the patterns by unraveling European cloths, presumably introduced to her through trade.²

² I recorded on tape three versions of the *Dada Nwawkwata* legend as told by the following informants: Johnathan Nwankwo Nwagbara; Nnete Nwagbara Akpara and Koko Ngbo Akparanta. All three versions are recorded on tape in the Folklore Archives at Indiana University. Versions of the legend are also found in Ukeje (1962:41) and Kamalu (1965)



Figure 2 - Imported wool of English manufacture which the Ibani Ijo refer to as Blangidi.
Photo: Aronson, 1977-78.

The myth also suggests that the Ijo from Bonny and other areas of the delta were the catalysts for this change. The myth tells us her cloths were so expensive that canoemen, presumably Ibani traders coming to Akwete, sang that her cloth was difficult to purchase, and only obtainable by the wealthy (*egerebite nwada eregh mkpota*). River tradesmen were so intrigued with her cloths that they would pay a high price for them. With those profits Dada Nwakwata could purchase more slaves — her incentive for continued innovation.

Finally, we learn from the myth that Dada Nwakwata was highly secretive about her weaving. Depending on the version one hears, she either covered her loom when away, maintained a fetish near it to ward off onlookers, or was buried with her designs. One marvelous version says that she had a deaf-mute slave whose handicap would prevent her from teaching the weaving to others, or so Dada Nwakwata thought. But the slave had carefully observed the process and taught it non-verbally to others after Dada Nwakwata's death.

I have previously argued that this innovative period occurred in the last few decades of the nineteenth century when the Ibani Ijo were actively pursuing palm oil and cloth from Akwete (Aronson, 1989a; 1980a). In addition, I have noted that almost every aspect of Dada Nwakwata's behavior resembles that of the Akwete weavers today. Like Dada Nwakwata, Akwete weavers now place a strong emphasis on innovation, for which they receive considerable recognition and praise within the village. Some weavers even have their own names attached to designs they have invented. I have noted also that, Akwete weavers, like their role model Dada Nwakwata, are highly protective of their craft by adhering to strict rules which determine who may or may not weave.

But, curiously, Akwete weavers significantly differ from Dada Nwakwata in the way in which they sell their cloths. Unlike Dada Nwakwata whose Ijo cloth patrons came by canoe to Akwete to purchase cloths, Akwete women now must carry them from Akwete to the Ijo villages. More than likely, this change resulted from British presence after 1900.

We know that the British took an interest in Akwete weaving and may even have become new patrons for the cloths. A 1896 photograph (Figure 3) illustrates the trader Mr. Powis at his domicile in New Calabar (Kalabari). Towards the back of the room is a table covered by an Akwete cloth, suggesting that he was among those who



Figure 3 - A 1896 photograph of the trader Mr. Powis seated at his domicile in New Calabar (Kalabari).
Photo source: Barley, Nigel. Foreheads of the Dead. Washington D.C., National Museum
of African Art, 1988, p. 37.

purchased the cloths. The British may even have inspired one or two of the designs Akwete weavers began weaving at that time. One, called "good people's knees" (*ikperendoma*, Figure 4) refers to the act of kneeling at prayer in church, an institution the British brought to Akwete in 1910.³

Due to British interest in the weaving, we also now have access to a substantial number of museum collections of Akwete cloths dating to around 1910. The most noteworthy examples exist in the Liverpool Museum, the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, and the Horniman and the Museum of Mankind in London. ⁴ A small grouping collected in 1920 by George Sadler, a Baptist missionary in Nigeria, is now in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. In the 1930s, G. I. Jones, then an ethnographer in southeastern Nigeria, purchased several examples that are now housed in UCLA's Museum of Cultural History (Figures 5 and 6).⁵

But, by and large, Akwete cloth remained an Ijo commodity. The ethnographer Talbot, whose data for his 1932 publication was collected in 1916, tells us that Akwete cloth was ceremonially important to the Ijo at that time:

Akwete cloth [was] formerly termed AKWA MIRRI because it was originally said to have been made for use as a towel when bathing, but has gained in elaborateness of pattern year by year and is now worn [by the Eastern Ijo] for occasions of ceremony (Talbot 1968: 278).

His quote also confirms what we already know: that Akwete weaving had undergone significant change just prior to 1916.

The British may have been responsible for a change in the way in which Akwete cloths came to be traded. It was noted above that the British had established Akwete as a sub-district headquarters for the Oil Rivers Protectorate. This meant that

³ The Anglican Church was founded in Akwete in 1910.

⁴ Some of the Museum of Mankind examples are illustrated in John Picton and John Mack. *African Textiles: Looms, Weaving and Design* (London, 1979).

⁵ G. I. Jones's Akwete cloths are also illustrated in Jean Borgatti, *Cloth as Metaphor: Nigerian Textiles from the Museum of Cultural History* (UCLA, Museum of Cultural History, 1983), and Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (UCLA, Museum of Cultural History, 1984).

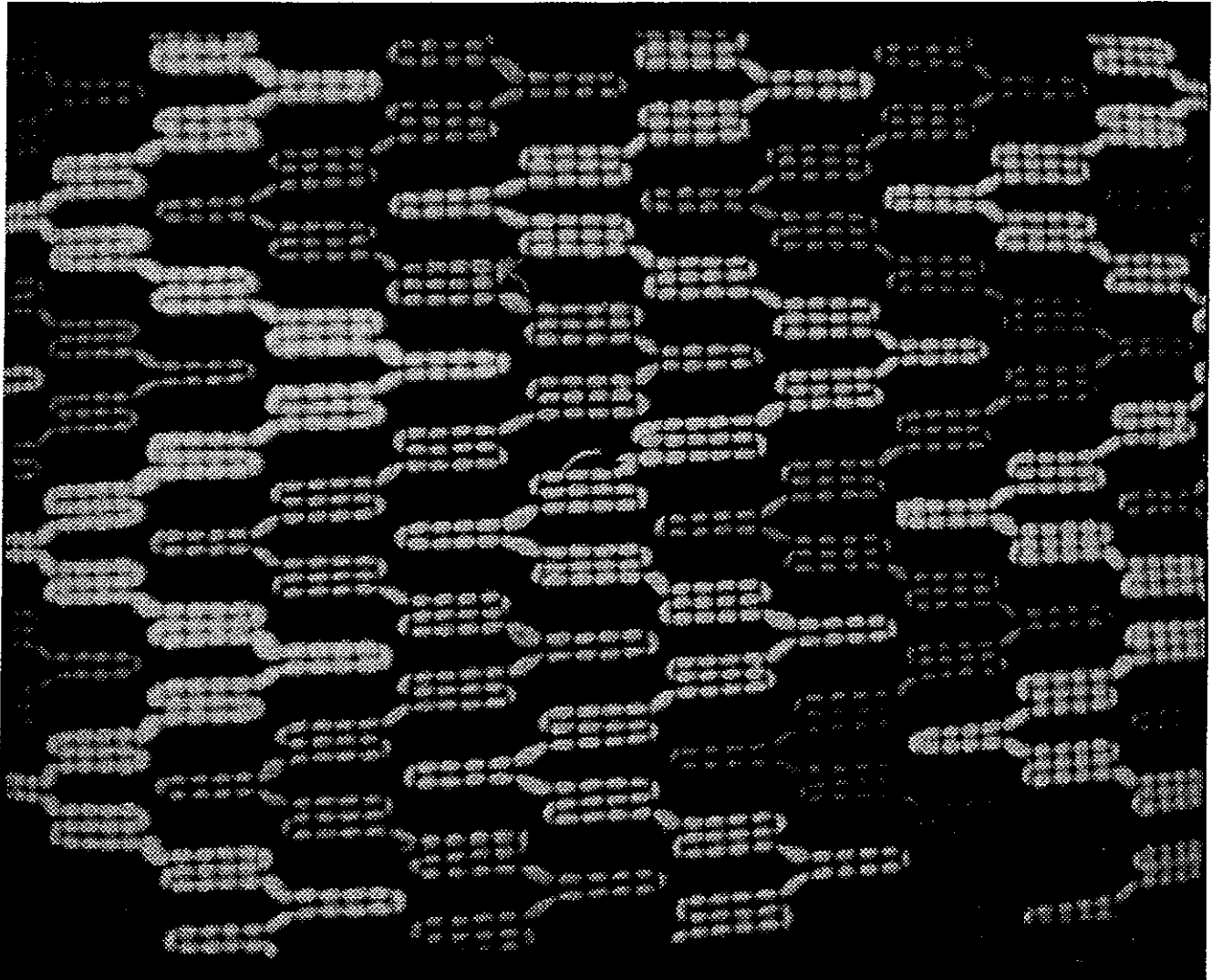


Figure 4 - Akwete cloth design called Ikperendoma which translates to mean "good people's knees."
Photo: Aronson, 1977-78.

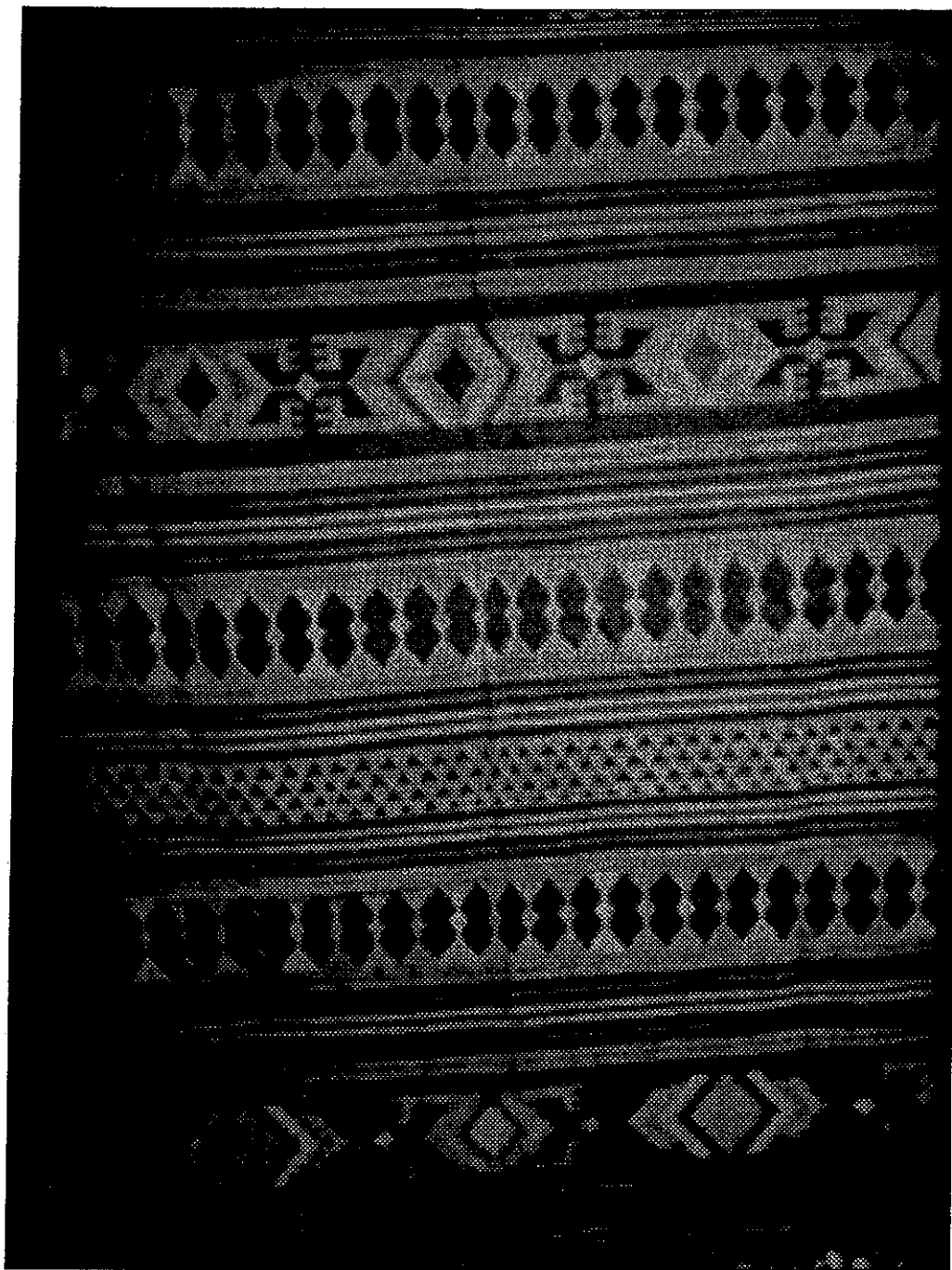


Figure 5 - Akwete cloth collected by G. I. Jones in the 1930's and now housed in the UCLA Museum of Cultural History. Photo: UCLA Museum of Cultural History



Figure 6 - Akwete cloth collected by G. I. Jones in the 1930's and now housed in the UCLA Museum of Cultural History. Photo: UCLA Museum of Cultural History

by 1900, the British could trade directly with this inland market, thus bypassing the Ijo on the coast. Stripped of their role as intermediaries, the Ijo were no longer traveling to Akwete to purchase palm oil and cloths. How then were the Ijo able to continue acquiring the cloths?

It seems that Akwete weavers compensated for this shift in trade by transporting the cloths to their patrons on the coast. Informants generally agree that it was only after British occupation in the area that Akwete women began carrying the cloths, either by boat or on foot, to Ijo villages, as they continue to do today.⁶

This new method of trading the cloths may explain why Akwete weavers have become so uncompromisingly protective about their weaving. My field data suggest that by the nineteenth century weaving was fairly widespread throughout the Ndoki clan to which Akwete belongs (Aronson, 1989a:37-38). One can only assume that the Akwete weavers' entrepreneurial efforts to market the cloths prompted competition over profits and the control of weaving within the clan. To protect their economic interests, Akwete weavers had to adopt protective measures that would justify claiming the industry as their own, thus gaining from its profits. Akwete weavers wholeheartedly agree that Dada Nwakwata was Akwete-born, an assertion that only serves to legitimize Akwete ownership of a craft once more widespread throughout the clan.

Popo Weaving and the British Presence

The British impact on indigenous trade may have also influenced the so-called Popo weaving. But unlike Akwete weaving, whose marketing strategies were affected by the British presence, Popo weaving was newly transplanted into an area where no men's strip weaving had ever been practiced. Its inception can be credited to one Ibani man who, seeing the need for a local Popo industry, sought its Ewe source and learned to manufacture it for local consumption. Christopher Brown, from the Ibani Ijo town of Finima, traveled to Keta, Ghana in 1939 where he apprenticed under the master Ewe weavers C. Telk and C. K. Amobo (Figure 7). Carrying with him numerous weaving samples, he subsequently returned to Finima, a village immediately adjacent to Bonny, where he set up his loom to begin weaving cloths for local consumption. He then began teaching the craft to other individuals in the area. The unprecedented strip-

⁶Today, Akwete weavers rely on roads to transport their cloths to Port Harcourt, and then by boat to the Ijo villages.

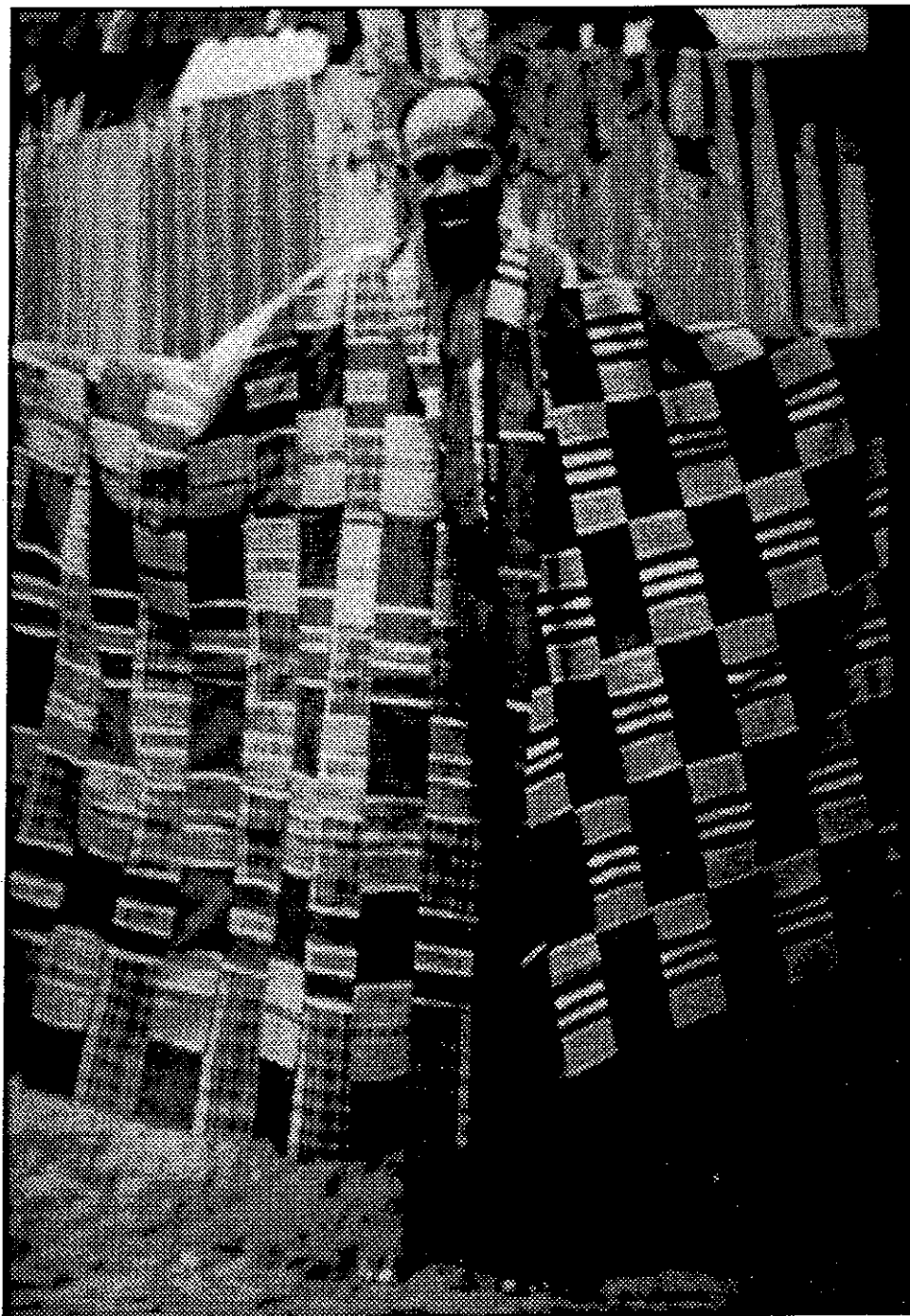


Figure 7 - Christopher Brown, Finima, Nigeria. Photo: Aronson, 1977-78.

weaving Mr. Brown had introduced bore the name Popo, the name of the trade cloth that had inspired its inception (Figure 8).

Because men's weaving had never previously been practiced in this area, no tradition existed into which Popo could assimilate. Given that fact, Popo bears striking parallels with the Ewe tradition from which it originated. But, at the same time, Popo weaving also reflects changes resulting from adaptations to its new setting.

I outlined many of these similarities and differences in a previous study (Aronson, 1982). To summarize, one similarity can be seen in the Popo weaving apparatus which clearly shows Ewe derivation. Like those of the Ewe, Popo looms consist of a wood frame supporting the suspended string heddle (Figure 9). Also typical of Ewe weaving are the extra foot-operated string heddles that the Popo weavers use to produce the weft-float patterns, thus explaining why a multiple heddle system would be used in an area surrounded by cultures, such as the Yoruba, who use other systems.

In addition to these few signs of similarity, there are differences resulting from the circumstances of diffusion and the effects of a craft form functioning in a new environment under new patronage. Because of the convergence of ethnic groups (i.e. Ewe master with Ijo and Igbo apprentices), I found instruction to be in English which, due to British colonial occupation, was already accessible at the time of Christopher Brown's apprenticeship. As a result, all of the weaving apparatus bears English names: "frame" for the apparatus used to make the string heddle, "pedal" the word for the foot pedals operating the heddles, "machine" the word for the bobbin-winding apparatus, and "rolling stick" for the skein winder. However, there is one fascinating example of linguistic alteration. Popo weavers refer to the heddle as "hill," spelled as such by more than one informant; what clearly seems to be a mishearing of the English word "heddle" has become the accepted term.

An obvious change in weaving is seen in the gender of the weavers doing it. The Ewe weaving that Mr. Brown had apprenticed was an exclusively male activity, as is all strip-weaving in West Africa. Popo weaving proves to be the exception in that both men and women are actively weaving (Figure 10). Three of the five Popo weavers I interviewed in 1977-78 were female. This was allowed, it would seem, because men's strip-weaving had previously been unknown in this region of Nigeria. Thus, no such sexual taboo existed. While Brown only taught to men, because that

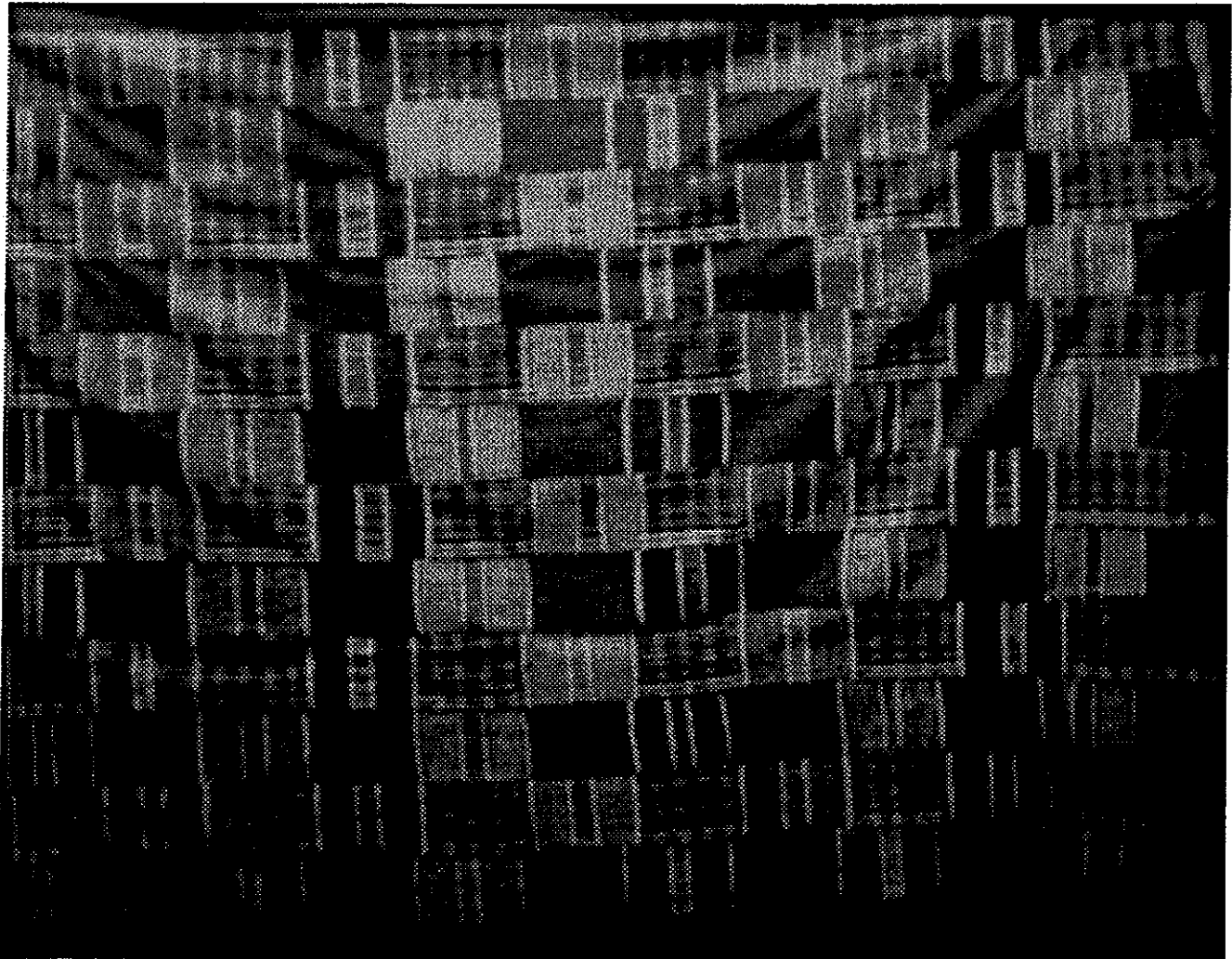


Figure 8 - A Popo cloth Christopher Brown wove as an apprentice in Ghana. Photo: Aronson, 1977-78.



Figure 9 - Popo loom. Photo: Aronson, 1977-78.



Figure 10 - Igbo woman from Asa weaving Popo cloth on her own loom.
Photo: Aronson, 1977-78.

was how he learned, his male apprentices were less compelled to exclude women. Thus, the emergence of three female weavers.

The British presence may explain why Popo weaving came to southeastern Nigeria. As noted in our discussion of Akwete weaving, the British had blocked traditional trade channels feeding into southeastern Nigeria, including the network through which Popo cloth had initially been traded to the Bonny area. Christopher Brown informed me that it was his mission to learn how to weave Popo cloth so as to meet the Ijo demands for a commodity no longer accessible through traditional trade channels due to British presence and influence in the area.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at two weaving traditions in southeastern Nigeria in which British influence was felt. The main thrust of that influence pre-dates colonialism, when the British were already actively trading in southeastern Nigeria. While not in control of that pre-colonial trade, the British were responsible for feeding foreign goods, such as cloth, into the area. This fact of history would have an irreversible effect on local weaving industries.

Other changes occurred after the British had established their colonial rule in the area. But again, their influence was indirect. The British began instituting changes in local commerce in an effort to meet their own economic and political needs. But they did not mitigate changes in the marketing of Akwete cloths. Nor were they in any way responsible for the formation of Popo weaving. Instead, it was entrepreneurs and innovators like the Akwete weavers themselves and Mr. Brown whose reactions to the British-inspired conditions altered the history of weaving in southeastern Nigeria.

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