

The Traditional Cloth Weaving Industry and the Jechira of Benue State: A Historical Appraisal, 1952 - 1998

Korinya M. Tivlumun

Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria

VS Akran

Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria

Abstract

This study appraises traditional cloth making among the Jechira people of Benue State, Nigeria, focusing on the techniques, cultural significance, and evolving dynamics of the craft within the context of modernity and globalization. The research adopts a qualitative methodological framework, employing ethnographic tools to collect data from selected communities within the Jechira axis, notably in the present-day Vandeikya and Konshisha Local Government Areas. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation involving local weavers, cultural custodians, and community elders. The study also relied on oral histories to trace the historical development and intergenerational transmission of traditional weaving knowledge. Secondary data were sourced from existing literature, archival records, and government publications. Data analysis was conducted thematically, highlighting recurring patterns and narratives related to technique, symbolism, gender roles, and economic relevance. The research reveals that while traditional cloth making remains a vital cultural heritage, it is under pressure from dwindling patronage, scarcity of raw materials, and limited institutional support. The study recommends strategic interventions for preservation, including cultural education, local policy formulation, and the integration of indigenous textile knowledge into contemporary fashion and creative industries.

Keywords: Traditional Cloth, Weaving Industry, Fabrics, Production Methods, Textiles, Jechira

Introduction

Clothing is one of the items on the traditional list of human “basic needs”, the others being food (including water) and shelter (Jolly, 1976). The clothing component of the basic necessities of life, which is the subject of this study, has over time, been met in a variety of ways ranging from the crude to sophisticated types. Clothing has also been produced in a variety of ways, namely: woven, knitted, crocheted, braided, bonded and felted, among others

(Ross, 2008). How and with what people clothed themselves are influenced by such factors as culture,

weather, technology, availability, affordability, as well as taste and choice, among others. For example, the Tiv people of Benue State in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria, according to oral tradition, in the “distant past” clothed themselves first with leaves (Makar, 1994). This gave way to the use of animal skin and plant fibres, probably until about the

beginning of the 19th Century when cotton replaced earlier fabrics.

Traditional Tiv cloth production is an important vocation particularly in Jechira where in several families still in the business, the skill is inherited from previous generations. The vocation confers several benefits on those directly and indirectly engaged in it. Thus, it is a means of satisfying the immediate clothing needs of the people as well as shaping their socio-cultural and economic lives; it is the symbol of Tiv cultural identity, and a rallying point (Hir, 2009). The sustained production and avowed utility of traditional Tiv traditional clothing notwithstanding, scarcity of documented studies on several aspects of the enterprise persists. A variety of traditional Tiv fabrics is produced in different designs and colours, and for different uses and various occasions, and some also have symbolic meanings, etc. However, aside from the obvious manifestation in colour and symbolic use for body adornment, several aspects of the traditional Tiv fabric particularly their historical persistence, economic relevance and socio-cultural significance are, at best, only vaguely understood. Justification for this study therefore derives from the need to properly study, identify and document traditional Tiv fabric production, particularly its socio-cultural and economic impacts on the local economy of Jechira Area.

Conceptual Clarification

“Cloth Production”, in the general sense, refers to the variety of fabric construction methods such as weaving, knitting, crocheting, braiding, bonding, felting, and the like. In this study, the emphasis is specifically on weaving; the ancient art of cloth

making which is continually being perfected from its original crude form, but which earlier techniques are still very much in use among some weaving cultures. The essence of this cloth production method is the interlacing of two or more sets of yarn so that they cross each other, normally at right angles, with a hand or power-operated loom (Adetoro, 1983).

“Weaving” is the most important and the most commonly used method of textile production globally, and is known to shape the social, cultural, and economic lives of different ethnic groups and societies (Kureave, 1980). Right from time, several traditional African societies have depended on weaving and indeed other arts and crafts, as important sources of subsistence.

According to Ada, the history of woven textiles, like other crafts, seems to be lost in time; as no one can tell with certainty, when and where exactly the crafts originated (Ada, 2010). The first loom, for example, is believed to have started in its crude form with two slates to which one set of yarn was stretched, and that the process underwent several refinements to achieve the high-technology weaving of today (Hilary, 2010). However, in several cultures especially in sub-Sahara Africa, traditional weaving is still the most accessible and available technique of traditional cloth making. Arts and crafts such as pottery, calabash and wood carving, as well as mat, basket, and cloth weaving have been of socio-cultural and economic importance in Tiv society for very long. The Tiv people, for the most part, have practiced their crafts with locally sourced raw materials, and using locally fabricated equipment, as well as indigenous processes (Hilary, 2010).

The art of weaving consists of pulling together components and parts to form a whole, to construct something by combining separate parts; or to make something by interlacing stripes or strands of any material. There is a plethora of applications of weaving, ranging from fabric construction to basketry and from mat weaving to horse weaving. However, for the purpose of this study, weaving will be considered in the subjective context of fabric construction; as a process of interlacing sets of yarn to each other, and in many different designs; depending on the type of loom used (Kureave, 2005). In essence, the interlacing of yarns (whether at right angles or otherwise) in repeated sequence, forms a fabric; most fabrics today are constructed via weaving.

Weaving has several types: plain weave, satin weave, twill weave, and lace. The plain weave, which is relevant to this study, is discussed here below.

- i. **Plain weave:** According to Anyakoha and Eluwa, Hollen, Saddler and Langford, plain weave is the simplest of all the weaves and it is formed by passing the warp and weft yarns alternately over and under each other. Each warp yarn interlaces with each weft yarn to form the maximum number of interlacing required (Anyakoha, 2008). Interlacing in plain weave requires only a two-harness loom for construction (one harness up and another harness down); with no right or wrong side unless printed or given any surface treatment. This makes plain weave fabrics suitable

for printing, embossing and glazing. The varieties of Plain weave include balanced plain weave, unbalanced plain weave and basket weave.

- a. **Balanced plain weave:** This has equal number of warp and weft yarns, of same size and same distance apart. Balanced plain weave is the largest group of woven fabrics and has a wide range of end-uses. Examples of plain weave are: Crepe, Taffeta, Shantung, Organdie and Muslin.
- b. **Unbalanced plain weave:** This is sometimes referred to as rib weave due to lopsidedness in the number or size of yarns, either in the warp or weft directions. If the number of warp yarns is increased until the number of counts is about twice that of the weft yarns, the pattern created will be cross-wise rib, otherwise called filling rib. In the case of colour imbalance, the colour of the warp yarns is always the colour that appears on the surface of the fabric. Examples of the rib weave include Broad cloth, Poplin, Faille, Bengaline, Grosgrain, Ottoman etc.
- ii. **Basket weave:** According to Hollen, Saddler and Langford, basket weaves are made with two or more warp yarns used as one and

with two or more fillings placed in the same shed; and that the most common basket weaves are: 2x2 and 4x4. Other combinations include 2x1, 2x3, and so on. Characteristically, basket weaves are flexible and wrinkle resistant because they have few interlacing per square inch. Examples include: Monk's cloth, Hopsacking, Basket weave coating etc.

Origin of Weaving

According to Igirgi, weaving of fabrics evolved from basketry and mat making. The earliest evidence of both forms of weaving is from the Neolithic cultures, about 5000 BC (Igirgi, 2007). There are indications that more primitive techniques existed earlier from which the Neolithic culture derived its art. Evidence exists of early examples of basketry, mat making and weaving with handmade interlacing of the strands or threads. While textiles changed considerably with the passage of time, basketry and mat making witnessed minimal transformation. The discovery of spinning, which origin is shrouded in uncertainty, marked a major turning point in the development of modern textile. Spinning was initially done using body parts (i.e., legs and hands). This was soon augmented with the spindle which was invented before 3000 BC. This made the spinning of longer lengths of yarns possible.

The icing of the cake was the invention of the loom, which revolutionized textile production and paved the way for standardization, patternization and specialization. The horizontal loom is said to be

earliest loom recorded in history, and was in use in pre-dynastic Egypt around 3000BC. The vertical framed loom, with two beams, appeared in Egypt around 1400BC. A third type- the warp weighted loom- was recorded in Try (Greece) around 2500BC and was in use in Greece and Palestine. According to Crowfoot, while the horizontal and the vertical looms still exist and remain in use in the original or modified form, the warp weighted loom is extinct (Igirgi, 2007).

It is evident from the foregoing that textile production progressed steadily from rudimentary to advanced stages long before the modern times, and that the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, completely revolutionized textiles production, as it did virtually all economic production. Most manual functions and operations were performed mechanically, and with substantially increased output several times over. Today's modern textile production is a major industry in the world; catering not just for the basic human needs of clothing and shelter but also variously contributing socio-culturally and economically.

Cloth Weaving in Nigeria

According to Lamb and Holmes, African art has had profound influence on modern art globally, particularly in the last hundred years or so. However, only recently has this contribution gained prominence (Crowfoot, 1975). European Museums, including the museum of Mankind in London, of recent, exhibited some African art, and which were well received as they clearly depicted both craftsmanship and design; suggesting that cloth weaving, or the production of textiles has been practiced in Africa and particularly

in Nigeria for long, most likely in antiquity. Production of beautiful textiles appears to be a Nigerian passion; one of its most important technical activities, and an outcome of centuries of development, investment of time, energy, enterprise, ingenuity and capital (Lamb, 1980).

In the development of textile generally, the adoption of new technologies has tended to co-exist alongside older technologies; the latter are seldom discarded. Some experts suggest that the tradition of embracing the new and old has actually been the strength of the local textile industry in Nigeria over the years. According to Andah, from archaeological findings, fibres such as raffia, bast and black bark (other than cotton) were employed for weaving around C700 to C.1050 AD, and were used by several weaving cultures including the Boki, Ekajuk; Mbube; Bekwarra; the Igbo; Tiv; Benin and parts of Northern Nigeria. The use of bark fibres is said to have persisted in Nigeria. Since its introduction over 1000 years ago following contact with Europeans, cotton fibre has become the dominant and most important fibre in use; and archaeological evidence suggest that, by the 14th century, weaving had reached an advanced technical stage in Nigeria (Andah, 1972).

Cloth Production among the Tiv /Jechira

In the context of the Tiv people, Ipusu (the father of Jechira) is an important ancestral figure in the genealogical tree. Ipusu is considered a prominent patriarch in Tiv tradition, and many Tiv families can trace their descent back to him. His sons, including Jechira and Jemgbagh, represent key branches within the Tiv lineage. Jechira as a name hold cultural and historical significance, representing unique section within the larger Tiv community. The exact

roles and attributes associated with Jechira vary depending on the oral traditions of specific Tiv sub-groups or communities, but the figure is recognized as foundational ancestor in Tiv history. Jechira is often regarded as the ancestor of a particular lineage within the Tiv people. His descendants trace their origin to him and are typically recognized as part of a distinct sub-group within the broader Tiv community (Korinya, 2025).

The word Jechira holds deep symbolic meaning in Tiv society. As a name and term, Jechira carries several layers of cultural significance: The name Jechira is not just a label; it connects individuals to a specific ancestral origin. The Tiv attach great importance to the name because it serves as a key link to the past, identifying individuals as part of the larger family or section that traces its lineage back to the great progenitor, Tiv. The descendants of Jechira often use this name to affirm their heritage and status within the community. Secondly, the name Jechira evokes a sense of pride, and for the descendants of Jechira, it serves as a reminder of the strength, wisdom, and unity of their forebears. The Jechira lineage is often seen as a revered line with a rich history, and the name continues to inspire respect and admiration within Tiv society. Besides, Jechira is often associated with spiritual and moral virtues (Nomor, 2025). In Tiv society, certain names are thought to reflect the character and values of the ancestors. The name Jechira symbolize qualities like leadership, courage, wisdom, and responsibility, qualities that are revered and upheld by the descendants of Jechira. These values are passed down through generations as part of the legacy of the ancestors.

The history of Tiv textile production, like other aspects of Tiv history exists in oral tradition and written accounts. Those knowledgeable about the history and developments of the industry suggest that textile production and utilization among the Tiv dates back to as early as the beginnings of the time people remembered history. The oral accounts from Jechira are highly valued and considered credible because even historically and archaeologically, Jechira area is considered as the custodian of Tiv weaving culture (Gbor, 1978).

Compared to literature on the textile traditions of other Nigerian groups like the Hausa, Yoruba and Ebira, that on Tiv textiles is very scanty. The literature on Tiv history, culture, economy, arts and crafts and religion is deficient particularly in respect of Tiv textile (Akirga-Sai, 1978). One is therefore compelled to unduly rely on oral tradition, in spite of the attendant limitations, or unreliability due to inherent contradictions and inaccuracies, among others.

Economic Relations

Agriculture is the mainstay of Tiv economy, including the economy of Jechira area. The favorable guinea savanna environment, fertile soils and abundant arable land support the cultivation of a wide variety of traditional root crops like yams and cocoyam, sweet potatoes and grains such as benniseed, millet, sorghum, guinea corn, maize etc. From the beginning of the 20th century, tree crops like citrus, guava, cashew, coconut and palm trees were introduced, as supplementary crops such as beans, cassava, sweet potatoes, groundnuts, shear nuts, and ginger, among others. Over the years, animal husbandry also gained a foot hold in Tiv/Jechira agriculture. Tiv agriculture

largely depends on the labour power of the men and women; using the traditional implements of hoe, axe and cutlass while knives, spears, bows and arrows are used for hunting. The men often combine farming with other tasks such as construction of houses, local roads and bridges; art and crafts; herding cattle, and vigilante activities among others (Dzurgba, 2012).

The market culture developed relatively late in Tiv; the earliest markets being Katsina-Ala, Abinsi and Gbereve (Nyityo, 1986). Early colonial reports state that agricultural produce, salt, simple iron tools, pottery, and fanned leather were the major items traded. Markets at Takum, Wukari and Donga in present day Taraba State also attracted a large part of their merchandise from Tiv land. To the south of Tiv land, the Udam of present-day Cross River State embraced Tiv agricultural produce for food supply while places like Lokoja in present day Kogi State also got their supply of agricultural produce from Abinsi market. As a result of colonialism, European goods particularly gun powder and matches, were introduced in Tiv markets and demand for these items grew significantly (Bohanna, 1968).

In the early 19th century, the Tiv people became popular for the textiles they exported to their neighbours. For example, “Godo”, the white blanket was highly demanded by the people of Agbem whose capital is Wum in the Cameroons. Better dresses were fashioned and the drum chiefs invented dances which used newer designs of clothes. At such occasions was displayed rich clothing which accompanied new dances like “Ishen” and “Acacha”, and several others. The importance of Tiv/Jechira fabrics encouraged the textile industry to flourish and spread to all parts of

Tiv land; and the fabrics produced were sold far and near including to “Uke” and the “Atôatiev” who commonly imported them into their distant lands. By the first decade of the 19th century, the changes imposed by the British colonialists on their Tiv subjects started telling on the Tiv people (Makar, 1994). The colonialists emphasized on cash crops including cotton. Foodstuffs were exchanged for beads and other fancy goods brought in by the Hausa of Northern Nigeria. Better dresses were promoted throughout the Tiv nation. More cotton was grown by the Tivs. The British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA) opened stations at Katsina-Ala of the Tiv land Abinsi where it supplied cotton seeds for distribution throughout Tiv land. However, most of the Tiv people refused to abandon the cultivation of their native beniseed and traditional cotton in place of the British cotton (Government of Benue State, 2020). This was because the people believed that every of the Whiteman’s gift either had strings attached to it, or it was a worthless item, besides the heavy weight of the foreigner’s cotton.

In 1947, there was a severe drought which resulted to a great famine. Therefore, the cash crops earlier cultivated such as cotton, groundnuts and benniseed drastically dropped in supply. However, in the next year, the economy quickly picked up. The poor could not pay the tax of four shillings imposed on the populace; talk less of buying clothes, beads and other accessories to dress. Meanwhile, the district heads and British colonialists kept on opening more markets which traded in textiles, like other products. The Tiv textile industry flourished later, especially in the hands of the Hausa and Igbo traders, who traded in cotton goods and beads (Makar, 1994).

According to Bohannan, prior to money, the Tiv economy adopted the woven cloth as an acceptable medium of exchange.” Cloth money” signified the economic importance of woven fabric among the Tiv at the time. In addition, Tiv woven fabrics facilitated trade and led to the establishment of several commercial networks and trading relations beyond local boundaries. This development played a crucial role in the establishment of major market centres such as Agbo, Tsar, Ihugh, Korinya, Adikpo, Jato-Aka, Zaki-Biam, Gungul, Ugba, Annune, Buruku, and a host of others. Other important early trade routes included Adikpo – Buruku – Gbajimba – Keana; Makurdi – Abinsi – Ihugh – Ogoja; Obudu – Adikpo – Katsina-Ala; and Akpagher – Buruku – Katsin-Ala. These trade routes were the supply channels for Tiv products, including textiles from Jechira and other parts of Tiv land, and they also availed an opportunity for the acquisition of knowledge and skills from other societies (Makar, 1994). The latter contributed significantly towards the enrichment of the local economy and culture, as contact with the Hausa and the Jukun for instance, influenced the fabrication of machinery and the configuration of clothing types, among many other benefits. In contemporary times, commercial networks and trade relations developed around Tiv textiles have saturated the whole of Nigeria, Africa and even beyond; as volumes of local (Tiv/Jechira) textiles are regularly exported to virtually all parts of the world by tourists and other stakeholders.

The largely agrarian economy of the Jechira is complemented by traditional cloth production, on a scale that has sustained livelihoods, facilitated income generation and contributed towards poverty reduction. It is normal in Jechira for even those with white collar

jobs and other gainful employment to also venture into traditional fabric production and marketing, even if it is on part time basis. There is also a growing rank of “middlemen” engaged in marketing Jechira fabrics beyond local boundaries (Agber, 2025).

Cloth Making in Jechira and its Historical Trajectory

Jechira area of Benue State is synonymous with traditional Tiv cloth weaving since it is the custodian of the Tiv weaving culture. According to Akiga and Gbor, the people of Tiv most likely adopted the weaving culture from their ancestors, right from the time of their departure from Swem Centuries ago (Gbor, 1978). Tiv tradition teaches that Swem, a group of mountains bordering Cameroon, Cross River and Benue States and visible from Kyurav-Ya, extending down to Shangev-Ya in present day Kwande Local Government, was where Tiv people initially settled during their migration from Congo, in the late 1500CE. The area is said to have provided cover, and enabled the Tiv people to rest for a while and to celebrate their victories and freedom from their enemies. Tradition also teaches that the Tiv people enjoyed peace, prosperity and growth during their stay in Swem but eventually dispersed in the area “coming down” to the Benue Valley, from late 1500 CE to 1600 CE, largely due to population pressure. According to Igyur, Tiv people harnessed crafts such as pottery, basketry and mat weaving, wood carving, cloth weaving, dyeing and so on, in shaping their socio-cultural and economic lives right from the time of their stay at Swem (Igirgi, 2007). It is therefore suggested that the Tiv practiced their crafts in the areas they inhabited, including Jechira which is within the vicinity of Swem, the original abode of the Tiv when they first migrated from East Africa.

In addition, the history of traditional cloth making in Jechira is the history of traditional cloth making in Tiv. Information on textile production like any other history of the Tiv exists in two main forms: The oral tradition and written accounts. The oral testimonies of knowledgeable informants about the history and development suggest that textile production and utilization among the Tiv people, including the people of Jechira dates back to the period as early as the beginnings of the time people remembered history (Makar, 1994). Compared to literature on the textile traditions of other Nigerian groups like the Hausa, Yoruba and Ebira, Tiv textiles is under-documented. When Tiv people in general and Jechira people in particular, embraced the craft of cloth production and the use of woven fabrics is speculative.

Jechira people’s fame for producing a variety of traditional Tiv fabrics derives from their ascribed status of “custodian of the Tiv weaving culture”. “Coming down” from their initial abode at Swem Karagbe in the late 1500CE to 1600CE, the Tiv people moved in batches. While some of them went southward across Obudu Mountains, others went northward and settled at Mdema and Waka district, and still another group moved into central Nigeria and spread over the Benue valley. It can therefore be inferred that the Tiv as a group, including the people of Jechira knew and practiced textile production before the 17th century AD (Akirga-Sai, 1968).

According to oral narrations, the earliest fabrics produced in Tiv, including Jechira, were from the bark of trees or other plant material, and that the process required no special technical skills. Ingyur reported that the first Tiv produced cloth -” Nyagba”- was non-woven and of cloth-like material obtained from the bark of trees like “Vambe” (ceiba

pentandra), “Kumenduur” (chlorophoraexcelsa),” Nimbiligh” (Lanneaschimpheri), “Akinde” (ficusthoningii), “Mua” (ficus sycomorus) and “Tur” (ficus capsicum); all of which are fibrous and with continuous barks that could be peeled in sheets. Ingyur further suggests that the use of bark of trees in cloth production remained with the Tiv/Jechira people for long, until the discovery of cotton. He also suggests that the first refined, cotton cloth produced by Tiv weavers was the “Tsarlkyondo”; a narrow band of cloth of not more than 15cm wide. This cloth was used in covering the pubic area and the buttocks. “Tsarikyondo” was closely followed with the “Bendeh”, another small piece of cloth configured with three arms, and which involved some needle work. The production of the “Bendeh” is said to be the beginning of complexity in Tiv textile technology (Gbor, 1978). Subsequent introduction of weaving on looms, and the production of both narrow and large woven cloth types, as well as many other designs are all said to be all offshoots of the “Bendeh”.

The availability of hand spun cotton yarns and later machine spun yarns provided further impetus for the production of a variety of other cloth types such as “Tugudu”, Godo”, “Ishundan”, Agbende-a-Kurugh”, “Anger”, “Gbev-war”, “Mule-u-Tiv” and “Swem Karagbe”, among others. Today, both the vertical and the horizontal looms are utilized in cloth production in Tiv land in general and in Jechira area in particular.

While it is not clear when cotton fibre was first used for production of traditional cloth in Jechira, it is generally known that Jechira weavers used locally grown cotton when cotton fibre became the preferred raw material for cloth production. By the 19th century, the Tiv and indeed Jechira People were

producing all the cotton required to service their needs and surplus for sale. According to Anyakoha and Eluwa, cotton, an annual plant with a life cycle of between four to five months, and harvested before the onset of the harmattan (November to December), was initially cultivated side-by-side with other crops. There was no need then to have farmers or farms dedicated purely to growing cotton. However, in the colonial era, cotton became a cash crop, and cotton fields were separate from the production of other crops, and separate farmers were dedicated to its production.

Traditionally, for cotton to be used in fabric construction, a number of processes were involved. These include **ginning**, **opening** and **spinning**. According to Lamb and Holmes, ginning which is the first stage primarily involves processing the cotton balls, to remove cotton seeds and other impurities like leaves, and husks, etc. This is followed by opening, to loosen the fibre and to align it for spinning. The final stage, spinning is achieved by drawing out and twisting the opened fibre clockwise, to produce continuous strands of yarn. Traditionally, spinning is achieved through the use of an instrument called the “majir” (spindle). This is locally constructed using such materials as clay, hard fruits (nuts), or carved bones of animals; with a weighted base affixed to a fashioned shaft. The structure and function of the traditional spindle does not differ significantly. Diogu suggests that the actual spinning process entails fastening the mass of opened cotton fibre on a stick (roving) which is held in one hand and from which the fibre is drawn down and twisted before it is tied to the pointed end of the spindle. The weight at the base of the spindle (whorl) helps to draw the spun yarn down. In the process, the spindle with the roving tied

to its lower base is twisted clockwise, while positioning on a smooth flat surface. The spinner gradually moves the hand holding the roving away and this motion rolls the thread (yarn) round the spindle shaft. At the completion of spinning, the yarn is wound on a local traditional fly wheel (Alaga), and the spun yarn is transferred onto bobbins (Anyakoha, 2008).

The ancient dressing method and textiles of the Tiv people have been handed down from generation to generation, and reflect the history of the use of indigenous knowledge, natural resources and cultural beliefs of the Tiv people, expressed through their mode of dressing. According to oral tradition, the Tiv people started dressing as early as when they needed to cover their nakedness and shield themselves from extreme weather. The earliest form of dressing was fresh leaves tied around the waist. This was later replaced by “Ibyor”, or apron, which was made of plant fibre from trees such as “Tuu”, or the fig tree; “Vambe”, or the silk cotton; and shrubs such as “Atuu”, or okro, among others (Lamb, 1980).

Oral tradition also suggests that in the course of their migration from the Congo, across thick forests and mountain ranges, the Tiv people gathered a lot of experience which, among other things, guided them in modifying their clothing materials to suit the varying weather and terrain. At Swem (in the Cameroons), Tiv people learnt the art of weaving, and the use of cotton, and native instruments to manually produce textiles. The cotton was grown and processed locally for weaving. The fabrics produced were not sewn but mostly tied round the waist and/or used for covering the whole body. Tiv textiles were popular in the early 19th century, and as drum chiefs invented new dances such as “Ishen”, and “Akacha” and other, new

clothing designs were introduced along with the dances. Tiv textile became very popular and was exported to neighbouring non-Tiv territories such as Udam, Bafum, Jukun and Chamba. From the first decade of the 19th century, district heads and British colonialists established more markets which traded in textiles, like other products especially with the Hausa and Igbo traders (Makar, 1994).



Tiv Elders Dressed in Present Generation Tiv Attire

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2019

At the time the Tiv left Swem to descend into the Benue valley they invented and wore tattoos, tribal marks and ornaments. The tribal marks were usually on the face for ease of identification of fellow Tiv brothers and sisters. Young men also made nail marks (“Kusa”) on the face, and cut their teeth and pierced the ears as mode of adornment. The Nail marks extended from the face to the neck, forearm and stomach, and later had a modified version (“Ukari”), which was usually made under the eyes in a downward direction (Abanyam, 2025).

However, more recently, trade liberalization policies of successive governments have led to flooding of local markets with cheap industrial base fabrics, and the abundance of synthetic dyes which permits an almost limitless combination of colours on fabrics. These have cumulatively eroded the originality, quality and standard of local traditional fabrics. Progressive use of cheap

foreign raw material inputs (particularly yarn and dyes) has led to the loss of integration and linkages that were possible with the old production processes which involved cultivation of cotton, spinning the cotton fibre into yarn for weaving, and dyeing and other value-added, finishing processes, and their impact on the local economy.

Traditional Cloth Production Methods

Ada, defines machinery as a set of tools, or a device used for a specific purpose; the system or structure in which a process occurs or an organization function. It could also be a system of organs that work together to perform a function. The foregoing suggests a set of component parts of a whole that must work complementarily with, and inter-dependently on, each other to fulfill certain ends. Thus, for a machine to be functional, each component part must be actively involved.

Traditional cloth production on a sustainable basis has been made possible by the invention and adoption and adaption of appropriate cloth weaving equipment / technology. The Loom, the dominant and most accessible weaving apparatus in fabric production was invented many centuries ago. It was adopted and adapted by many cultures around the world, including Tiv/ Jechira people of Benue State. Igirgi concisely defined the loom as a device used to weave cloth, and which purpose is to hold the warp threads under tension to facilitate the interweaving with the weft threads. He explained that there are many types of looms differing in shape and structure, but all having one basic function (Igirgi, 2007).



Anger Cloth Production using Horizontal

Hand loom at Tsar

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2019

According to Makar, the history of the invention or adaptation of the loom by Tiv people of Benue State is not clear, but there is evidence that the knowledge and practice of the use of the loom existed among the Tiv/Jechira people for centuries, and its use could have been perfected long before the 20th century AD. Several types of looms have been invented over time; the dominant, manual, types being the vertical loom, and the horizontal loom. According to Ali, the vertical loom has a rectangular wooden frame which is either leaned against the wall of a house, or a tree trunk, or dug into the ground in a room or outside the compound or a house. This type of loom has two horizontal cross beams, one at the upper part, and another at the base of its rectangular frame. The loom has two carefully fashioned wooden bars which are aligned vertically and joined or fastened to the cross beams. Lamb and Holmes state that the horizontal cross beams, which serve to hold the warp yarns, are made either of ribs, of raffia palm, or carefully fashioned (round and smooth) wood. The cross beams are for laying of the warp, while the length of twine or rope is for

tying or lashing the horizontal beams to their respective vertical bar positions. Ada identified other accessories of the vertical loom to include: two sword like cross sticks, the temple, sword like beater, long flat shuttle, picking sticks and twine or yarns, as well as other accessories, namely: A loom frame made of two wooden poles (bars); Two wooden poles of about six centimeters in diameter which serve as warping frames; Two flat sticks which serve as the heddle and shed sticks; Two smooth and round sticks of about ninety centimeters long which serve as loom bars; Heavy cords for lashing the loom bars to the frame; Length of fine cord for making the heddles; and Yarns; Shuttle; and Beater (Ada, 2010).

The vertical loom is used in cloth production among several weaving cultures of Nigeria, and is the earliest method used among the Tiv/Jechira people of Benue State. Earlier clothing types like “*Ashisha*”, “*Achika*”, “*Bende*”, “*Chado*” and “*Gbagir*”, among others were produced with this method. However, contemporary and exotic Tiv/Jechira fabrics such as the popular “*Anger*” cloth, and others which are of narrow band, are more commonly produced with the narrow band horizontal loom. According to Ada, many communities in Nigeria, including the Tiv and the people of Jechira, now use the narrow band horizontal loom for the contemporary designs of their traditional fabrics. Among the Nigerian Tribes that use the narrow band horizontal loom, its basic structure is the same; except the reed size, construction materials, and type of cloth woven on the loom, which vary according to the preferences of the different

cultural groups using this method to produce their cloths (Ali, 2010).

Like the horizontal loom, the time of invention or the introduction of the vertical loom among Tiv/Jechira people of Benue State is not exactly known. However, both loom types have a rectangular wooden frame (*daar*) supporting the reed and two heddles (*atunba – a-Ikondo*), and other components such as two treadles (*Ikpande*) controlled with the feet, a beater (*chife*) and a bobbin shuttle (*akusha*). According to Diougu, (1989) and Dzurgba, the narrow band horizontal loom, was introduced to Tiv land by the Hausa, and presently is the most popular loom type in use in Tiv/ Jechira. Today, all narrow band clothing types like the “*Anger*” and other exotic brands are produced with the narrow band horizontal loom, which comes in two versions. One variation has “*Ishaa*” (a pulley), while the other version has a rolling mechanism, locally known as “*Monsegh*”, which enables the cord holding the harness to freely roll back and forth. Contemporary narrow band horizontal looms differ from the earlier versions mainly in complexity and the degree of refinement of some key components. Whereas the contemporary horizontal loom has a more refined heddle, beater, and treadles, and heddle loops that are of nylon strings and, therefore, more flexible and softer, earlier horizontal looms had heddles that were originally made of the filament of raffia fibres, and were later replaced with heavy cotton strings. These innovations have enhanced efficiency. On the whole, the contemporary narrow band horizontal loom, which is more

complex both in structure and operation, also ensures faster and less cumbersome weaving.

The process of cleaning or whitening newly produced fabrics like the “Ashafa”, was traditionally done using various types of locally made detergents such as “Wayol”, (which looks like benniseed and is slippery as “agev”), and “Ichahul-mtse” (soap made from ash). Dyeing of the fabrics traditionally is a relatively sophisticated process using “beba” (the indigo plant). Sometimes the leaves of the “Asuu” tree are pounded and mixed with indigo (“beba”) for effect. Some dyers also add calcium carbonate (“mtsem”) to the indigo solution. Black dye is traditionally produced with “mtsem”; a mixture of ashes (“mtuhwem”) and water which is sieved after about four days. A mixture of “Mtsem” with either indigo (“beba”) or “Asuu” produces the black dye traditionally used in making patterns on newly woven cloth. Sometimes needles are used to stitch together selected portions of the cloth, while at other times a stone tied with a string is used to hold the cloth which is then soaked into the dyeing substance. In both cases, the “needled” area and the “roped” area of the cloth come out plain or not dyed. In some cases, only two edges of the cloth are dipped in the dye-pits or pots, leaving the centre of the cloth plain or undyed. Typically, dyeing, a complex, sophisticated and varied process is also undertaken by the cloth weaver (Lamb, 1980).

Woven traditional Tiv cloth, functionally, served several purposes, over time. For example, before money was introduced in Tiv/Jechira, woven cloth (“atsaraikyondo”) was a medium of exchange and a store of value (cloth money).

Culturally, the white “ashisha” cloth with holes in front, usually worn by virgins, exposed their pubic hair and served to entice or attract potential suitors. Other woven cloth types such as “Tugudu” “Godo” and “Gbagir”, and others were clothes of prestige which served to distinguish the men of wealth from common men. These cloths were also brought by sons-in-law for the burial of their parents-in-law (Aguji, 2025).

Conclusion

Conclusively therefore, the traditional cloth weaving industry in the Jechira community of Benue State played a crucial role in shaping the socio-economic fabric of the region between 1952 and 1998. Despite facing challenges such as limited access to modern markets and raw materials, the industry remained a significant source of livelihood for many households, contributing to local economic stability and cultural preservation. The resilience of the weavers, who maintained their craft while navigating economic pressures, underscores the importance of traditional industries in sustaining community identity and economic well-being. While the advent of mass-produced textiles posed threats to the sustainability of the industry, the enduring value of traditional weaving in promoting cultural pride, job creation, and economic resilience highlights its continued relevance. To ensure the long-term viability of the weaving industry, there is a need for targeted support, including improved access to resources, modern marketing strategies, and government intervention to bridge the gap between traditional

craftsmanship and modern economic opportunities. Ultimately, the study reveals how the blending of tradition with innovation can offer pathways for economic empowerment and cultural preservation in the Jechira community and beyond.

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- **Korinya M. Tivlumun** is a Ph.D student of Military History at the Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna and a lecturer in the Department of History and International Relations, Veritas University, Abuja. He can be reached at: korinyam@veritas.edu.ng; mosestivlumun@gmail.com.
- **VS Akran** holds a Ph.D and he is a Professor of History in the Department of History and War Studies, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria.