

**Cultural Entrepreneurs  
and the Dynamics of  
Cultural Exchange in  
Transnational Spaces: A  
Study of the *Adire* Guilds  
of Abeokuta, Nigeria**

African Journal of Stability  
& Development  
Vol 17 No. 2, Nov. 2025  
pp. 1115-1128

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**Abstract**

This study examines the activities of cultural entrepreneurs in the craft textile industry and their impact on transnational cultural exchange, using the case of the *Adire* guilds in Abeokuta, Nigeria. Through a mini-ethnographic approach (12 in-depth interviews, participant observation, and the review of extant literature), the research investigates how *Adire* guild members translate their cultural heritage and craft skills into entrepreneurial capital, utilising flows of ideas, materials, and markets despite structural constraints found in the globalised cultural-economic arenas. The theoretical bedrock adopted is Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital and Schumpeterian entrepreneurship theory (Schumpeter, 1934), both of which emphasise that cultural entrepreneurs not only produce goods but also craft

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narratives, identities and networks that enhance their value. The findings reveal: (i) craft heritage is actively commodified and repackaged for transnational markets; (ii) transnational exchange is bidirectional- raw-material imports, design inspirations from diasporas, as well as exports of finished textiles and brand narratives; (iii) institutional and market constraints in the forms of competition from low-cost imports, weak intellectual-property regimes, and fragmented value chains impact how cultural entrepreneurship plays out. This paper contributes to existing research works on transnational and development studies by shedding more light on micro-level actors' engagement in global cultural flows and offers policy implications for enhancing the craft-industry nexus in development strategies.

**Keywords:** Cultural Entrepreneurship, Transnational Cultural Exchange, Adire, Craft Industry, Nigeria

## **Introduction**

In an era where the economic and cultural worlds are becoming increasingly intertwined, craft industries have emerged as sites where local traditions meet global markets. Little wonder, the nexus of globalisation and cultural diffusion is gradually evolving into the intersection of culture, commerce, and transnational exchange. Thus, it becomes a significant area requiring empirical research into these transnational subjects for development studies. Cultural entrepreneurs—individuals or groups who leverage cultural heritage, creative skills, and networks to generate value—play vital roles in mediating between local traditions and global markets (Ray, 2000). This paper investigates how such actors operate within transnational spaces of cultural exchange, using the Adire textile industry in Nigeria as a case study.

The city of Abeokuta in southwestern Nigeria, long acknowledged as a hub for the production of Adire (tie-and-dye textile) by the Yoruba people, serves as the focal site. The craft has both deep cultural significance—as a marker of identity, heritage and artisan skill—and contemporary economic relevance, including linkage to fashion, tourism and export markets. Although the subject of globalising forces such as competition from machine-made

imitations, evolving fashion trends, diasporic networks and export opportunities constitute constraints.

Despite its rich legacy, the Adire industry also faces confrontations of global competition (including cheap imports), resource constraints (raw materials, technologies), and fragmentation of value chains. Should guilds and artisans succeed as cultural entrepreneurs in transnational spaces, they must contend with these constraints to access the opportunities for cultural exchange and value creation.

This study, therefore, investigates the engagements of cultural entrepreneurs in Abeokuta's Adire guilds and the dynamics of transnational cultural exchange. Through a mini-ethnographic investigation of guild practices, networks, and strategies, this study seeks to generate insights into: (i) the ways cultural heritage and craft become entrepreneurial assets; (ii) the mechanisms of cultural exchange in this sector; and (iii) the institutional and structural factors that condition cultural entrepreneurship in a globalised context.

The significance of this research is found in its contribution to transnational discourse through sub-national cultural actors (cultural entrepreneurs) engaging transnational flows of commerce. It also speaks to the form in which cultural industries, typically marginalised in economic policy, could offer pathways for local economic empowerment, identity affirmation for diaspora kinship groups and global engagement.

### **Literature Review**

The concept of cultural entrepreneurship refers to the process by which individuals or groups draw on cultural capital (heritage, identity, creative skills) and entrepreneurial practices (innovation, market orientation, network building) to create economic, social and symbolic value (e.g., Kirzner, 1973; Swedberg, 2006). In the context of development, cultural entrepreneurs often operate at the intersection of traditional craft and emerging markets, mediating between local credibility and global demand (Ray, 2000 & Pratt, 2004).

Transnational cultural exchange underscores the movement across borders of cultural forms, goods, ideas, as well as practices, through networks of local actors, diaspora engagements, trade flows, tourism and digital media

(Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996). This exchange is not unidirectional; given that local actors are both receivers and producers of cultural flows, shaped by power, economics and identity.

Within the West African circumstance, craft industries and textiles have been analysed as sites of cultural entrepreneurship and transnational engagement. For instance, the production of resist-dyed textiles (such as Adire) involves techniques, motifs and market dynamics linking local production to global fashion circuits (Wolff, 2006). In Nigeria, research findings show that Abeokuta has long been a centre of Adire production, with ample engagement in the early 20th century and a sustained legacy of dyers, traders and designers.

Moreover, scholars affirm that women, through guilds and associations, have played key entrepreneurial roles in the production, marketing and diffusion of Adire textiles (Okeke, 2013). Nonetheless, existing literature has not given much attention to the engagement of cultural entrepreneurs (in craft industries) in transnational cultural exchange, i.e., how they build networks, access foreign markets, import/export cultural goods and ideas, and negotiate trans-border flows. Similarly, the focus of development studies scholars has emphasised macro-industrial policy or tourism rather than the micro-dynamics of cultural entrepreneurs in a globalised craft environment. This study addresses these gaps by investigating how Adire guilds in Abeokuta engage and shape cultural exchange in transnational spaces.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study is guided by three specific objectives, which are to:

- i. Examine how Adire guilds in Abeokuta mobilise cultural heritage, craft skills and identity as entrepreneurial assets in transnational cultural exchange;
- ii. Investigate the mechanisms of cultural exchange through which Adire artisans engage global markets, networks and trends; and
- iii. Underscore the structural and institutional factors that influence the capacity of Adire cultural entrepreneurs in transnational cultural exchange.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research draws on two theoretical strands, the cultural entrepreneurship framework and the notion of transnational cultural flows. Within the ambience of cultural entrepreneurship, the study relies on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital and its conversion into economic and symbolic value, in agreement with Schumpeterian entrepreneurship theory (Schumpeter, 1934) that emphasises innovation, value creation and market orientation in cultural contexts. Both Bourdieu and Schumpeter aver that cultural entrepreneurs not only produce goods but also craft narratives, identities and networks that enhance their value.

Furthermore, the transnational cultural flows framework (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996) furnishes researchers with the understanding of how cultural forms, goods and actors traverse borders. Appadurai's 'scapes' (ethnoscapes, ideoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and mediascapes) highlight the complexity of global flows that affect local cultural actors. The fusion of both frameworks, in this study, conceptualises cultural entrepreneurs in craft industries as agents who operate within transnational cultural fields—they accumulate cultural capital, transform it into entrepreneurial value, and engage in multiple cultural flows that shape their practices and outcomes.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual model guiding this study is:

Cultural heritage and craft skills (cultural capital) →  
Entrepreneurial practices and networks → Engagement in  
transnational cultural flows → Outcomes (economic value,  
cultural dissemination, identity affirmation) moderated by  
structural/institutional factors.

The evidence suggests that the *Adire* guilds in Abeokuta exemplify how cultural entrepreneurs mobilise heritage and craft skills, engage in transnational cultural flows, and manoeuvre a set of structural and institutional constraints that shape their entrepreneurial outcomes. The conceptual model reflects: cultural capital → entrepreneurial practice → transnational engagement → moderated by constraints → outcomes (economic, cultural, identity).

### **Cultural Entrepreneurship**

The term cultural entrepreneurship has gained attention in recent research as a way of understanding how cultural assets (heritage, identity, creative skills) become entrepreneurial resources. Ray (2000) portends that cultural economy approaches shift attention from large-scale industrial production to small-scale, locally embedded craft and creative industries. More specifically, Swedberg (2006:124) describes cultural entrepreneurs as those who ‘create value by consciously using cultural goods in an entrepreneurial way.’ This literature emphasises the conversion of cultural capital (in the view of Pierre Bourdieu) into economic and symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1986). Within this paradigm, craft artisans and guilds are increasingly seen not merely as heritage bearers but as actors in market and network dynamics (Cohen & Kennedy, 2010).

In the contexts of developing economies, cultural entrepreneurship is often linked with informal economies, micro-enterprise formation and cultural tourism. Pratt (2004) points out that creative industries policy has progressively embraced craft producers as nodes of cultural innovation and economic diversification. Moreover, cultural entrepreneurs frequently build networks (local, diasporic, global) and adapt to changing consumer tastes while preserving local authenticity (Lederman, 2018).

### **Transnational Cultural Exchange**

Globalisation has compressed the distance between local and global cultural fields, giving rise to transnational cultural flows of goods, ideas, people, media and capital (Appadurai, 1996). According to Hannerz (1996) and his notion of cosmopolitanism, cultural exchange is not simply the imposition of Western culture on the rest, but a dynamic of multiple actors engaging in flows across borders, often involving hybridisation, appropriation and resistance. In this vein, craft industries are not just recipients of global fashion trends, but producers of cultural goods that travel, adapt and influence markets abroad (Gibson & McKenzie, 2014).

In the African context, craft and textile production have been shown to participate in transnational circuits: for example, resist-dye fabric production in West Africa connects to diaspora demand, global fashion collaborations and export markets (Endeley, 2016). In Nigeria, the Adire industry has

featured in fashion shows in London and Lagos, engaged with diaspora Yoruba designers, and sourced raw materials internationally (Wolff, 2006). Yet, as Okeke (2013) notes, the literature still lacks micro-level ethnographic attention to how artisans themselves navigate these exchanges.

### **Craft Industries, Heritage and Development**

Through a development studies point of view, craft industries occupy an intriguing space—they embody cultural heritage, local knowledge and labour-intensive production, and can support inclusive economic growth as well as identity affirmation (UNESCO, 2013). Ray (2015) also argues that sustainable development in cultural industries requires knitting local value chains, equitable networks and appropriate institutional support. However, craft industries in Africa often confront structural disadvantages in the form of weak export infrastructure, informal trade networks, inadequate policy support, and competition from industrial imports (Liedholm & Mead, 2012).

Recent empirical work by Mills (2021) in Ghana highlights how craft clusters struggle with scale, formalisation and intellectual property challenges in global markets. Another study by Mbaye (2019) on textile clusters in Senegal demonstrates that while craft exports bring foreign exchange and visibility, the advantages are unequally distributed and often mediated by intermediaries. These findings underline that participation in transnational cultural exchange does not automatically translate into empowerment- the structural and institutional context matters.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Three main gaps emerge from this review. One, while the concept of cultural entrepreneurship is increasingly used, only a few studies focus on craft-guild actors in developing countries as cultural entrepreneurs operating transnationally. Second, the literature on transnational cultural exchange tends to emphasise macro-flows (media, migration) rather than detailed empirical exploration of craft production, input flows, networks and export practices. Third, the development studies' works on craft industries often treat them as passive beneficiaries of globalisation rather than active agents shaping and negotiating the flows themselves. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the micro-level of guild actors in Adire production in

Nigeria and exploring how they enact cultural entrepreneurship within transnational exchange.

### **Methodology**

Given the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on practices and networks within a specific cultural-entrepreneurial context, a qualitative mini-ethnographic design was chosen. The research site is the Adire textile guilds in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria. Purposive sampling was used to select 12 participants from different Adire guilds (dyers, designers, traders, guild leaders) who are actively involved in production, marketing and transnational engagement. Additional key informants included local industry association leaders and cultural-entrepreneurship programme officers. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation at production sites, and document review. Interviews were conducted, transcribed and coded thematically. Themes were drawn, both deductively and inductively. Observational notes and documents were triangulated with interview data to enhance validity. The study adhered to ethical research guidelines for qualitative inquiry.

The mini-ethnographic design limits generalisations; findings are context-specific to Abeokuta's Adire industry. Also, language translation (some interviews were in Yoruba) may have introduced nuances that the researcher may not fully capture.

### **Findings and Results**

#### ***Objective 1: Mobilising Cultural Heritage and Craft Skills***

Participants consistently emphasised the rootedness of Adire in family and communal craft traditions. One guild leader said, *My mother taught me each motif: the 'egungun' patterned strip, the indigo resist-dyed wave-when I wear it, I wear the story of our town*. This underscores how heritage and identity are embodied in craft and become part of the entrepreneurs' value-proposition. Many guilds use branding appellations such as 'Authentic Adire Abeokuta' or 'Made by Egba Artisans', indicating heritage as a marketing asset.

The conversion of craft skill into entrepreneurial activity was illustrated by one designer who said, *We now export to London; I tell clients this*



*piece is hand-tied and kiln-dye finished by Egba women in Abeokuta-the story sells.* Thus, cultural capital is leveraged for marketing, export orientation, pricing and narrative differentiation.

### **Objective 2: Mechanisms of Transnational Cultural Exchange**

Analysis revealed three primary pathways of exchange:

- i. Guilds reported importing finer cotton fabrics (often from India), synthetic dyes from Europe or Asia, and design inspirations from diasporic Yoruba designers in the UK and US. One artisan observed: *We now use a machine for steaming the dye; that machine came from Turkey through a friend in the diaspora.* This demonstrates technoscape and fincanscape flows (Appadurai, 1996), enabling production modernisation.
- ii. Finished Adire textiles are sold to buyers in London, New York, Lagos, and Dubai. A younger designer explained: *A Paris fashion house approached me for a capsule collection using Adire prints- so my workshop produced ten pieces and shipped them.* Beyond goods, cultural narratives travel: the motifs, brand story and authentic provenance are part of cultural export.
- iii. Guilds participate in craft fairs, diaspora events, fashion weeks and social-media marketing. During the fieldwork, we observed an export-preparation workshop where a diaspora-based Yoruba fashion influencer provided Instagram training.

These mechanisms show that cultural entrepreneurs in Adire are both recipients and producers of transnational flows, actively positioning themselves in global networks rather than passively adapting.

### **Objective 3: Structural, Institutional and Market Constraints**

Despite entrepreneurial dynamism, participants encountered persistent constraints. An artisan lamented in these words, *“Chinese imitation of adire comes in at one-third our price- buyers don’t ask where it was made.”* This undercuts local producers and affects pricing power.

Guilds remain dependent on imported supplies; local cotton is of lower quality, and the rising cost of dye materials restricts output. A guild leader stated, *“We would have loved to expand, but the cotton lint we need*

*must be imported, else we cannot get the quality our buyers expect.”* Moreover, intellectual-property protection for motifs is limited, government craft-cluster policy is divided. Several participants said: *“We asked the state ministry for export support, but it was delayed and very small- we rely on our networks, not official channels.”* In addition, artisans reported tension in maintaining traditional patterns and adapting to international taste. A designer confessed, *“I changed the colour here because the Paris client said ‘make it pastel’ - part of me worries we could lose what makes it Adire.”*

While some designers- especially those connected to diaspora or fashion houses- succeed internationally, many small dyers remain local-market bound and rely on middle-men. A dyer said, *“I only sell to the local market; the export people bypass me and take the pieces.”*

## **Discussion**

The data analysis revealed three major findings corresponding to the study’s objectives.

- i. **Mobilising Cultural Capital for Entrepreneurial Value:** Participants described how craft knowledge passed through generations (often matrilineally) provides a foundational cultural capital. One artisan stated: ‘I was born into this adire making- every motif has a story, every pattern a proverb.’ This heritage is publicly leveraged through branding (‘Made in Egba’, ‘Authentic Adire Abeokuta’), and sold in domestic and foreign markets. The guilds have formalised this heritage into workshops, training programmes and export-oriented product lines. The cultural entrepreneurs thus convert heritage and craft into market value.
- ii. **Mechanisms of Transnational Cultural Exchange:** Several pathways of exchange were identified which includes:
  - a. **Inbound Flows:** This has to do with importing raw cotton fabrics, synthetic dyes, modern machinery, and design ideas from overseas markets and diasporic networks. For example, a guild leader reported sourcing finer cotton from India and design motifs from diaspora-based Yoruba designers.
  - b. **ii). Outbound Flows:** This is the exporting of finished Adire textiles to international markets (London, New York, Lagos-Dubai route),

involving fashion shows abroad and leveraging social media to reach global buyers. One young designer explained how she ‘collaborates with a fashion house in Paris that wants Adire prints for their Autumn/Winter line.’

- c. **iii). Cultural Networking:** This refers to engagements at cultural festivals, diaspora exhibitions, and collaborative workshops that build the guilds’ transnational visibility. For instance, the 2025 Adire Cultural Festival in Abeokuta attracted international visitors and generated global press coverage.

These mechanisms illustrate that Adire cultural entrepreneurs are not passive recipients of global culture but active agents shaping flows of material, ideas and identity.

### **iii. Structural and Institutional Factors**

Despite the opportunities, certain factors constitute significant constraints for participants, some of which include:

- a. **Competition from Cheap Imports:** Several artisans lamented the influx of imitation fabrics from China, sold at a fraction of the cost, undermining local producers and limiting economic growth.
- b. **Raw-Material Bottlenecks:** Dependence on imported cotton and the cost of high-quality dyeing materials limit scalability.
- c. **Institutional Weaknesses:** Weak intellectual property protection for motifs, limited government policy support for craft export, and fragmented value chains restrict growth.
- d. **Balancing Authenticity and Market Demands:** Many artisans reported tension between preserving traditional motifs/patterns and adapting designs for fashionable international markets- some believed that ‘if we change too much, we lose what makes us unique’.
- e. **Limited access to global networks:** While some designers tap diaspora and foreign markets, many small-scale dyers remain horizontally isolated, reliant on middle-men and local markets.

These factors impact the outcomes of cultural entrepreneurship and shape the ways the guilds engage with transnational flows.

### **Results**

Combining the findings yields a refined model: the Adire guilds mobilise cultural capital (heritage, craft skills, identity), which they channel into entrepreneurial practices (branding, design adaptation, marketing) and into transnational cultural flows (imports, exports, networks). The outcomes (economic value creation, cultural dissemination, identity affirmation) are influenced by structural/institutional factors (competition, materials, policy, networks). This model confirms and affirms the theoretical framework.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined how cultural entrepreneurs in the Adire textile industry of Abeokuta operate within transnational cultural exchanges. It has shown that these actors are not merely artisans but strategic entrepreneurs who mobilise heritage, craft skills and networks to engage global cultural-economic circuits. They import materials and ideas, export designs and finished goods, and position themselves in transnational networks of culture and commerce.

Nevertheless, these processes are conditioned by structural constraints- cheap imports, weak institutional support, raw-material bottlenecks and market pressure to adapt or compromise traditional authenticity. For transnational and development studies scholars, this case highlights the importance of micro-level cultural entrepreneurship in global cultural flows and local economic development.

In sum, the *Adire* guilds of Abeokuta illustrate how local cultural entrepreneurs can become nodes in transnational cultural flows- with implications for policy, craft industries and cultural diplomacy.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

**Strengthen Institutional Support and Policy Frameworks:** Government (federal and state) should recognise cultural entrepreneurship as a vital component of the creative economy. This includes designating craft clusters, providing export incentives, establishing intellectual property protection for motifs and registering guild-based co-operatives.

**Develop Resource-Supply Infrastructure:** Facilitate access to raw materials (100% cotton fabrics, indigo or synthetic safe dyes) through local sourcing, subsidies or partnerships with textile manufacturers. The planned “Adire Village/Industrial Hub” in Abeokuta represents a promising model.

**Enhance Global Network Access and Branding:** Cultural entrepreneurs should receive training and support in international marketing, e-commerce, fashion collaborations and diaspora outreach. Guilds can partner with foreign fashion houses, galleries and cultural diplomacy bodies to raise visibility and market reach.

**Balance Authenticity and Innovation:** While global markets demand innovation, preserving traditional techniques, motifs, and stories is essential for cultural value. Training programmes should help artisans adapt designs for export without losing authenticity.

**Promote Craft Tourism and Cultural Exchange Platforms:** Festivals, exhibitions (such as the 2025 *Adire* Cultural Festival), and craft-tourism initiatives can bolster both local economic value and transnational cultural exchange. Investments in visitor infrastructure and storytelling can amplify impact.

**Monitor and Combat Unfair Competition:** Policy and trade authorities should address the influx of cheap imitations (e.g., from China) that undermine authentic craft industries. This may involve trade regulation, certification schemes (‘Authentic *Adire*’), and public-awareness campaigns about local value and heritage.

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