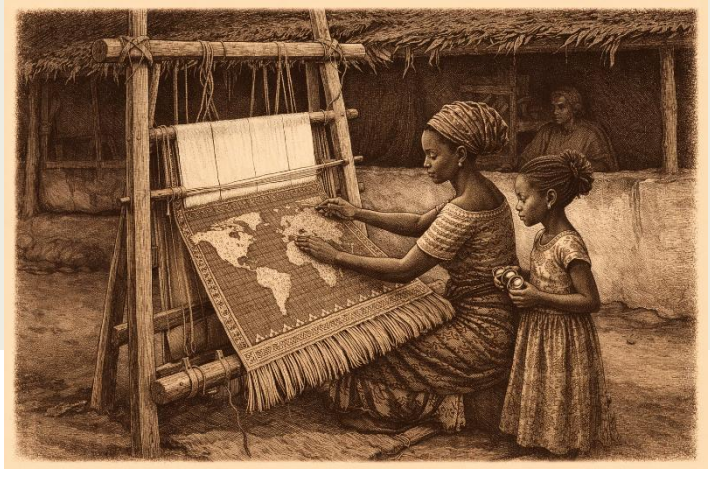
REWEAVING CULTURE: INNOVATION FRAMEWORK FROM AN AKWETE ATELIER

Prequel

I have always been the one who did not quite fit the path already laid out. While a conventional route was defined for me, I found myself drawn elsewhere, and that divergence became the starting point of my journey into fashion. I am the founder of a sustainable fashion business, and over time, I have learned to ask not only what we create, but also how and why we create it. The systems, choices, and intentions behind production. This search for more intentional forms of production in fashion led me to the Akwete weaving studio in Abia State, Nigeria, where I encountered a craft sustained across generations through storytelling, discipline, and inherited knowledge. It was during my visit to the Akwete studio, and while reflecting on this year's essay theme, that I came to understand that: "*culture shapes what we create, but when it becomes unquestioned, it can also limit innovation*." This insight forms the basis of what I call the Akwete hypothesis. A framework that draws on the logic of weaving to explain how culture shapes innovation.



My Akwete Hypothesis

The weaving of Akwete begins with sourcing cotton, which is spun into yarns and dyed. These yarns are then carefully picked and arranged vertically on a loom. The weaving typically involves the interlacing of horizontal yarns over and under the vertical yarns, with the weaver manually controlling pattern formation on the fabric, and in the end, a tight-knit fabric is produced.

In my hypothesis, **the yarns** represent our ideologies, practices, and accepted behaviours. **The loom,** in turn, represents societal and institutional structures (our families, organizations, and societies) that shape, constrain, and guide these developments. **The act of weaving** represents the interaction of these elements (yarn + Loom). Just as each yarn is positioned on the loom for the production of the akwete fabric, our beliefs, practices, and behaviours are continuously built, shaped, and reinforced through our lived experiences within these structures. **The fabric produced** is the direct consequence of the yarns that are chosen and the loom upon which they are woven. The yarns carry the substance of what becomes possible, while the loom provides the structure that determines how those possibilities are shaped and constrained.

It is clear from my hypothesis that what we come to describe as "the tradition/norm" is embedded in both what we repeatedly accept and the systems that hold those acceptances in place. These recurring patterns of acceptance are what shape culture and can, over time, evolve into patterns that either enable or discourage innovation.

When the Normal Becomes Abnormal

I wake up every morning by 4:00 a.m. to get ready for work, often without enough money for my commute. My monthly stipend, a little above the minimum wage, barely lasts the month it is paid. On days like this, I spend close to thirty (30) minutes scrolling through my contact list, trying to find a friend I haven't recently asked for help, or calling home that early just to get transport fare.

By 5:00 a.m., I have to be at *Ilaje* (my bus stop) to begin my journey from *Ajah* to Victoria Island. Even getting a bus is a struggle. And when one finally arrives, it's a scramble. People pushing, tugging at my suit, stepping on my shoes just to get a seat. "Endure," I whisper to myself. It's *normal.* I say this to myself while stuck in traffic, half-seated in a cramped bus, my buttocks barely touching the seat as sweat trickles down my forehead. By the time I get to work, I am exhausted! Sometimes barely able to stay awake. I once called my friend Chris about it, and he jokingly advised me to take naps in the restroom whenever I felt sleepy. After all, that's why it's called a REST-room.

This unfortunate experience of mine represents the reality of many knowledge workers in Nigeria. This is *our way of life*. Repeated exposure to abnormalities has gradually made them acceptable and woven them into our daily routine.

In the words of historian Ian Hacking, the concept of the "normal" creates an appearance of objectivity that subtly equates what is "normal" with what is acceptable.[1] This is evident in the routine of knowledge work in Lagos state, Nigeria, where long commutes, financial strain, and physically exhausting work conditions are endured without opposition. In this sense, the idea of this being "the normal" discourages reflection on whether such conditions should be accepted at all.

Normalcy culture, defined as those behaviors and practices a society accepts as standard and unquestioned, extends beyond the daily realities of 9–5 workers[2] and informs how we see, understand, and react to the world around us.

Conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Palestine crisis, for instance, were once shocking and upsetting. But over time, because we see them so often in the news, on our phones, and through constant social media updates, they are starting to feel normal, leaving us less sensitive. Genocide slowly becomes something we scroll past without thinking too deeply about it. Without even realizing it, we are becoming used to things that should still disturb us.

Normalcy culture is one of the greatest obstacles to creative thinking and innovation. It gradually erodes individual sensitivity, diminishes accountability, and conditions us to tolerate circumstances that should ordinarily trigger widespread concern.[3] In Nigeria, insurgency, like the many attacks by the Boko Haram terrorists and the rampant ethno-religious killings, even up to the point of writing this paragraph, has also started to follow the same pattern. What should constantly shock and demand urgent attention is slowly becoming something people hear about and move on from. The danger is in how easily we begin to accept these realities as part of everyday life.

The same thing is happening with issues like climate change and global warming. Even though we know how serious they are, the conversations around them have become routine. We talk about them from time to time, but not always in a way that leads to real action.

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[1] Ian Hacking, "The taming of chance, ideas in context" *Cambridge University Press,* (1990).
[2] Knowledge workers are popularly referred to as 9-5 workers
[3] Tonye Preghafi, "Normalising abnormalities: When the absurd becomes our norm" *The Guardian* (2026) < https://guardian.ng/opinion/normalising-abnormalities-when-the-absurd-becomes-our-norm/>

When dysfunctional threads are repeatedly woven into our DNA, they stop appearing as flaws and gradually become the norm. Similarly, when inexcusable habits are consistently tolerated in workplaces, workers stop seeing them as wrong, and they become normal. This is how a toxic work culture grows. Employees start yielding to a culture that inhibits "ethical reflection, open communication, and psychological safety."[4]

Reweaving Culture the Drucker Way

"Culture – no matter how defined – is singularly persistent." ~ Peter Drucker[5]

The persistence of culture often manifests in the quiet endurance of norms, even when they no longer serve the people within them. As Drucker suggests, organizational culture is largely defined by habits shaped by leadership. Therefore, *if culture is to be rewoven, change must be anchored in the decision of leaders.*

This became evident to me when I began my journey in the corporate world. I experienced a culture that felt strict and hierarchical. Employees were required to stand whenever senior management (managing directors) entered an office. There was resistance to adopting a hybrid work model, despite clear economic realities and the exhausting nature of commuting in Lagos; we were required to be at work every day. My line manager was openly opposed to the use of Generative AI tools that could improve our work, often dismissing them as shortcuts. This was frequently followed by remarks like "you are Gen Z, that's the problem" or "Gen-Zs are lazy" as though using AI only confirmed what they already believed – that my generation was looking for shortcuts. To my line manager, AI wasn't a tool for working smarter: it was seen as an extension of that perceived laziness.

From my experience working in this organization, I saw how directives put in place by leaders can, at times, be a hindrance to innovation. This makes it crucial to rethink the role of management and particularly managers. The five basic functions of a manager, as outlined by Drucker, including setting objectives, organizing, motivating and communicating, measurement, and developing people,[6] provide a useful framework for assessing this.

Managers must therefore ask if organizational goals are truly driven by performance. They need to reevaluate whether daily practices improve efficiency or just reinforce authority through rigid traditions that resist change, even when other approaches are available. Managers must also consider whether the workplace culture promotes open dialogue and new ideas or suppresses them through top-down communication, generational biases, and the stigmatization of innovation. Managers must examine whether success is measured by meaningful results and increased efficiency or by sticking to traditional methods that value performative effort over effectiveness. Lastly, managers must consider if they are equipping employees with the necessary technological skills for future success, including learning to ethically integrate artificial intelligence into their work, or if they remain confined by outdated systems that hinder growth, morale, and creativity.

Above all, managers must realize that management is about people. And people are not tools that should be controlled, but are to be understood and developed. This means that managers must lead with a sense of humanity, they must act with a sense of understanding as regards the realities their subordinates face, they must also be willing to listen, and act with fairness and integrity. When leaders ignore these realities, they risk creating environments where people disengage, and where growth, creativity, and innovation are stifled. But when they recognize and respond to the human experience within the systems they lead, they shape cultures that enable individuals to thrive, and it is within such cultures that meaningful progress and innovation truly take root.

To innovatively reweave culture, managerial practices must be deliberately questioned. This questioning is not limited to what is expected of individuals, but also what is enabled or constrained by those who lead them.

To be frank, I had already begun to foresee my present reality while I was still in the university. With rising unemployment and a recruitment system often shaped by nepotism[7], the future felt bleak. My parents, on the other hand, were guided by a deeply rooted academic culture that prioritised going to school and earning through salaried employment over and above everything. As a result, they strongly opposed my interest in fashion, viewing it as a distraction from the more secure path they had laid out for me.

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[4] Gilbert Rely, "Organizational Culture and Ethical Blind Spots in Managerial Accounting" *Juranal Ilmiah Akuntansi Kesatunan* (2025) <https://doi.org/10.37641/jiakes.v13i3.3457>
[5] Peter Drucker, "Don't Change Corporate Culture – Use It!" *The Wall Street Journal* (1991) <https://drucker.institute/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Drucker-1991-Dont-Change-Corporate-Culture-Use-It.pdf>
[6] Peter Drucker, Joseph Maciariello, "Management" *HarperCollins E-books* (2008) <Management-Peter-F.-Drucker.pdf>
[7] Ukpong, Dianabasi, "Nepotism in Employee Recruitment and Student Admissions in Nigeria's Tetiary Education System" *Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies* (2025) <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/17511>

As Peter Drucker asserts, "to create the future demands courage." Therefore, I had to find the courage to challenge the status quo and begin building the future I envisioned for myself, even when it did not align with my parents' expectations. But I knew that *reweaving the norm would demand more than courage. It would require "reasonable balance"—recognizing that change is not always about outright defiance, but about making intentional choices that create room for innovation without completely severing existing structures*. I also understood that completely resisting the structures put in place by my parents would only create conflict without progress. So I learned to navigate both worlds. I committed to my education, completed university, and went on to graduate from law school with strong results, all while quietly building my business. Alongside studying for my law degree and professional exams, I experimented with entrepreneurship by designing and selling tote bags within my university community. It was a small step, but it exposed me to the realities of business, customer relationships, market demographics, the need for referrals, and the importance of customer's trust in business. Alongside this, I actively sought knowledge, attending master classes and industry programs such as those organized by Lagos Fashion Week, the French Embassy's Lagos x Paris initiative, and other sustainable fashion platforms. By 2023, after graduating from university and before proceeding to law school, I developed my first sustainable fashion collection with the proceeds from my small business. It was a strategic step to position myself for opportunities, attract potential investors, and signal readiness for something bigger. Shortly after completing law school, I received an exclusive invitation to showcase a collection at Nairobi Fashion Week. That moment meant a lot to me. It was an assurance that I was on the right path. Choosing entrepreneurship was my way of challenging the existing culture shaped by my parents and of choosing how to arrange my yarns on the loom.

However, *reweaving culture does not mean discarding it entirely. It requires discernment.* I came to understand that some elements of the structure I resisted still held value. Therefore, rather than abandon education, I had to rethink it strategically. As Drucker again posited, "planning tries to optimize tomorrow the trends of today, while strategy aims to exploit the new and different opportunities of tomorrow." Through my academic training and professional experiences, I developed skills in management, communication, and strategic thinking. Tools that now strengthen my entrepreneurial journey. I have formally registered my fashion brand, refined my business model, built stakeholder relationships, and continued to save and reinvest capital from my knowledge work into growing my sustainable fashion business. By choosing to challenge the status quo with intention and strategy, I gradually earned the understanding and support of my parents, who now believe in and encourage my vision. My journey shows that culture is not static; it evolves, and when approached with clarity, it can be reshaped to accommodate new ideas while still honoring its roots. Ultimately, *reweaving culture requires intention, the courage to question long-held practices, and the discipline to redefine what should be sustained.*

Preserving Culture Through Storytelling

"The story is our escort, without it we are blind" ~ Chinua Achebe.

Our Akwete hypothesis revealed that the yarns determine what is woven, and the loom determines how they are held together. In society, the loom achieves this innovatively with storytelling.

A bias associated with storytelling is that when we think of the art, our minds often turn to literature, to great writers and celebrated works. But storytelling is far more embedded in our daily lives than that. It exists in how we share experiences, pass down knowledge, and make sense of the world around us. The survival of Akwete weaving is evidence of this. It has endured not just because of technique, but because of the stories, practices, and cultural significance that have been consistently passed down through generations.

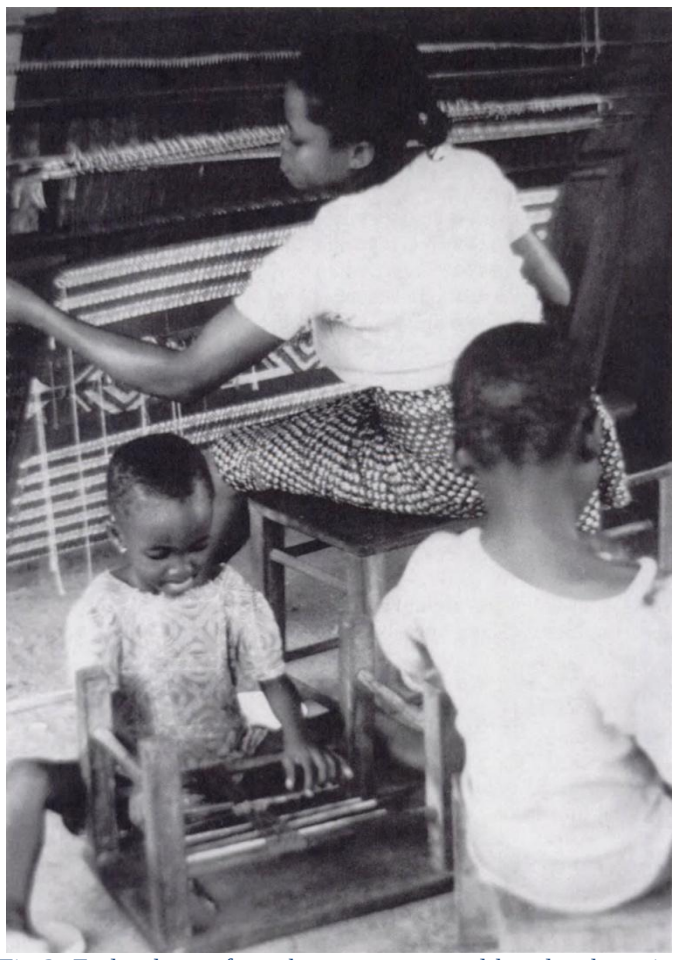


Fig 2: Early photo of an akwete weaver and her daughters in Ndoki, southern Abia State, Eastern Nigeria. Photographer: Lisa Aronson, 1977-1978[8]

The Akwete weaving craft is widely believed to have begun with Dada Nwakata, a woman said to have received the knowledge of weaving in a dream in the late 19th century and had gone on to develop a distinct and closely guarded technique.[9] Over time, this craft spread within the Ndoki community and became deeply associated with the Akwete people, where it evolved into both a cultural identity and a full-time trade for many women. The craft is traditionally exclusive to women, and is passed down through generations to those born or married into the Akwete community. In many ways, storytelling is what has held the Akwete craft together. It is not just the weaving technique that has been passed down, but the meaning attached to it. That meaning is what has kept women committed to learning it, preserving it, and building on it across generations. Storytelling, when harnessed properly, bring abstract company mission statements and values to life, helping employees understand them, connect with them, and put them into action to build a strong workplace culture.[10]

The continuity of the Akwete weaving has proved useful today in the wake of growing conversations around sustainability and the urgent need to move away from environmentally harmful materials like polyester. There has been a renewed interest in traditional, eco-conscious practices, and crafts like Akwete weaving are now being revisited as viable alternatives. It is the stories behind them that have helped these crafts endure over time.

All Fingers Are Not Equal

A long African proverb reminds us that all fingers are not equal. Although the fingers differ in size and function, they all work together to make the hand useful. In the same way, people are not the same in ability, role, or perspective, yet each person contributes to a shared purpose. This reemphasizes that innovation does not come from erasing differences, but from understanding them and building with the strength each person brings.

Managers must recognise that employees bring diverse perspectives shaped by generational, cultural, and professional experiences. When people from different backgrounds work together, they introduce new ideas, question assumptions, and approach problems in fresh ways. Some may prioritise collaboration and shared decisions, while others focus on efficiency and individual output. These differences also affect how time is perceived, how work is approached, and how success is measured.

What matters is finding the right balance. Creating space for people to share ideas helps everyone feel heard, while setting clear goals and timelines keeps work moving forward. Knowing when to involve others and when to make decisions quickly helps avoid delays. When managed well, these differences strengthen the team, leading to more thoughtful input, faster execution, and better innovation. In this way, the true value of diversity lies not just in having it, but in making the effort to understand it, bring it together, and make the most of it.

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[8] Internet link: <https://www.tumblr.com/threadparty/151387484597/ukpuru-akwete-girls-are-taught-the-secrets-of?source=share>
[9] Otosirieze, "The Women Weavers of Akwete, "*Open Country Mag,"* (2023) < https://opencountrymag.com/folio-nigeria/the-women-weavers-of-akwete/>
[10] James McGinty, "The Impact of Storytelling on Company Culture" *James Mcginty Professional Speaker* (2025) <https://mcginty.net/blog-42/#:~:text=Building%20Shared%20Identity%20Through%20Narrative&text=Origin%20stories%20hold%20particular%20power,exists%20and%20how%20it%20operates.>