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Key contacts



Ijeoma Uju
Partner,
Corporate & Commercial
ijeoma.uju@templars-law.com



Inna Ali
Managing Counsel,
Corporate & Commercial
inna.ali@templars-law.com



Nyerhovwo Umukoro
Associate,
Corporate & Commercial
nyerhovwo.umukoro@templars-law.com

TEMPLARS ThoughtLab

Globalization of Adire: *Strengthening Nigeria's Legal Protection and Economic Leverage*

Introduction

Adire which is derived from the Yoruba etymology of àdì (to tie) and ẹ̀ (to dye)¹ is a hand-dyed fabric traditionally made by artisans of the Yoruba ethnic group in Southwestern Nigeria. While Adire is synonymous with Southwestern Nigeria, according to most reports, its historical roots stem from Egbaland in Abeokuta, the present-day capital of Ogun State². More than just a fabric, Adire is a cultural expression, an intangible symbol of Yoruba heritage, artistry, and skill. Although Adire craftsmanship has gained international recognition and prestige, its origins and ownership are still not widely acknowledged or protected by formal laws. With the global tie-dye apparel market size valued at US\$4.1 billion in 2024, and forecasted to hit US\$ 7.8 billion by 2033³, Nigeria has an opportunity to benefit from its indigenous craftsmanship such as Adire. This article discusses how the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (the "UNESCO") Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage (the "Convention") and the intellectual property framework on geographical indication can provide a structured path for formal recognition and protection of Adire craftsmanship, and more broadly, support intangible cultural heritage in Nigeria.

Recognition under the Convention

The Convention defines intangible cultural heritage to include practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces with

¹ The Guardian 'A Short History of Adire' <https://guardian.ng/life/culture-lifestyle/a-short-history-of-adire/> accessed 25 November 2025

² Ibid. Interestingly, an online squabble arose regarding the origin of Adire in Nigeria. See [Adire's Origin: Withdraw Your Statement, Ogun Traders Tell Gov Adeleke - Daily Trust](#) (Accessed 16 October 2025)

³ Debadatta Pate, 'Tie-Dye Apparel Market Research Report 2033', <https://marketintelo.com/report/tie-dye-apparel-market> (Accessed 1 November 2025)

communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals that are recognized by such groups as part of their cultural heritage.⁴ The Convention also highlights traditional craftsmanship⁵ as an example of an intangible cultural heritage which Adire should be categorised as. However, Adire despite its widespread popularity, is not recognized under the Convention. In contrast, the Convention recognizes other Nigerian cultural expressions such as the Ifa Divination System;⁶ Ijele masquerade;⁷ Argungu international fishing and cultural festival⁸ to mention a few.

It is noteworthy that recognition of an intangible cultural heritage under the Convention does not amount to a grant of intellectual property on the respective community in which the expression is attributed to. However, there are numerous benefits that accrue with recognition under the Convention as recognition would authoritatively affirm the geographical originator of the intangible cultural heritage. This matters for heritage, tourism, cultural education and can spur negotiations and discussions relating to international recognition and trade. Even more, the recognition grants an opportunity to Nigeria to apply for financial assistance from the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund⁹, allowing Nigeria to mobilize resources and expertise for programs, projects and activities aimed at safeguarding, promoting and building capacity in relation to the craftsmanship. Finally, inscribing Adire on a global list strengthens the community's sense of identity and pride, helping to secure its place in national policy planning and spurring further international dialogue and discussions related to trade and cultural exchange.

Process of Recognition under the Convention

To recognize any intangible cultural heritage under the Convention, Nigeria must submit the cultural expression to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (the "**Committee**")¹⁰. The Committee will first assess whether the nomination meets the eligibility criteria set out in the Convention and its operational directives¹¹. If the cultural expression is eligible, the Committee proceeds to evaluate the submission¹². This evaluation process typically takes about 2 (two) years from submission to final decision. Upon approval, the Committee may inscribe the element either on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity or, if it is deemed to be at risk of disappearing, on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. For craftsmanship such as Adire that remains vibrant but requires greater visibility and support, the Representative List would be the appropriate destination.

Cultural Recognition without Enforceable IP Rights: The need for Geographical Indication

Although cultural recognition of intangible cultural expressions enhances their global prestige and visibility, without protective IP frameworks and rights, they are exposed to possible cultural appropriation and potentially lost economic opportunity for Nigeria.

⁴ Article 2(1), the Convention.

⁵ Article 2(2), the Convention.

⁶ UNESCO, "Ifa divination system" Ifa divination system – Intangible Heritage – Culture Sector – UNESCO (Accessed 4 December 2024)

⁷ UNESCO, "Ijele masquerade" Ijele masquerade – Intangible Heritage – Culture Sector – UNESCO (Accessed 4 December 2024)

⁸ UNESCO, "Argungu international fishing and cultural festival" Argungu international fishing and cultural festival – Intangible Heritage – Culture Sector – UNESCO (Accessed 4 December 2024)

⁹ UNESCO, "Requesting International Assistance" in <https://ich.unesco.org/en/requesting-assistance-000392> (Accessed 16 October 2025)

¹⁰ The Committee is a body within the UNESCO established pursuant to Article 5 of the Convention and tasked with implementation of the purposes of the Convention.

¹¹ Nigeria would have to demonstrate that I) Adire is within the definition of intangible cultural heritage II) the recognition will contribute to enhancing the significance of Adire, III) domestic safeguarding measures for Adire are in place, IV) Adire was nominated following the widest possible participation of the relevant local community, and V) Adire has been included in the inventory of intangible cultural heritage held by Nigeria

¹² UNESCO, "Operational Directives for the implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage" in *Procedure of inscription of elements on the Lists and of selection of Good Safeguarding Practices - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Accessed 16 October 2025)

An effective method of protecting Adire craftsmanship is through the Intellectual property (IP) mechanism known as Geographical Indications ("GI"). GI is defined under the World Trade Organisation ("WTO") Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights ("TRIPS") as

"Indications which identify a good as originating in the territory of a Member, or a region or locality in that territory, where a given quality, reputation or other characteristic of the good is essentially attributable to its geographical origin"¹³.

In addition to TRIPS, there are several international treaties that further regulate and promote the use of GI's such as the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property 1883 and the Geneva Act of the Lisbon Agreement for the Protection of Appellations of Origin 2015 (the "**Lisbon Agreement**")

GI represents an important mechanism for protecting ownership of cultural expressions and ensuring higher commercial benefits for Nigerians as it is an IP framework that connects a product to a specific location known for its quality, tradition, or method of production.¹⁴ In other words, it is an IP right that protects the use of a name or sign to identify a product as originating from a specific geographical region, where a particular quality, reputation, or other characteristic of the product is essentially attributable to that origin.¹⁵

For example, only sparkling wine from the Champagne region of France can be legally labelled as such;¹⁶ same is applicable to the Rooibos tea and Rioja wine which are exclusive respectively to communities in South Africa¹⁷ and the La Rioja region in Spain¹⁸.

Geographical Indications in Ghana: Recognition of the Kente Textile

The example of Ghana and the recognition of the Kente textile illustrates the possibilities with Nigeria and the Adire textile. Recently, Ghana took a landmark step in safeguarding its iconic Kente cloth under the Geographical Indications Act, 2003 (Act 659) and the Geographical Indications Regulations, 2020 (L.I. 2414).

In September 2025, the Registrar-General of Ghana's Industrial Property Office and the World Intellectual Property Organization ("WIPO") jointly announced the GI status of the Kente cloth. Further to the recognition, only textiles made by registered artisans and in accredited Ghanaian weaving zones are permitted to legally use the "Kente" label in both domestic and foreign markets¹⁹.

This succeeds the recognition in 2024 by the UNESCO where the UNESCO inscribed the craftsmanship of traditional woven Kente on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, marking a significant cultural milestone²⁰

¹³ Article 22.1, TRIPS

¹⁴ Precious Onuabuchi, 'Geographical Indication as an Intellectual Property Right: A Comprehensive Overview' *Business Day* available at <https://businessday.ng/news/legal-business/article/geographical-indication-as-an-intellectual-property-right-a-comprehensive-overview/> accessed 07 June 2025.

¹⁵ Bilge Dogan and Ummuhan Gokovali, 'Geographical Indications: The Aspects of Rural Development and Marketing Through the Traditional Products' 62 *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 761.

¹⁶ Anne-Laure Bedaux, 'Champagne Protection Remains Strong' *Gevers* available at <https://gevers.eu/blog/champagne-protection-remains-strong/> accessed 07 June 2025.

¹⁷ South African Rooibos Council, 'Rooibos continues to enjoy GI protection in UK post-Brexit' (<https://sarooibos.co.za/rooibos-continues-to-enjoy-gi-protection-in-uk-post-brexit/>) accessed 2 December 2025

¹⁸ European Commission, "Rioja", <https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eambrosia/geographical-indications-register/details/EUGI00000003061> accessed 12 June 2025

¹⁹ News Ghana, "Kente Gains Global Protection as Ghana's First Geographical Indication" <https://www.newsghana.com.gh/kente-gains-global-protection-as-ghanas-first-geographical-indication/#:~:text=For%20weavers%2C%20the%20protected%20name,and%20inspections%20to%20support%20compliance>. (Accessed 17 October 2025)

²⁰ See UNESCO "Ghana" <https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/ghana-GH> (Accessed 17 October 2024)

When combined, the UNESCO designation and the GI accreditation strengthen Kente's position as a cultural ambassador and a strategic asset in international trade and cultural diplomacy, in addition to being a representation of Ghanaian identity. It enhances the economic worth of genuine Ghanaian Kente, guards against abuse and copying, and guarantees that local weavers and communities directly profit from its commercial success.

Looking Forward: Next Steps for Nigeria

In order to fully realize protection and economic potential for Adire and other intangible cultural heritage, it is important for Nigeria to enact a tailored GI Legislation.²¹ Following this, Adire must be registered under Nigeria's domestic GI legislation²², once a dedicated legal framework is in place. This registration would provide legal recognition and protection within Nigeria. As a result of the domestic registration, international treaties such as the Lisbon Agreement²³ can support the facilitation of cross-border enforcement of GI rights, helping to prevent unauthorized use of Adire craft in global markets.

Currently, the only existing legal provision that offers limited recognition for GIs in Nigeria is Section 43 of the Trade-Marks Act²⁴, which provides for the registration of certification marks. In addition, the Merchandise Marks Act²⁵ prohibits the use of false or misleading indications of origin on goods. While these provisions offer a basic legal framework, they fall short of the comprehensive protection typically afforded to GI's under a dedicated legal regime.

In response to Nigeria's gaps in Geographical Indication ("GI") protection, the Nigerian Technical Working Group on Geographical Indications was established in 2021 through the support of the Africa Intellectual Property and Innovation Project (AfrIPI), an EU-funded initiative implemented by the European Union Intellectual Property Office ("EUIPO"), in collaboration with the Africa International Trade and Commerce Research ("AITCR")²⁶ to develop a GI legislation suited for Nigeria. After over three years of consultations and research, the group completed a draft Geographical Indications Bill (the "Bill"), which was formally submitted to the Minister of Industry, Trade and Investment, Dr. Jumoke Oduwole, on 14 January 2025. The Bill²⁷ is making progress and has passed first reading at the House of Representatives²⁸.

In today's era of increased global trade and tourism, it is essential that Nigeria fully benefits from her unique cultural products and expressions. Adire fabric now features on the shelves of renowned designers around the world. Formal recognition and protection will not only promote cultural pride but also create economic opportunities. Therefore, taking concrete steps now to solidify the country's cultural heritage and secure its rightful place in international markets is both timely and necessary.

If you require any further clarification, do not hesitate to contact us

²¹ Onyekwelu, S. Woven rights: Kente's voice finds protection—what Nigeria must do next. *BusinessDay NG*. <https://businessday.ng/life-arts/article/woven-rights-kentes-voice-finds-protection-what-nigeria-must-do-next/> (Accessed 17 October 2025)

²² This is crucial as the Lisbon Agreement does not allow for recognition of a GI that has not been domestically recognized as a GI in the member state.

²³ Nigeria currently is not a party to the Lisbon Agreement and will also need to domesticate the treaty.

²⁴ <https://placng.org/lawsofnigeria/laws/TRADE%20MARKS%20ACT.pdf>

²⁵ Merchandise Marks Act

²⁶ All Africa Intellectual Property Summit, "Significance of Nigeria Draft Geographical Indications Bill" in <https://africaipsummit.it-rc.org/2025/04/30/significance-of-nigeria-draft-geographical-indications-bill/> accessed 12 June 2025

²⁷ Geographical Indication (Registration and Protection) Bill, 2025 (HB.2387) (Hon. Victor Afam Ogene)

²⁸ See [https://nallf.gov.ng/house-of-representatives-10th-assembly-bills-passed-first-reading-june-24th-26th/#:~:text=Geographical%20Indication%20\(Registration%20and%20Protection,\(Senate\)%20%E2%80%93%20First%20Reading.](https://nallf.gov.ng/house-of-representatives-10th-assembly-bills-passed-first-reading-june-24th-26th/#:~:text=Geographical%20Indication%20(Registration%20and%20Protection,(Senate)%20%E2%80%93%20First%20Reading.)