

Malian Textiles

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55

Mali's long weaving tradition has given rise to a wide variety of textiles that are particular to communities or regions, are used by people throughout the country, and, in recent years, have become popular around the world. Malian textiles began to be traded in the 11th century, although, as archaeological evidence reveals, they existed far earlier.

Weaving, traditionally a man's craft in Mali, is based on the processing of cotton and wool; the use of one or the other in a region depends on the climate and local people's knowledge. Wool weaving is a specialty of Fulani (Peul) weavers, the Maabube, who are a specialist "caste." (Among other groups in Mali who work primarily in cotton, weaving as a profession is not restricted to a particular "caste." See p. 43.)

They create utilitarian wool weavings called *kaasa*; of these, the most valued for their softness are made from the wool of young sheep. *Kaasas* can be used as blankets, which are generally white, and for clothing, such as shepherds' tunics (*boubous*), which are most popular in black. *Arkilajii* are large blankets or hangings made of strips of wool or a combination of wool and cotton with motifs like the moon, stars, and animals, which convey humans' relationship with nature. One of the most prestigious weavings in Mali is the Fulani *arkila kerka*, a specialty of the Maabube, which generally serves as mosquito covering for the nuptial chamber. An *arkila kerka* takes about a month and a half to make. The weaver moves into the household of the family that commissions the textile, and together they come up with the design. The *arkila jango* is the main item of marriage trousseaus for Tuareg girls; hung around a tent, it offers protection against the cold, wind, and sand.

Cotton textiles seem to be the oldest in Mali and the most widespread throughout the country. They are used as coverings, *pagnes* (wrappers), other articles of clothing, and as offerings and during rites of passage in rural areas. Cotton was introduced to Mali as a cash crop at the beginning of the 20th century by the French, to reduce their dependence on U.S. and British cotton. The first efforts to cultivate cotton as a cash crop took place in 1907 in the region of the interior Niger Delta, but it only became really viable beginning in 1935.

Although men shear the sheep and harvest the cotton, many of the subsequent tasks involved in processing raw wool and cotton are performed by women. Women comb raw wool by hand and card raw cotton. Spinning is a women's activity as well, traditionally providing an occasion for women to tell stories and proverbs to one another as they work. Both men and women make the woven cloth strips (*bandes*) that are sewn together to make textiles. A black strip, for example, protects against illness and would be put in men's garments in places where he is

A woman vendor in Bamako's bustling textile market displays her resist-dyed cloth. Photo © National Museum of Mali



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vulnerable (chest, spine). *Pagnes* have seven strips, *kaasas* have six; piecing them together can be time-consuming and demanding work. Men and women embroider fabrics and tailor garments. Women dye the fabrics, and men polish them. Most fabrics except fine, handwoven cotton are polished to give them the desired sheen. Polishing is accomplished by beating the fabric with wood mallets and is hard work.

Natural dyes are made from roots, leaves, flowers, bark, and clay; indigo is cultivated, and indigo-dyed cloths are very highly valued. *Bogolan*, known as mudcloth, uses various plant dyes and clay. Until recently the specialized knowledge of making *bogolan* was possessed by the Bambara (Bamanan), Malinké (Maninka), Bwa, Dogon, Senufo, and Minianka; now it is claimed by many other groups. The process involves applying mud on cloth, leaving the pattern bare—that is, the mud design is painted on as the background, and the motif appears in the areas without mud. Indigo-dyeing developed in West Africa and especially Mali at the same time as cotton weaving; textiles found in the cliffs of

Bandiagara (from the Tellem culture, 11th–15th centuries) contain thread dyed with indigo. Soninké women are most famous for indigo-dyeing.

At the point textiles are made into clothes, they assume a dual function: protecting the body and conferring a status on the individual. Malians, and Africans in general, are careful not to let an article of clothing that has been worn fall in the hands of someone who wishes the wearer ill; sorcerers can get to the person through any object that has had contact with his or her body. Textiles are intimately connected to the existence of those who wear them.

Islam and exchanges with the Maghreb, which increased between the 11th and 16th centuries, influenced to varying degrees the clothing fashions of different ethnic groups in Mali: large tunics, baggy pants, caps, turbans, and *babouches* (slippers). The way one dresses depends on one's age, gender, social status, and religion. The *boubou* marks the passage to adulthood; notables add to the *boubou* a shawl on the shoulder (turning it into a *grand boubou*). The quantity of material, quality of weaving, length of

the garment, and ornamentation specify the socioeconomic status or religion of the wearer.

Traditionally craft trades had a sacred or magical character because they transformed material; “the artisan pursued the work of God...who, in creating the earth, left certain actions unfinished.” Knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation according to precise rituals. However, handweaving and the crafts associated with it have gone into a steady decline as industrially produced waxprints and roller-print cotton textiles have become increasingly available. These textiles, which come from Europe, Africa, and Mali's own factories, are loomed in wider widths and are more easily cut and tailored. Workshops where clothes are sewn by machine have little incentive to promote traditional textiles, because the styles of clothing the workshops produce come from outside Mali, some from imported catalogues, and change annually. In addition, the thickness of traditional fabrics does not lend itself well to the newer fashions that both rural and urban women desire. The growing use of industrially produced thread has been accompanied by the discontinued manufacture of the carders rural women depended on to comb cotton. Contemporary weavers also face challenges in obtaining sufficient supplies of quality wool and cotton. Droughts have affected sheep's diets, and in turn their coats, and most raw cotton is exported. Another factor in the quality of production enters in when textiles are made for the marketplace rather than commissioned by a family according to its specifications and for its use. In this case, since a family's decorative needs play no role in planning and evaluating the design and the work, the motifs may be less tightly woven, or

the weaver may use chemical dyes and industrial thread to save time. Some weavers who have moved to the cities have been unable to make a living there and have been forced to abandon their craft.

But the future for Malian textiles and craftspeople is far from bleak. A renewed interest among Malians and others in handwoven cotton textiles, especially *bogolan*, could be an impetus for reviving the handweaving industry. Chris Seydou, an internationally successful fashion designer (1949–94), introduced *bogolan* into haute couture, and his contribution was decisive in the revalorization of African textiles. Traditional hand embroiderers, centered in Timbuktu (Tombouctou) and Djenné, along with Gao and Bamako, have retained their prestige because of the antiquity of their craft, complexity of the work, and great beauty of the finished garments. In cities weaving and dyeing have become open to more groups. Urban weavers adapt *pagnes* and coverings for use as decorations in people's homes. The production of textiles in urban areas also is characterized by the use of chemical dyes applied to *basin* (damask). This flourishing industry has resulted in the making of *boubous* that have become one of the hallmarks of Malian identity.

Textiles and dress are not just functional but are basic to individual and collective identity. Once considered prestigious possessions, for dignitaries and royalty, textiles today can provide a way for all Malians to assert their heritage, and craft the way the world sees them. ■

(Facing page) A vendor sells stenciled mud-dyed cloth. Stenciled cloths are faster to produce and less expensive to buy than the handpainted mudcloths. Photo © Shawn Davis

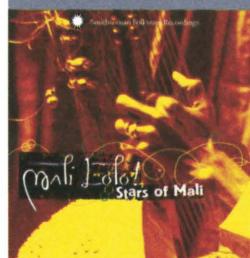
(Below) This Dogon weaver is working on a cotton strip. Five or more of these strips will later be sewn together to make a complete cloth. Photo by John Franklin © Smithsonian Institution



MALI ON SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS

57

"One of the most striking aspects of Malian music today is the way it blurs the distinction between traditional and modern music....Malian musicians are renowned improvisers, and their willingness to experiment and to extend into new areas has led to a proliferation of hybrid genres. Older sounds and forms are constantly reinvented. As participants in a living musical tradition, today's Malian musicians have listened to the world." —from the liner notes by Banning Eyre to Mali Lolo! Stars of Mali (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW CD 40508).



Today's world is listening to Mali's musicians. The striking sounds of contemporary Malian music both honor the unique essence of Mali's

culturally diverse population and boast a boldness to create new ways of expressing that essence. Many would say that this embrace of both continuity and creation equally is precisely the reason for the striking international popularity of Malian musicians.

Mali Lolo! Stars of Mali, produced by Smithsonian Global Sound director Jon Kertzer especially for the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, is an audio group portrait of leading Malian musicians of today. Sixteen tracks profile Oumou Sangaré, Kasse Mady Diabaté, Ali Farka Touré, Habib Koité, Lobi Traoré, and many others beyond those appearing at the Festival in a rare anthology of contemporary Malian sounds.

To purchase *Mali Lolo! Stars of Mali*, visit the Festival Marketplace or the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings Web site, www.folkways.si.edu. ■

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