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**The Symbolism of North West
African Fabric Dyeing and Designing.**

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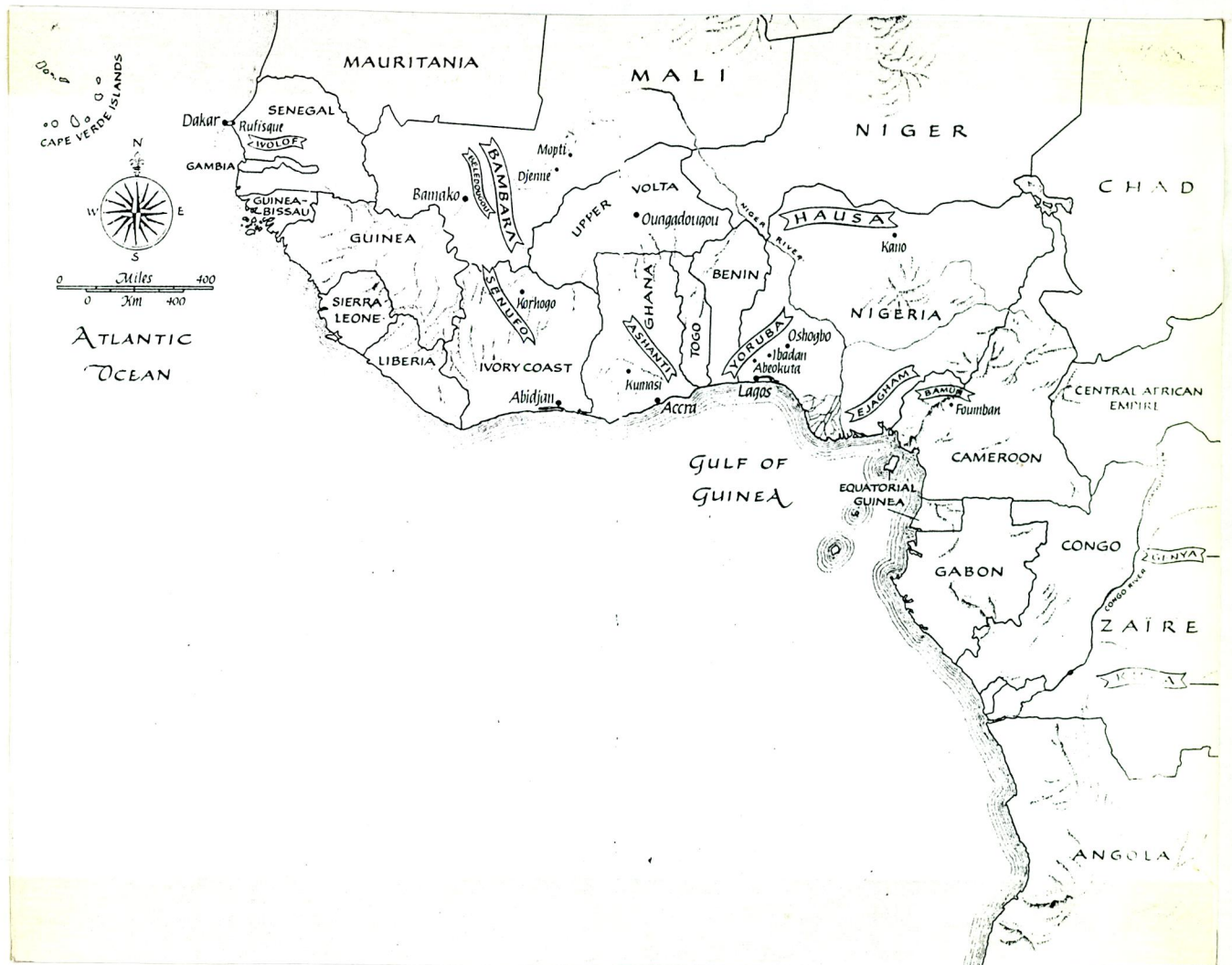
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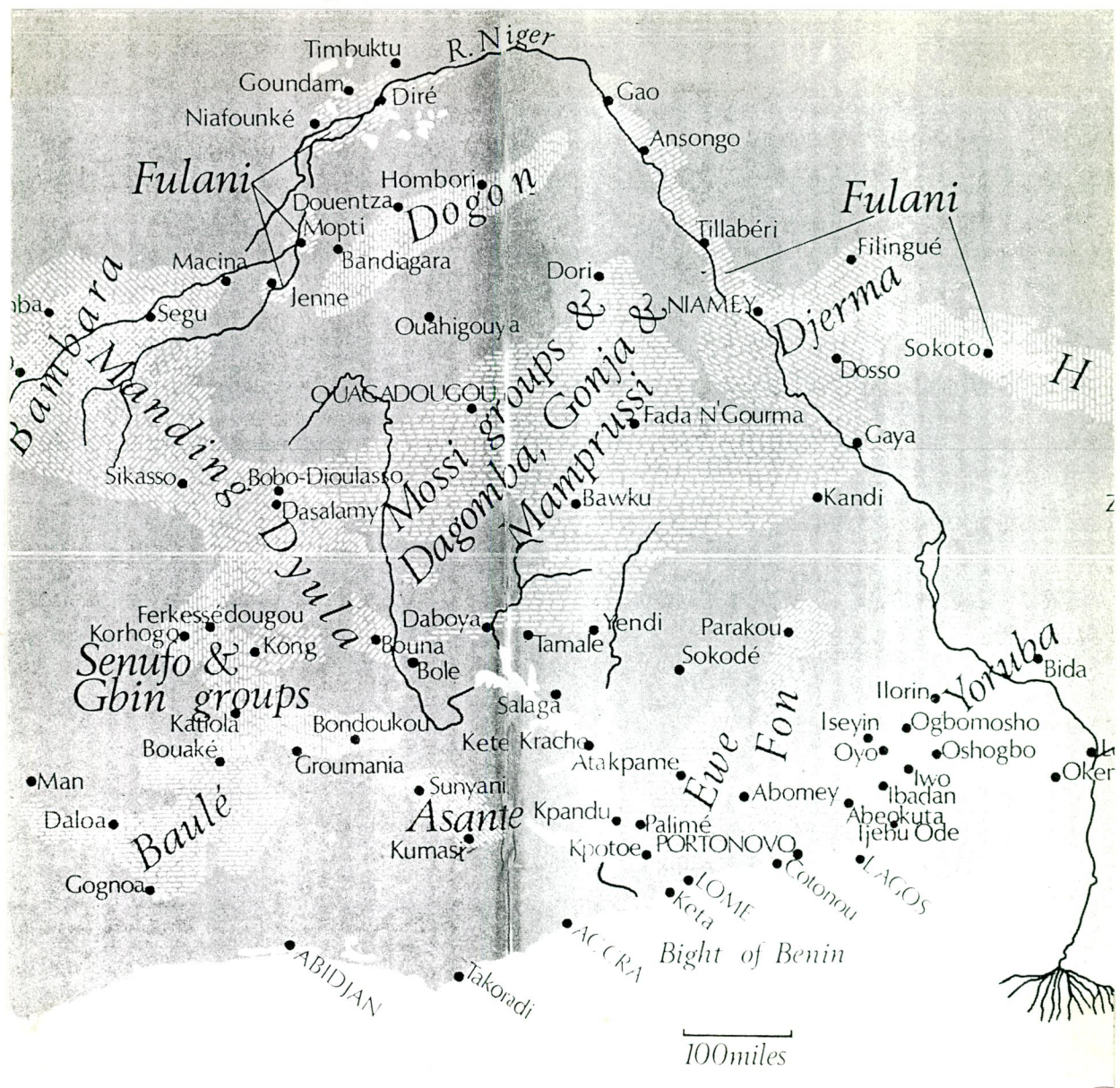
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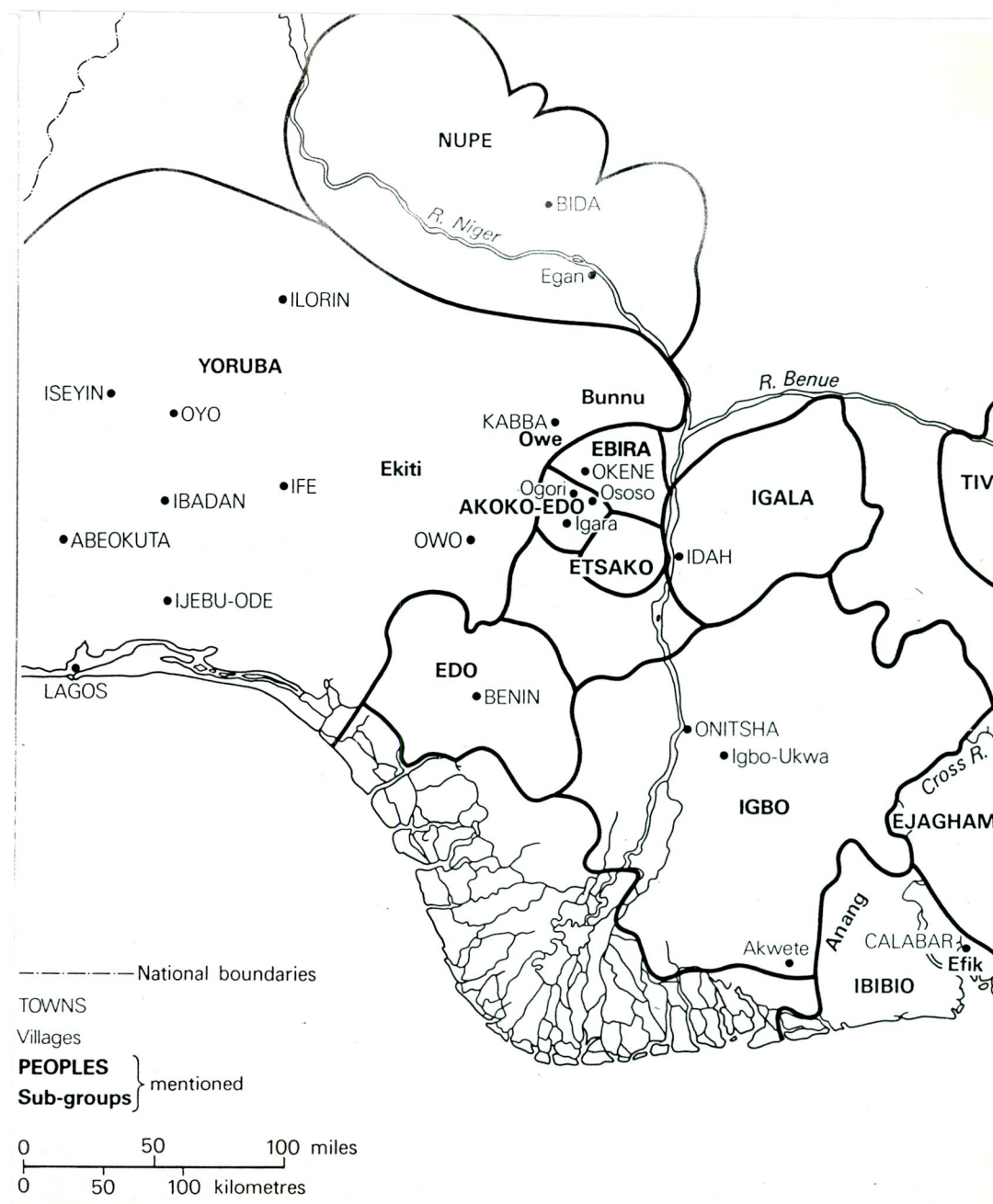


MAP 1 .
North west Africa.

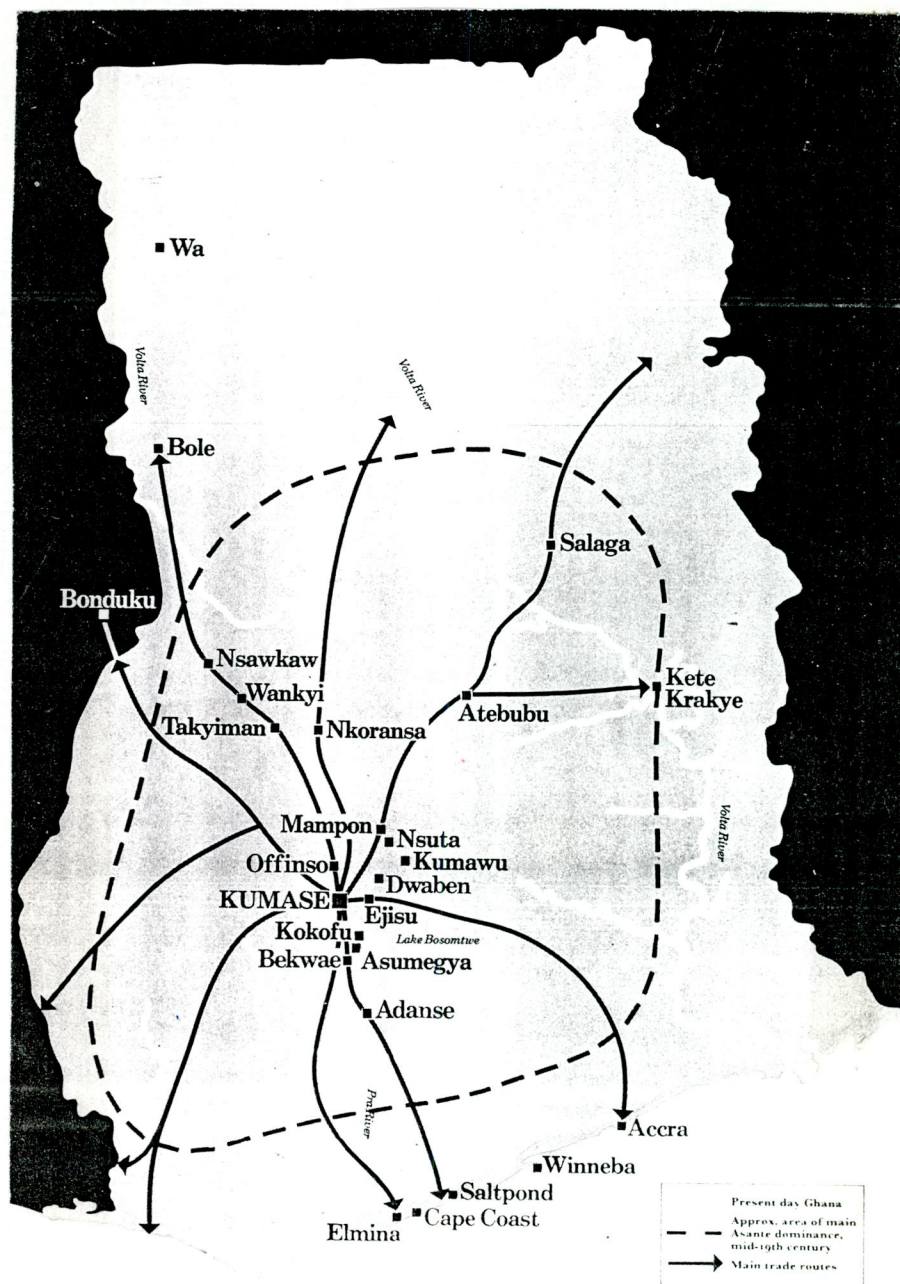


MAP 2.

Above map shows Nigeria and the tribes (in heavy black print) found around the Niger delta.



MAP 3.
Weaving in Nigeria.



MAP 4.
Weaving in Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Fabrics and textiles are one of the most accessible art forms. Everyone can be subjected to their beauty. We can wrap and surround ourselves completely in their textures and colours. We each have our individual preferences, however varied and diverse they may seem to others. Textiles take on a personality. There is no language barrier with fabric - it speaks directly to our senses. It envelopes an environment and culture. It will be shown that this idea is very important in the textiles of north west Africa. The textiles of Africa enrich and reflect the language of their cultures, religions and traditions.

This thesis sets out to explain the symbolic ideas behind the fabrics of certain tribes. The adire cloth of the Yoruba of Nigeria; the adinkra cloth of the Asante of Ghana; and the Korhorgo cloth of the Ivory Coast. The quality of the textiles chosen from these areas is not necessarily better than other parts of Africa. Within the north west African region I find that the adire, the adinkra and the Korhoga cloth embody qualities this thesis attempts to highlight. They are each symbolic in both their colour and design.

The Yoruba are recognised for their expertise in the resist method of patterning fabric. They have perfected the art of tie and dye, which is known by them as adire. These craftsmen and women are admired by many European and American collectors for their sensitive insight into the handling of indigo. The delicacy they achieve, using fine embroidery as a resist, is enviable.

The adinkra cloth of the Asante holds many symbols, signs and ideas. It translates many distinctive messages of their life. The motifs and design symbols are linked with daily activities, representing both religious and social concepts. The symbolism of colour is strongly evident as a language for the Asante people of Ghana.

Finally the Korhoga cloth of the Ivory Coast is known for its stylised figures of humans and animals in a technique of direct paint/dye. Certain drawings of animals have significant symbolic meanings, which are combined to tell stories in the cloth.

Chapter One discusses the significance of symbolism in north west African textiles. It is necessary to understand the use of symbols as a medium for storytelling. The stories are told using both colour and motifs as symbols. Chapter Two discusses the importance of colour as an expressive medium. The dependence of the specified north west African areas on colour is evident when considering their textiles. Chapter Three addresses the sources of the motifs and how they are applied to the fabric. The various meanings associated with each motif are also discussed in relation to each tribe's fabrics.

The Conclusion discusses the survival of the traditional and loved textiles in an atmosphere of contemporary ideas and progress. It addresses the following question: Can or should the traditional textiles be kept alive as opposed to being replaced by faster techniques?

CHAPTER ONE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SYMBOLISM IN NORTH WEST AFRICAN TEXTILES.

Worldwide, man unconsciously and deliberately uses his spoken, written or visual language to express the meaning of what he wants to convey. Our language is full of symbols. A symbol is more than that which is obvious. Symbolism becomes a medium through which we can convey intentions which can be vague or relatively unknown, for example religious icons are merely symbols for our suggested ideas of the existence of certain "substances".

It is believed by many writers and art critics, that West African textiles have a language of their own, shown symbolically through colour and design. A similar symbolic language is found in many textiles and local crafts throughout the world. India, for example, is recognised for the symbolism of colour in its textiles. This thesis attempts to show how the north west African craftspeople convey stories, feelings and emotions in their textiles.

The techniques employed in making the cloth have been passed down from generation to generation. There remains a love for the craft of weaving, dyeing and spinning. It has never merely been a series of techniques for the craftspeople of Africa, but a

joyful, fulfilling experience. The love and pride put into these fabrics is seen in the spiritual satisfaction gained. (6, chapter 1.) The fabric itself has a value in its success as a beautiful, useful product. Is this because so much enjoyment was experienced in the making of and the everyday use of the cloth? Could the importance and the making of the cloth be so great if there were not this symbolic importance associated with it?

In all three of the tribes this thesis looks at, many meanings are understood by the various types of clothing people wear. Clothing, and the marks on it, are one of the most important marks of distinction in the Asante of Ghana. This still remains so today, but not as rigidly as it was during the sixteenth century. Basic differences still exist between the dress of the sexes and between that of people of different status and occupation. Dress also varies according to the occasion - for example, a mourning ceremony. All the cloth of the Asante serves to translate a distinctive message. The type, style and design of Asante cloth, for example the adinkra¹, cloth have remained relatively similar to that of cloth found by the traveller T.E. Bowdich² in 1817. Contemporary restraints, for example commercialism, loss of meaning from country to country, will obviously change some traditional styles and techniques, but the continuing success of most styles and techniques is an achievement in itself.

One society rich in symbolism is that of the Asante tribe of Ghana. These peoples have been recorded as being a wealthy and

¹ Highly symbolic printed cloth of the Asante, in which specific design techniques are used to convey intended messages.

² T.E. Bowdich was a traveller and collector. He recorded information on local tribal groups, especially in north western Africa. Following his celebrated expedition to North Africa in 1817, he wrote a book, published in 1819, called "Mission from Cape Coast to Asanti". Several locally woven cloths, collected by Bowdich, are part of a collection in the British Museum of African Textiles, for example he collected an adinkra cloth in 1817 which is kept in the British Museum.

splendid tribe. (11, Chapter 1.) Their wealth is due to the discovery of deposits of gold in Ghana and the Ivory Coast after 1700. The gold, once plentiful, was used in the making of opulent golden jewellery and sculpture. (Figure 1.) The Asante are the dominant nation of the main Akan³ group and are centred in Kumasi, South Ghana. They are particularly noted for their strong belief in animist cults. They all follow the supreme God and creator, Nyame, through a belief in the spirits of rivers and bushes, in witchcraft and in the power of protective charms. During the nineteenth century, the chief wore a golden or leather charm (or talisman), inscribed with spiritual writings as a pendant or sewn onto clothing. The Asante was a powerful kingdom in Ghana up to the nineteenth century. Its power was based on the symbol of the Golden Stool. Through Asante history, the Golden Stool has represented the soul of the nation. Its physical well-being and survival have been intricately linked to the survival of the stool. It has therefore been not only the most important item of the Asantehene's⁴ hoard, but also a cult object for the entire people. Similar in meaning for poor Asante are Wooden Stools. Examples of wooden stools, dated approximately mid-nineteenth century, can be seen in the National Museum of Ireland's storeroom.

There are said to be strong colours in the Asante landscape of Ghana. It is an extremely hot country, 5° north of the equator. At noon the sun is directly overhead in a cloudless blue sky, scorching the land beneath. These conditions create intense colours and hard shadows which may be sources for the designs and colours for the local textiles. There are many streams and rivers

³ The Akan are a group of many tribes in Ghana. The Asante is the largest of this group. Other Akan tribes are the Ewe, found just south of the Asante, centred around Keta on the south coast, the Kpandu, to the north of the Ewe and the Fante, stretching along the coast. In the Ivory Coast there is a tribe called the Baule, who identify closely with the material style of the Asante.

⁴ The Asantehene is the king of the Asante tribe.

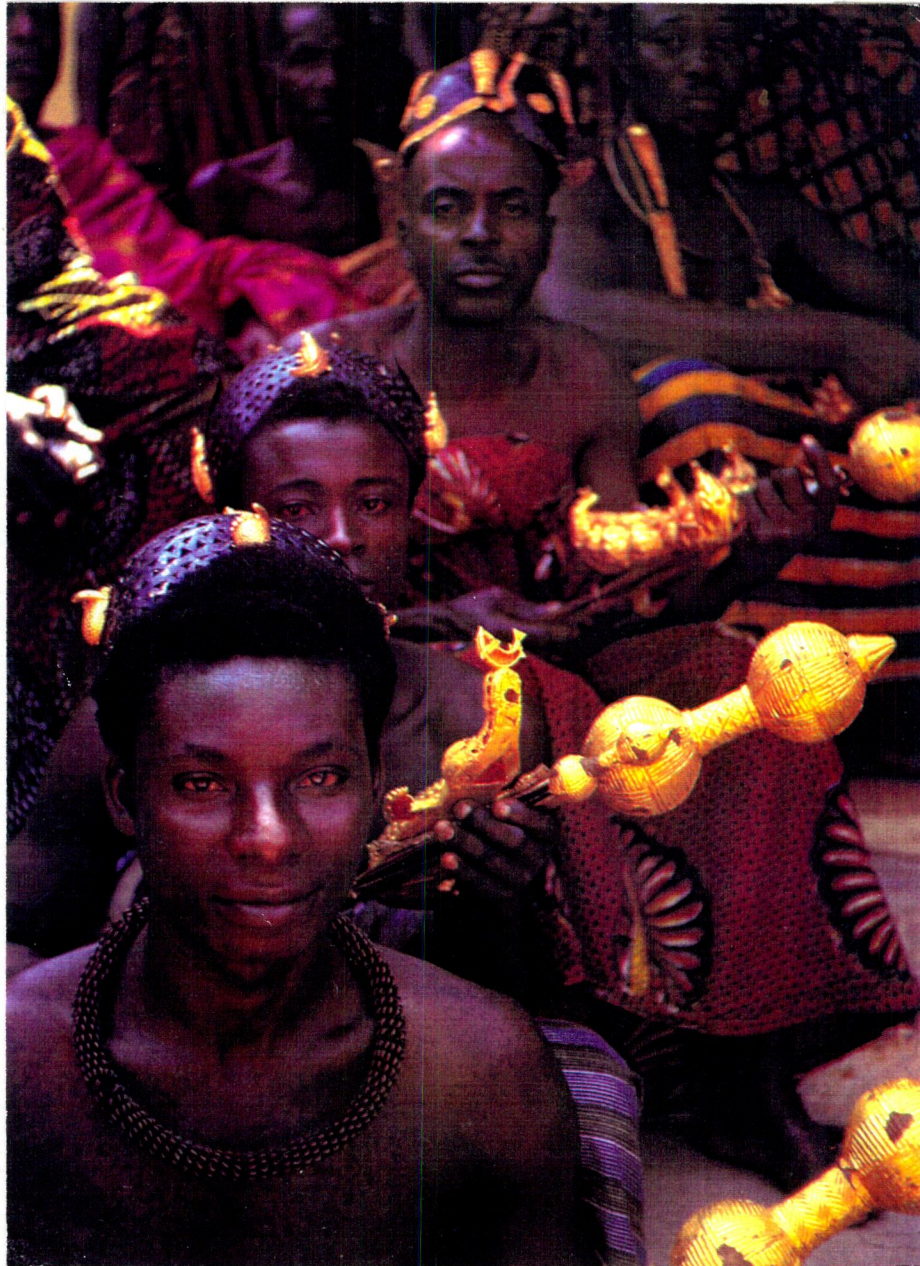


FIGURE 1

Sword bearers of the Kumawu paramount chieftancy. The sheaths are decorated with golden casting. Kumawu, a few miles north east of Kumase, is still a strong Asante town. The above photograph shows the richness of the golden jewellery and of the Asante people.

of the underlying soil, create many beautiful, intense colours which the craftspeople of the Asante use as inspiration for their work.

The most splendid and complex garments were worn by the Asantehene and senior chiefs as symbols of their importance and social standing within the tribe. The monarch chooses the pattern of his garment. If he wanted to declare defiance, that he was strong and not afraid of anyone, the 'aya'- the fern, would be incorporated into the design of his garment. For example, when the present Asantehene, (Opoku Ware II, Mathiew Jacob Poku), was installed in Office in 1970, he wore an adinkra cloth which he chose himself. It was patterned in the 'mframa dan' motif. This symbolic design, when translated, means "wind house" or "house built to withstand windy and treacherous conditions". (14, pg. 99.) It would seem that the chief was trying to inform his people that he would be a strong ruler for them and would overcome any problems they had. It would have given the people of his new kingdom peace of mind to know that they had a strong and confident ruler. (Figure 2.)

Status and roles are indicated by the Asante images. Hair-styles reflect particular social roles; for example, priests' hair is never cut, warriors have moustaches. The form and elaborateness of the product and materials used are related to the actual situation of use and to the reason for use. Certain types of images or designs used depict which member of society the cloth is intended for. Umbrellas and stools have been restricted to the more prominent members of society. These motifs would be created from the largest, most splendid and most expensive materials.



FIGURE 2.

Asantehene Opoku Ware II, sitting in state at his installation, wearing an adinkra cloth, patterned in the mframa-dan motif. Note the man just seen at left side of the photograph, wearing a cloth with the aya fern - translating as 'I am not afraid of you, I am independant of you.'

The idea of symbol does not always remain visual. The idea of the symbol of colour, for example, is to try to express moods and emotions through colour. The intention of much of West African cloth is in a verbal dimension. That is that the motifs are symbols of spoken words. The cloth could be described as an elaborate and flexible form of verbal discourse.

The design of Korhogo cloth of the Ivory coast has changed slightly from that of the older, traditional design. Cloths were used by religious specialists (fetichists) for religious purposes - they were never worn. However because of changes in society, commercialism and Western influences, the meanings of some of these highly sacred cloths have been distorted or misrepresented. It is interesting to note the strong traditionalism that exists in the minds of the elder craftspeople. It is evidence of the dependance and strength within the community on the traditional designs and techniques. These older designs are the essence of today's contemporary designs.

The designs used by the Korhogo people are symbolic and representational of natural surroundings; for example, animals, vegetation. Mademoiselle Konate was born in Korhogo, received a Western education and returned to write about contemporary Korhogo cloth. A selection of designs and their meanings were collected by Mademoiselle Konate in 1974. (14, pg. 155.) The goat represents male sexual power; the guinea fowl, female beauty; the swallow, trust; the crocodile and the lizard, male fertility.

The richness of African speech is a factor in the verbal explanation of many designs. The Asante people have a very rich language and their proverbs ('mmebusem') play a part in

interpreting the meaning of the cloth as well as in everyday language. Knowledge of the Asante proverbs is essential for an ambitious person to ascend through Asante society. These proverbs were thought to represent traditional wisdom and therefore were highly looked upon. Many elegant phrases merely hid the embarrassment of a situation and began a reluctance to refer directly to important matters. If the symbols of the cloth could do it so beautifully, was there a need to talk about it? In Asante society, for example, if a king died the matter would never be mentioned directly but through phrases such as 'the great tree has fallen'. A girl's first menstruation was referred to in phrases such as 'she has shot an elephant'. (1, pg. 180)

In this way, it becomes apparent that there is no fixed meaning to many images. They provide a starting point for a chain of proverbs. An image of a single creature may be there to create several meanings. For example, the snake in the Korhogo cloth is the symbol of the earth which he encircles with his tail in his mouth. This circle represents the world and it is said by the Korhogo that the day that the snake lets go of his tail, the world will cease to exist. The slightest reference to a snake is there to remind us of our existence on our earth. (Figure 3.) There can be an overlap of images and meanings; for example, red is seen as a colour of sadness and black is used in situations of great melancholia in Asante society.

The actual images chosen for North West African cloth seem to be selected on a variety of principles. Some are drawn from natural objects which the Asante find attractive. They use them over and over again because of their natural symmetry; for example, the fern ('aya') leaf. Some are chosen for their

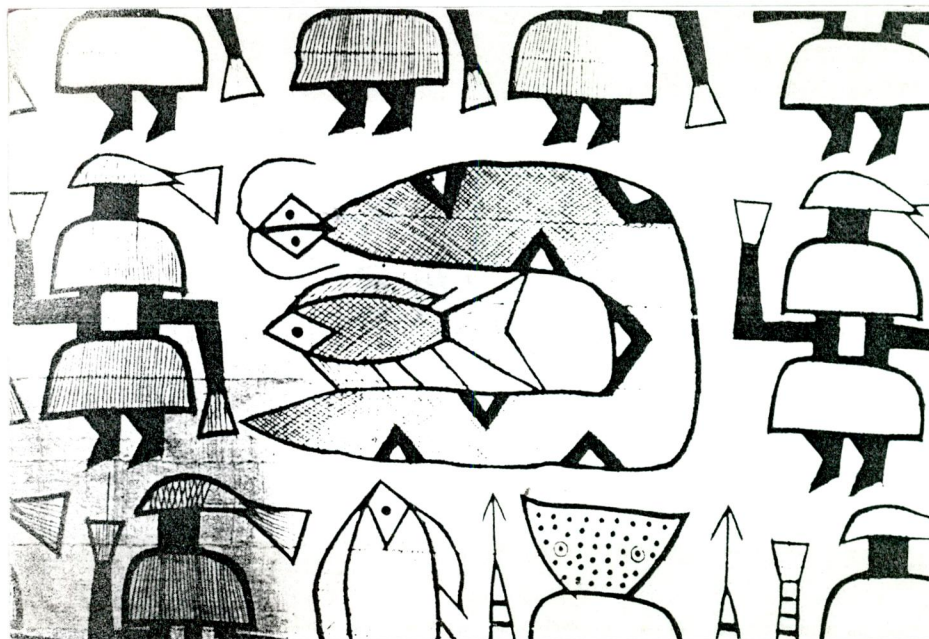


FIGURE 3.

Korfogo cloth.

Detail of a large snake, encircling a fish, surrounded by masked figures.

distinctive physical properties; for example, the elephant for its size, the pineapple for its yellow richness and sweetness.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SYMBOLISM OF COLOUR, ITS IMPORTANCE AS AN EXPRESSIVE MEDIUM. ITS SOURCES THROUGH LOCAL DYES.

The dependance of West African tribal craftsmen on dyes both natural and synthetic is due to a reliance on the ability of colour to convey moods and expressive meanings. This belief that colour is a medium for symbolic expression is not only an African belief, but is held in high regard by psychologists of European and 'developed' countries. Goethe said that:

'every colour produces a distinct impression on the mind and thus addresses at once the eye and feelings. Hence it follows that colour may be employed for certain sensual, moral and aesthetic ends.' (8, pg 189.)

The society of the Asante people in Ghana relies heavily on the symbolic use of colour. It appears to be used extensively in the production of adinkra cloth. Adinkra cloth is known by some for its beautiful drape quality. It is used today as mens' robes in contemporary Asante dress. The women appear to wrap this cloth around their torso and underarms and then wrap a second cloth around their waist under the first. It has been written in many books that the colours and the design of the cloth/garment reflect its function and is symbolic of the feeling of the occasion. Red or russet coloured cloths are used throughout North West

Africa as a colour for great sadness, specifically used at burial or mourning ceremonies. (Figure 4.) (14, pg. 88.) The adinkra cloth holds colour in high reverence as a symbolic medium. It is interesting to note that many concepts of colour in Africa relate directly to Western associations; for example, white is seen as pure and virtuous. However the Africans seem to have a more spiritual belief in the moods of colour. If a chief of a tribe were to wear gold (which is quite a common colour of expression for a chief) he could be showing many of the following: his royalty, the presence or influence of God in society, prosperity, continuous life and a warmth or controlled fire. Silver, white or blue would be considered of the same family and may express a feeling of purity, virtue, or joy if worn together. Blue becomes a complete area of discussion on its own, however, because of its dependance the local dyestuff, indigo. The use of indigo holds a strong position as the most versatile, tonal colour. It is known to express 'love' and 'womanly tenderness', 'early dawn and the crescent moon'. (14, pg. 98.) White in Asante society is usually worn by priestesses to symbolise deities or the spirits of the ancestors, as well as virtue, joy and purity. Green may be worn by young girls suggesting freshness, newness or a stage of purity, fertility or vitality. Black can stand for deep melancholia, vice, devils, old age, death or even history. Grey, as a symbol of ashes, personifies blame and various degrees of degradation and shame. Red appears to be the only colour which has different associations from those in the Western World. It is used widely as a dominant colour of expression on occasions of melancholia; for example loss of life, sadness, acts of war or national anger, sudden calamity, boisterousness, violence and as a show of dissatisfaction at political meetings.

In cloth it is the final composition of colour which



FIGURE 4.

Women of the local abusu at the funeral rites of a co-member, wearing mourning colours of red and black.

decides how it is interpreted. At special ceremonies a chief's cloth may be predominantly bright yellow and red, while the women may wear white and blue with some yellow. If it is a bright day the chief may decide to wear a silk cloth, to shine all around his people. On a dull day he may think it necessary to wear white and so brighten up the area in which he sits. The cloth in this case represents the dignity and position of the chief and the shine and glow will represent his wealth, brilliance and power.

Traditionally it was forbidden for an ordinary man to wear the same cloth as the chief. The special cloth of the chief, still known as the asasia, is of a particularly high standard of craftsmanship. Fifty years ago, its production was more strictly controlled by the chief of the tribe. Its design was kept very secret and it was woven under supervision. The cloth of the Asante was idolised fifty years ago more so than today. It held a stronger position in indicating social positions. These old standards have become a lot more flexible in contemporary use. However the idea of symbolic meaning through colour is still as strong as ever. Perhaps it is a good thing that the beautiful cloths woven by the local craftsmen have not become elitist through expensive prices. Instead they have become more widespread and celebrated by everyone. Cloth, its quality and the intricacy of its design have always indicated wealth. Today it is possible for a wider variety of people to wear cloths which symbolise their wealth and show their status, not as a chief but as a prominent member of society.

It is almost impossible to try to understand the importance of colour in any African textile without realising the importance of local dyestuffs. The most extensively used non-industrial dye in Africa is indigio ('indigofera'). The Yoruba of

Nigeria rely heavily on the use of this important natural dye. They make it from the indigo vine, the Lonchocarpus cyanescens, the particular variety which gives the most permanence and depth. The seemingly timeless deep blues acquired by dyeing with indigo are described by Claire Polakoff in her book "African Textiles and Dyeing Techniques". As a result of her experience with indigo dyeing, Polakoff⁵ describes indigo as being 'earthy and tangible as the blues of the soul, intensive and elusive as one's innermost longings'. It may sound dramatic and romantic, but having worked with and researched into dyeing with indigo, I can begin to understand her infatuation with such an intriguing colour. (Figure 5.) Polakoff continues in a similar musical manner :

'wrapped in this range of blues are all the village tones and city rhythms colouring African life....the blues of the sea, sky and soul are reflected in the people themselves, in the shimmer of copper-glazed indigo and glittering adornments.'

It is exciting to realise the strength of something which could bring about such a rich tradition and produce such exciting and beautiful fabrics.

According to Dr. Renee Boser, quoted by Polakoff, studies show that the first written evidence of indigo dyeing in West Africa appeared in the sixteenth century. (14, pg. 24.) The use of indigo as a dye process is a vast subject but it is important to understand the complexities of its procedure to understand how they obtain so many different depths of colour.

Indigo is not always used on its own as a dye. It can be

⁵ Claire Polakoff received her BS and MA degrees in textile and costume design from the University of California at Los Angeles. She has travelled extensively in Africa and lived for two years in Libreville, Gabon. She is on the curatorial staff of the Department of Textiles and Costumes at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She is a consulting editor and writes for the "African Arts".

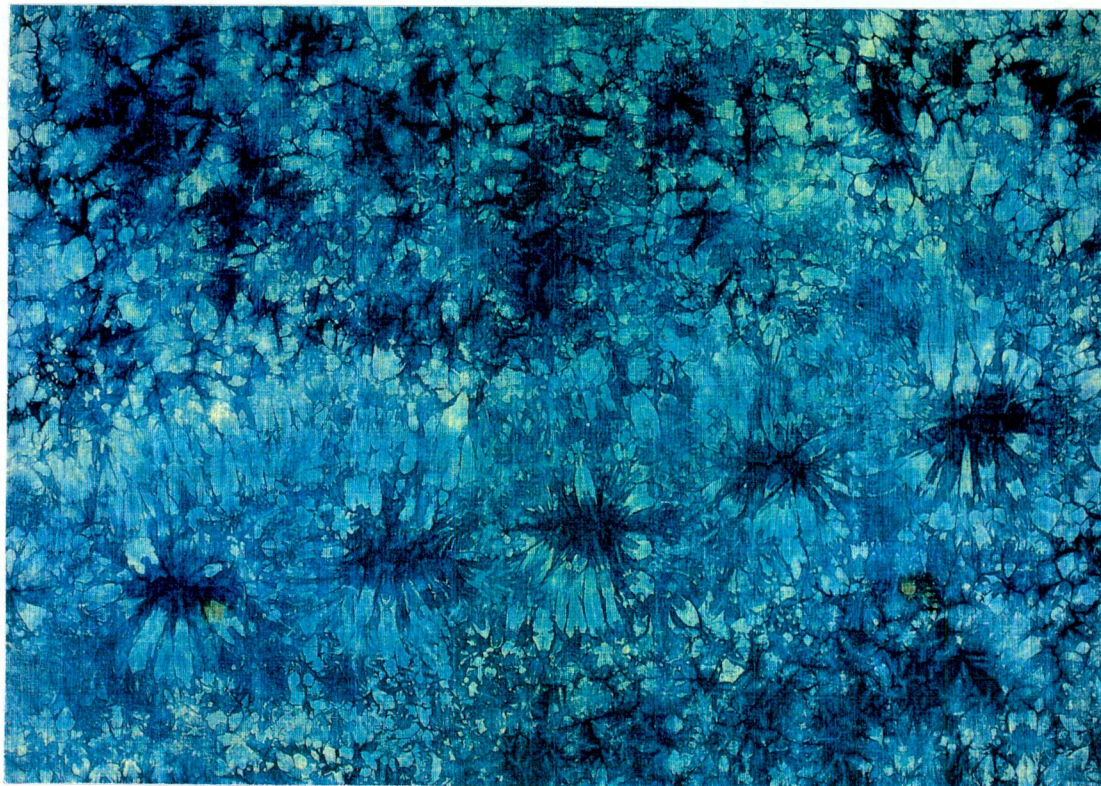


FIGURE 5.

Detail of resist dyed cotton textile, Nigerian dyed with indigo. The 'marbled' effect is produced by carefully crumpling the cloth before dyeing. The fabric used is woven of hand-spun yarn in narrow strips on a man's double heddle loom. Width 41 inches (104cm.)

incorporated into the total process of tie and dye (as are all local dyestuffs). Tie and dye is an important element in the design of cloth. The tie and dye technique is a resist method of patterning fabric. This means threads are bound tightly to block dye from seeping into certain fibres in selected areas of the fabric. The original undyed area is left as a background for the design in the dyed area (or vice versa). The Yoruba people of Nigeria have perfected this technique to an everyday art-form, which they know as adire. The main adire centres of art in Yorubaland are Abeokuta and Ibadan. (Map 3.) The Yoruba term adire eleso or oniko indicates a design as a result of tying, sewing, folding or pleating. Adire eleko designs are formed by the application of cassava - a starch paste resist. It is exciting to speculate how the beautiful results of shade gradation are caused by tying the fabric up into knots. Possibly the tie and dye technique was discovered as the result of an accident. Were the dyers dipping the cloth in the dye pot too tightly so that when they removed and dried the cloth they achieved beautiful tonal varieties? This however is pure speculation and some textile specialists may disagree, having carried out extensive research, for example Dr. Renee Boser⁶. Nevertheless it is offered as a result of my reading.

The indigo dyeing process is long and arduous, as the Yoruba show. One quality indigo dye retains in its use in contemporary textiles is a richness and vitality of colour which is found missing in many modern day chemical dyes. Perhaps this is a reason why it is still used today. Indigo is not soluble in water. It is reduced (the oxygen is removed) and must be dissolved in an alkaline solution before it will adhere to the fabric; it must be

⁶ Dr. Renee Boser-Sarivaxevanis is the curator of African Textiles and Art at the Musée d'Ethnographie, Basel, Switzerland. She wrote Les Tissus de l'Afrique Occidentale in 1972. She worked on an exhibition of African textiles and costumes at the Basel Museum. She spent 18 months researching in West Africa from 1973-74.

soaked long enough in the dye colour and then hung out to dry. Exposure to the air causes reoxidation and this brings out the blue colour. The dye is then absorbed into the fibres once exposed to oxygen and is insoluble and therefore colourfast.

The indigo leaves used by the Yoruba grow wild and are called elu. The entire process of picking the young leaves, pounding them with a mortar and pestle, forming the pulp into balls, dipping and dyeing the fabric and finally drying it out in the sun is done by the women of the Yorubaland. They are also responsible for making the ash mordant (alkaline ash water). The women share the labour and divide the results, both the cloth and, if it is sold at the market, its value. (Figure 6.) It is a lengthy process. The preparation of the ingredients and the process of dyeing are tedious work, but the women seem to do it with a joy and spontaneity. It is traditional in Western Nigeria for the indigo dyeing to be done by women; however in other areas, for example northern Nigeria, it is the practice of the men, who do their dyeing not in earth pots but in cement pits dug deep into the ground. Some two thousand pits, originally for this purpose have become an important tourist attraction in Kumo, northern Nigeria.

It is important to understand the procedure of indigo dyeing to understand the tremendous variety of tones achieved and the large design possibilities available for tie and dye and resist techniques of design. The following is a summary of the procedure of indigo dyeing. It is the aloro or dyer who carries out the process. Wood is stacked into the kiln/stove about one foot from the top in a sieve-like formation. Previously used ash from the salt ash-pots and wood ash from the house cooking fires and water from previous dye processes are mixed together and formed into



FIGURE 6.

The Yoruba adire cloth on sale in an Ibadan street.

balls which are placed on top of the sieve. The fire is lit and burns everything in the kiln into ash. The ash is collected and formed into balls and left to dry. To prepare the mordant water, the dyer uses two large earthen pots; one with a hole in the side is put into a shallow dip in the ground to steady it. The other pot with the hole in its base is put on top of it. Sticks, old dye-leaf fibres and broke up ash balls are laid over the hole in the base of the top pot, to form a sieve. Water is poured over this and it drains through the ash, collecting all the salt. It passes out through the bottom pot, pours out of the hole in the side and is collected in the dye pot. The women pound the elu leaves into a pulp and roll this mixture into balls. The number of indigo balls used depends on the colour of dye and the intensity of blue needed - more balls allow for a deeper colour. Up to one hundred and fifty balls make a blue-black colour; a regular blue requires fifty balls. It is at this stage that the dyer can decide on the tones and intensities of the blues. Ash balls and dye balls are broken up into the dye pots, where they are mixed with the mordant water. The mixture is left to stand for three days. It can not be kept for more than five days, otherwise an unpleasant smell will pass into the cloth. The fabrics, previously prepared with their design - adire eleso or adire eleko, either stitched or starch resisted respectively, are placed into the pot. The cloth patterned with adire eleko is folded gently into thirds, dipped, held for three minutes, taken out and refolded slightly differently to ensure even distribution of dye. The cloth of adire eleso is dipped and gently squeezed three or four times. This series of dip and dye is repeated five to six times, depending on the strength of the colour desired. (Figure 8.) Between dipping every cloth is left to drain off in the sun. The pots are kept covered and never stirred. When first taken out the cloth is greenish in colour, but quickly changes to blue as reoxidation occurs. Dyed cloths are



FIGURE 7.

Akoko-Edo women, in Nigeria, spin cotton for weaving the cotton cloth which they will dye. The woman on left is about to spin her spindle; the woman on the right draws down a further length of fibres while the spindle spins. She appears to be wearing the Ibadandun cloth around her waist.

never rinsed. To remove the starch on the adire eleko the cloth is left to dry. When dry, buckets of cold water are thrown over it to saturate the starch, which is then scraped off. The residue falls off with wear and the design becomes progressively sharper. The adire eleso is left to dry, after which the sewing and tying is undone. The finishing process involves the cloth being laid out and beaten by large, heavy mallets. This creates a beautiful shiny surface on the cloth. The beating of the cloth is a speciality of the Hansa dyers of Kano, northern Nigeria. These dyers dye plain white cotton cloths to an all over blue, whose surface, while heavily overloaded with indigo dye, is beaten to a super-shiny fabric, used normally for turbans. (Figure 9.) The dyeing in Kano is done exclusively by men, in contrast to the women of Yorubaland.

Now maybe there is a better understanding of the more tenacious qualities of indigo than regulated chemical dyes. It is important to the Yoruba to treat this almost spiritual entity ever so gently. It is believed that the respect of the aloro (dyer) coaxes the dye out of the indigo and into the cloth. It has been said by experienced indigo dyers that you must almost treat indigo as a 'heaven sent soul' with a mind of her own and a determination to keep the 'blues of her soul' (Polakoff) to herself. Every excursion into the process of indigo is an experience, regardless of what shades of blue are achieved. Indigo erupts in the fresh air, hopefully in the blues you desire. It is a beautiful insight to know that the Yoruba have perfected this wonderful process over so many years. Yes, you may detect some jealousy of such an enviable result. I am a bit unsure about the upsurge and availability of chemical dyes: are they interfering in the natural process? Is there a need to return to the traditional urea formula of antiquity in European cultures? It appears to be



FIGURE 8.

Dipping cloth in the dye pot, in Yoruba, Nigeria. Skeins of yarns dyed a pale blue can be seen beside the dyer.



FIGURE 9.

Two Yoruba women beating cloth after dyeing to smooth and burnish it.

the nature of indigo itself - its inconsistency - which allows us .
Something that one may never achieve in using chemical dyes is a
suitable reproduction of the blues of indigo. However this becomes
another chapter in itself.

CHAPTER THREE

MOTIFS, THEIR SOURCES FROM NATURAL INSPIRATION AND THEIR LANGUAGE OF SYMBOLISM.

We have seen how important the use of colour is in association with moods and emotions in north west African fabrics, especially in the adinkra fabric of the Asante of Ghana. There is another element of symbolism which is highly descriptive and representational; that is, the design motifs of the fabric. The success of the fabric is more than the composition of motifs, although this plays a part in conveying messages, for example, deciding where to place certain colours and in what amounts. More green than gold/yellow on a royal garment may suggest that this is a young king with fresh new ideas which is his strength in the ruling of his people.

This thesis discusses this idea in relation to the Yoruba, the Asante and the Poro peoples. The fabrics of these three, the adire, the adinkra and the Korhogo cloths, all rely on the motifs they apply to their fabrics to convey desired ideas.

There are definite sources for the various motifs used. Many would rely on natural organic sources, for example, animals, flowers, vegetation, elements (the moon and the stars). In some cases these motifs remain visually very realistic; for example, some of the slightly stylised figures of humans and animals used on the Korhogo cloth. (Figure 10.) However many become very geometric and purely symbolic of their source; for example, the

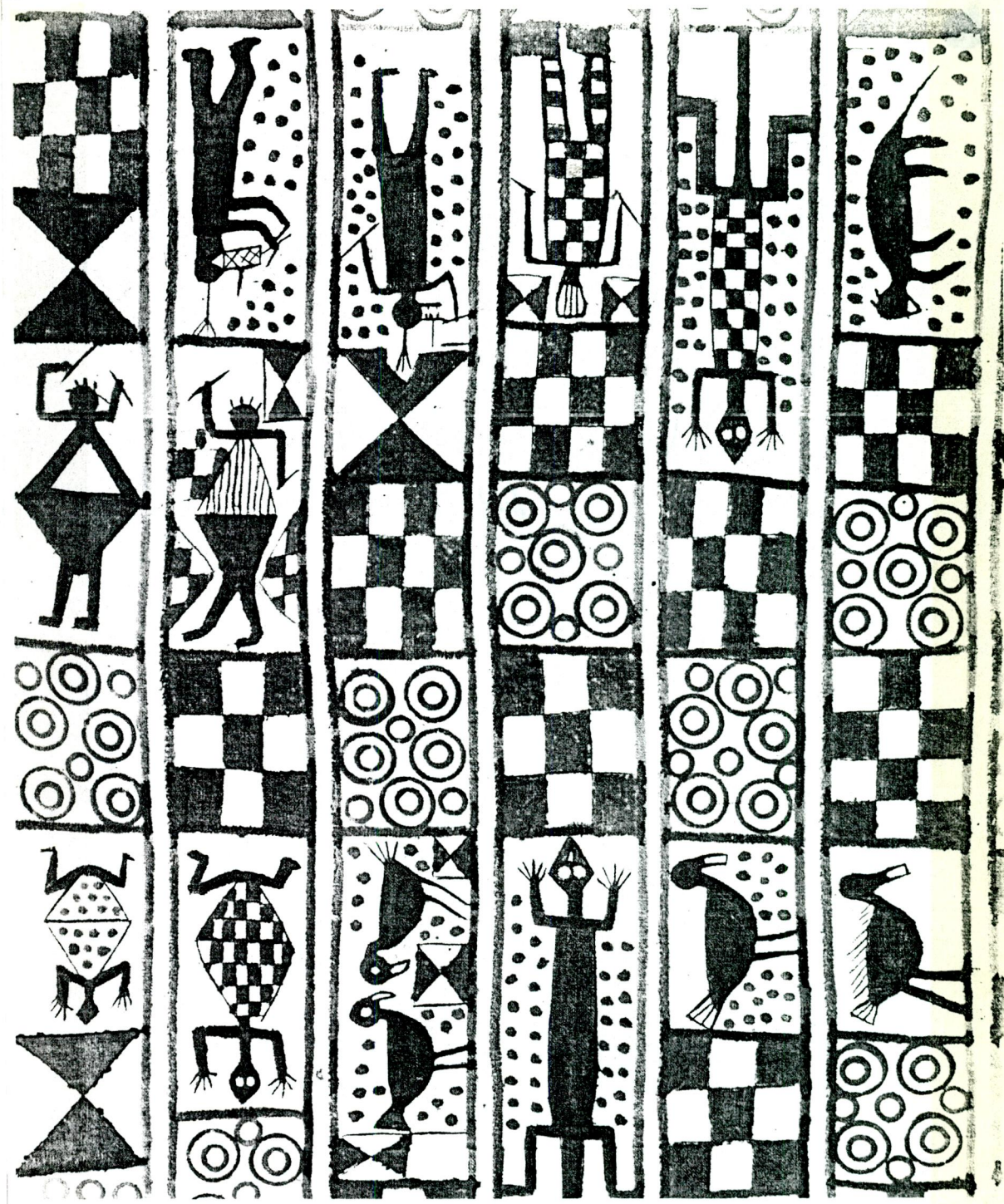


FIGURE 10.

Traditional style Senufo hand painted strip cloth , from Korhogo in the Ivory Coast.

(6, pg 65.)

motifs used in the adinkra cloth of the Asante. When you dig deeper into the motifs and their meanings, their geometric appearance becomes merely a simplistic and interesting method of representing the natural source. (Figure 11.) If you look at the adire cloth, through their many and varied techniques of tie and dye, the Yoruba have succeeded in allowing the design of their cloth to have an almost ethereal atmosphere. The folding and stitching of the cloth allows for many shade variations and these tones convey a mystical quality. (Figure 12.) Probably the commonest method of tie and dye is in the formation of patterns, large and small, mainly of circles in various combinations. Such a group of circles conjures up the image of the sky at night, enhanced by the midnight blue of the indigo dye (so frequently used by the Yoruba). To make larger circles, the binding thread is wound around a bunched up cloth, allowing for a circular but irregularly dyed resist pattern, giving it an enigmatic impression. (Figure 13.) Small circles are achieved by winding the thread over the cloth, around a seed or pebble. These patterns of circles are known as 'big moons and little moons.....moons and stars' or 'moons and fruits' (13, pg 148.)

The production of the Korhogo cloth is a native craft of the Poro people. The Poro belong to the Senufo group now found over a wide area of Mali, Upper Volta and the Ivory Coast. The Senufo are believed to have come to these areas approximately two to three hundred years ago, travelling down from north Africa. It has been suggested by Werner Gillon⁷ that the Senufo came from the inland Niger Delta due to their

⁷ Werner Gillon was born in Germany in 1905 and studied Engineering and European History in Berlin. He and his wife have shared an interest in African art and over the past twenty five years have built up a large collection. Today he devotes his time to research, lecturing and writing in this field. He is a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and a member of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association.

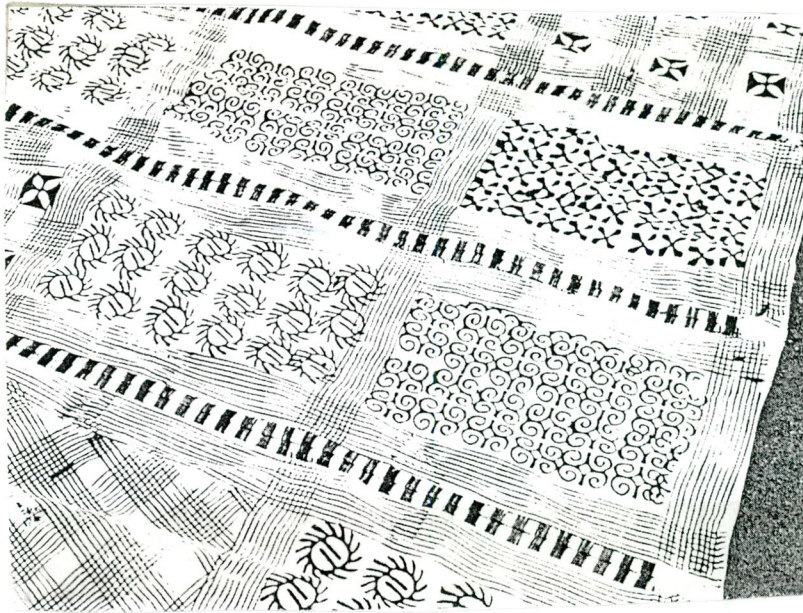


FIGURE 11.

A finished hand painted adinkra cloth. (14, pg 124.)

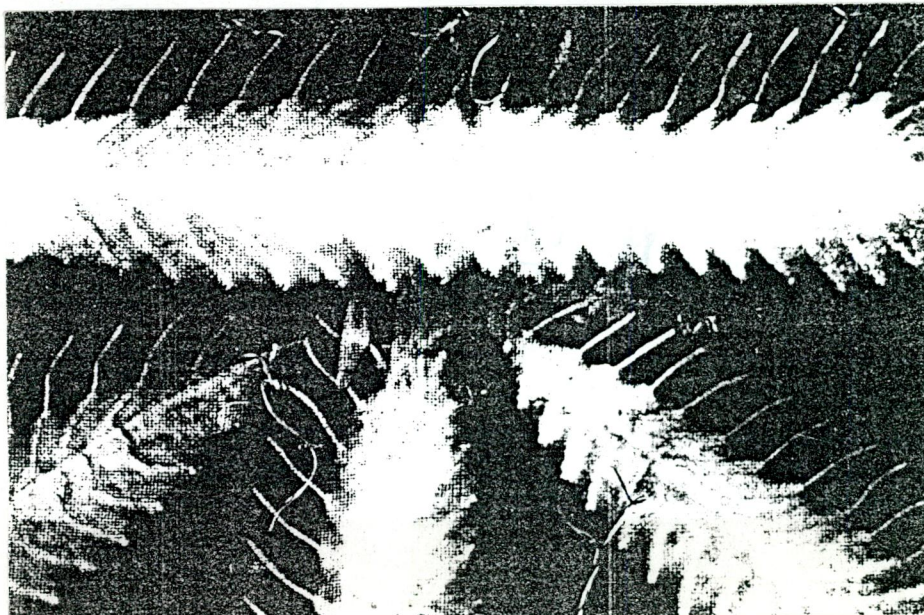


FIGURE 12.

Detail of a Yoruba adire alesi from Ibadan, Nigeria. (14, pg 22.)



FIGURE 13.

Tied cotton cloth, before dipping in a dye, Yoruba Nigeria. (1, pg 58.)

existence today in the most northern part of Koutiala, south of Jenne and south east of Segon. (2, chapter 5.) (Map 2.) Gillon suggests that there is a distinct similarity in their use of the snake, the crocodile and the turtle as symbolic motifs. (It is an obvious characteristic of the Korhogo cloth that the sources of its design are animals.) It has become popular in the European and American contemporary world to use the Korhogo cloth as wall hangings. The cloth produced today is derived from traditional practices but the purpose and design of the cloth have been changed a lot by the craftspeople who design it today. These cloths were used by religious specialists⁸ for religious purposes; in other words they were never worn. Specifically unpatterned cloths dyed with different colours are worn or used as shrouds; for example, a white unpatterned cloth is used as a shroud for the Poro people. The cloth which is being produced today is of different designs from the traditional cloth, so it is understandable that the purpose of the cloth has changed. 'The artists have almost created a new art form out of traditional media'. (14, pg.157, Anita Glaze⁹.) These sacred religious cloths were developed as a result of the needs of the religious specialists to paint designs on the walls of cult houses, as a way of preaching to the people. These designs, painted with natural dyes, were weathered off the walls, hence the need for a more permanent recording of the cult designs. It is only the ethnic group of the Senufo who use the fetish cloths.

The main difference between the original, traditional versions of Korhogo cloth and those made by the Poro artists today, is in the size and scale of each design and their

⁸ someone who acts as a mediator for the powers of cult objects expressing their values to the people.

⁹ Anita Glaze is an art historian who specialises in the Senufo society and did extensive research in the Korhogo area of the Ivory Coast.

overall effect on the cloth. The larger designs of human figures, animals, birds and geometric configurations that decorate today's Korhogo cloth are much smaller in the traditional cloth. (Figure 14.) The changes have brought about a deterioration in the rich meaning of the designs on the cloth. Today it may appear to be more the creative discretion of the artist which comes through in the fabric. However they do understand the elaborate meanings of the designs. Mademoiselle Konate collected certain designs and their meanings in 1974. Almost all of the motifs used by the Poro are representational symbols of an idea on the cloth. Throughout the culture of the Senufo there appears a strong character, the chameleon, who is seen as a messenger of death (he is known to be a carrier of leprosy). He also represents a good side in his ability to cure epilepsy. A Senufo chief values the use of birds as representational characters. He will always have symbols of trust, shown by the swallow motif, in his home. They sacrifice swallows in order to win the trust of the people and therefore have power over them. This idea of royal power is important and with the help of religious specialists, the chief would use the motifs of the lion and the leopard (usually with fierce eyes) to induce submission and fear in his people. (Figure 15.)

The more feminine and maternal aspects of Senufo life are represented by images of birds, which hold important positions associated with celestial powers; the guinea fowl and the chicken are such symbols, representing hope and fertility. The turtle-symbol embodies traits for which it is renown. It is believed that its slowness indicates a fear of the earth crumbling beneath its feet. It is logical that the fish for the Senufo symbolises life, since wherever there are fish there is

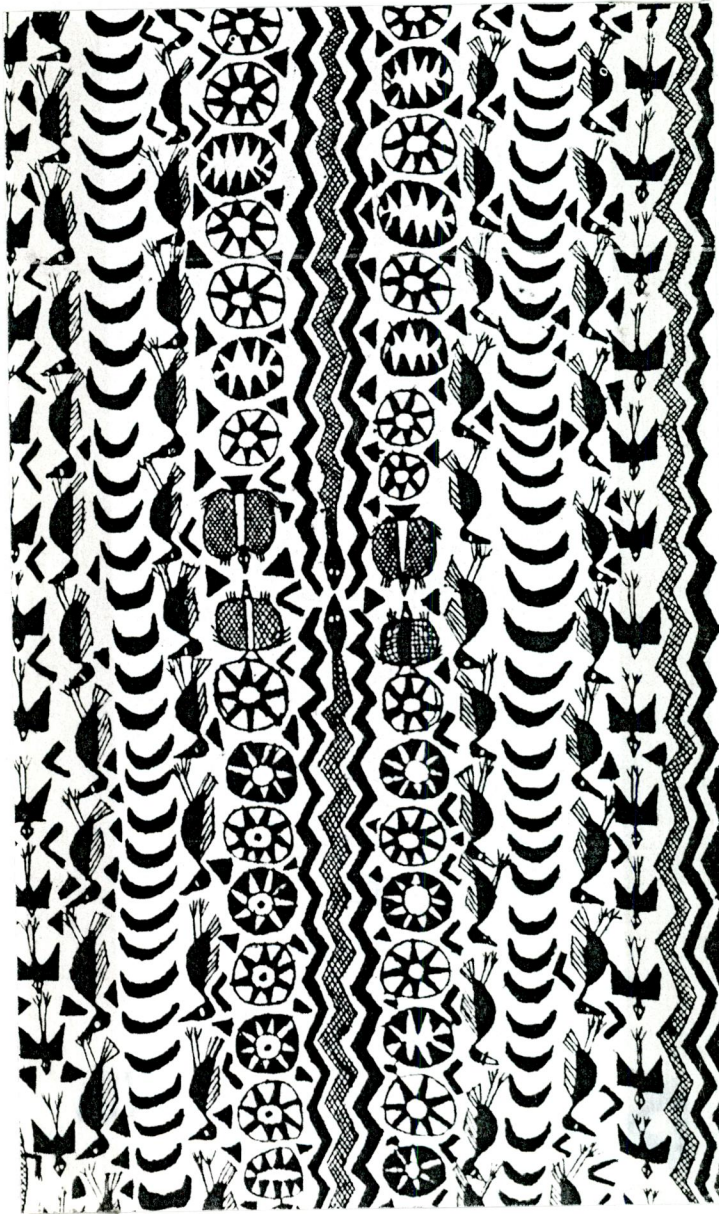


FIGURE 14.

A Korhogo cloth in the early style, featuring small figures and geometric, collected in the 1960's.

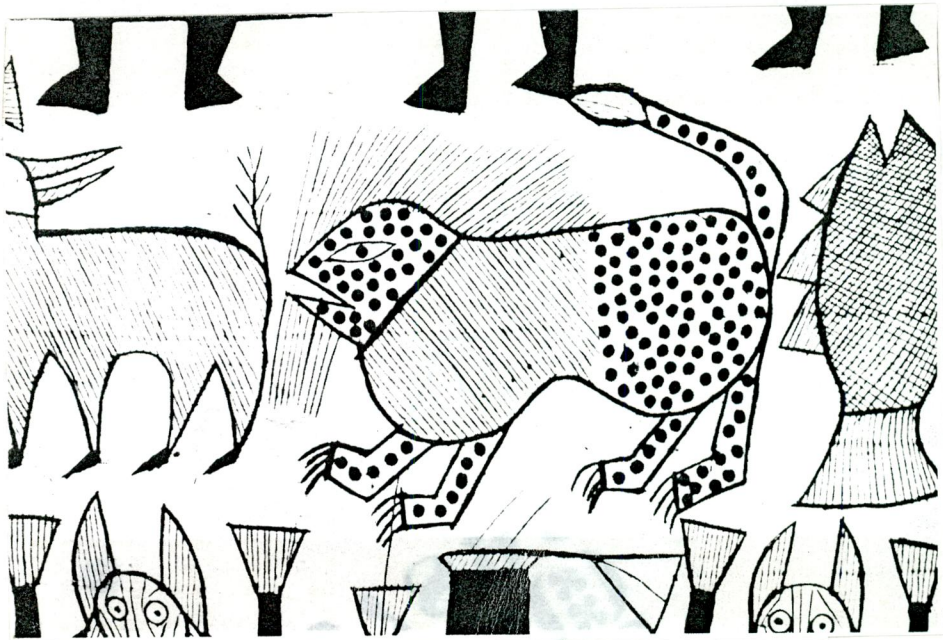


FIGURE 15.

Detail of lion (though spotted like a leopard he has a mane) surrounded by masked figures, an antelope and a fish.

water, an obvious necessity for survival in a country prone to long periods of drought. Likewise fishbones indicate drought, thirst and famine - the destructive elements. It is very familiar, in contemporary cloths, to have a selection of the animal symbols, in order to tell a complete story. If the lion, the chameleon and the guinea fowl appeared on a cloth together, they translate to mean 'feminine beauty loves strength and strength is afraid of death.' (Figure 16.) (14, pg. 162). The goat, the chameleon and the swallow seen together would mean 'one must always trust male sexual power even above death'. (14, pg. 162). A very controversial statement, but it highlights the power and superiority men have over the life of women in African society. Feminine qualities are recognised, admired and celebrated but remain characteristics of a maternal element, to which male strength and power are superior. This male power is not necessarily superior to motherhood, because this is a very revered position for a woman to be in, but the power of the male, symbolised by the goat and the strength of male fertility, symbolised by the crocodile and the lizard, are sought after. The chief of the tribe is always seen as the man who exudes these ideals.

The traditional painted cloth of the Senufo people, known as fila¹⁰ textiles is important to the people of Korhogo because the cloth is influenced by certain elements of their own culture, although its origins are with the Senufo. These cloths are primarily influenced by bush spirit representations, as well as the python and the chameleon. This important cloth is recommended as a protective charm to appease the potentially harmful bush spirits and therefore it is most honoured.

¹⁰ Fila textiles - fila is an abbreviated form of filafanwiji meaning, painted cloth dating from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.

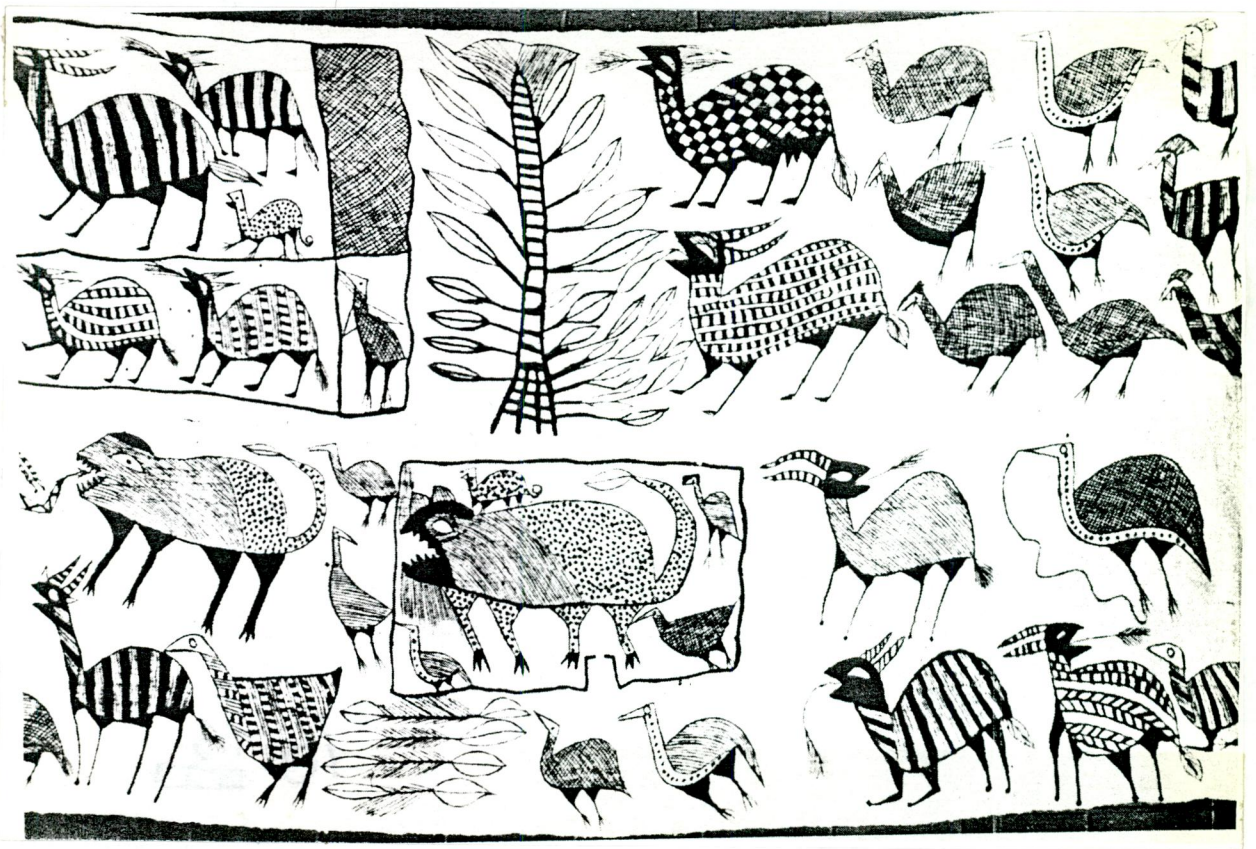


FIGURE 16.

A large Korhogo cloth distinguished by two groupings of animals and birds each having a special symbolism. The design includes a tree representing the sacred forest. The lower encircled animals are the lion, the chameleon and the guinea fowl. The upper ones are the goat, the chameleon and the swallow.

The process of making Korhogo cloth is fairly straightforward, although there have been changes made between the traditional and the contemporary designs. The basic method for today's Korhogo is a two-step process. (14, chapter 7.) First, a yellowish-brown mordant (which reacts with the mud dye solution as a fixative, making the cloth colourfast) is applied in the desired designs, without any preliminary sketching. Secondly, the mud dye (traditionally mud from selected local marshes) is painted onto the fabric, directly on top of the yellow mordant, in layers to achieve desired tones and depth of finished black design. The final design is contrasted against the stark white of the cloth. The first application of mordant, which can be used as a dye, is traditionally a light brown vegetal substance (kadayafour and nanganeman). Used on the cloth frequently, and is often the boiled bark and leaves of the niganam tree. It results in a thick, tar-like liquid, which would be diluted for lighter shades. The basic material on which the designs are made is a raw spun cotton, made of small sewn bands of various sizes, although increasingly more contemporary artists are using imported factory woven cloths. Today a combination of dyes is sometimes used. The cloth designed for local use uses mainly traditional dyes, for example, a brownish colour made from tree bark and kola nuts ¹¹. It has become popular to use chemical black dyes, resulting in very hard black lines on the fabric, which is produced specifically for the tourist market.

The Yoruba people are regarded as the largest nation

¹¹ Kola nuts are a brown narcotic-containing seed, produced by various African trees. It seems to be chewed in sub-Saharan Africa, to fight fatigue and diminish hunger, like we in the West drink coffee. It is crushed and mixed with water to give a rust coloured dye, used throughout west and central Africa.

in Africa with an art-producing tradition. Almost twelve million of them live in areas around south west Nigeria, the main areas for the art of its renowned tie and dye and paste resist fabrics being Ibadan and Abeokuta, although Ilorin further north is known as a specialist area in indigo dyeing. (Map 3.) Men's and women's dress, hairstyles, jewellery, painting, scarification of the face and body and weaving of fabrics have played an important role in Yoruba art from early periods in their history to the present. The history of Yoruba dress begins around A.D. 1000. It is helpful to understand the ideas behind the art of the Yoruba by looking at the temple of the Gods of the Yoruba and at some of the most important societies and their patron orisha (spirits) for whom art is produced in one form or another.

Olorum is the supreme god, a remote being too important to be directly involved in matters concerning mortal humans. There are no images made of him. He is not worshipped except through an orisha, especially eshu. Every phase of life - birth, sickness and death - is related to an orisha. Of great importance is the ibeji or twin cult. The high occurrence of twins among the Yoruba allowed for the development of this cult. If a twin dies, a figure is carved for the dead child and clothed and fed alongside its live twin. This represents a resting place for the dead twin, otherwise its vengeance will always threaten the parents. If both twins die, two carvings will have to be made. The ere-ibeji figures are among the best known carvings.

'It is significant for Yoruba culture that every activity in life has a basic religious significance. Indigo dyeing is closely linked with the worship of a goddess called Iya Mapo. Iya Mapo is an important orisha who protects all exclusively female trades like dyeing, pottery etcetera'.

(14, pg 32 and 53.)

Among the Yoruba of south west Nigeria there is some degree of symbolisation and representation in the sewn and tied designs handed down as traditional patterns. Generally the Yoruba tie and dye patterns are less complex and representational than their cassava paste and resist designs, mainly because the technique itself allows for less flexibility and freedom of representational expression. The Yoruba tie and dye designs are inspired by things seen in everyday life and are simplified into symbols that are easily adapted to the technical requirements of manipulating the fabric through tie and dye. The Yoruba continuously achieve extremely subtle effects of pattern, colour and texture. Fabrics made from the resist method of painting (adire eleko) are much more symbolic than the tie and dye technique, due to adire oniko. The main area for production of adire eleko is Ibadan, where the methods of freehand painting with a feather (aladire) have been passed from one generation to the next. One of the most important design patterns is the Ibadandun, meaning 'Ibadan is pleasant'. (Figure 17.) Typical Ibadandun designs are easily recognisable, by their stylised birds, snakes, frogs, scorpions, eggs, ducks, mirrors, chameleons, guinea fowl and leaves used in chieftain initiation rites. The cloth is woven in two halves and then sewn together. There are four rows with seven rectangles (twenty eight in total) made into a grid across the cloth. The range of patterns in the cloth is standard but may be repeated in different quantities across the twenty eight squares. The most distinguishing feature of the Ibadandun is the design known as 'pillars of Mapo Hall alternating with spoons'. (13, pg 156.) Mapo Hall is a building equivalent to a town hall in the centre of Ibadan. This pattern could be over forty or fifty years old. It is

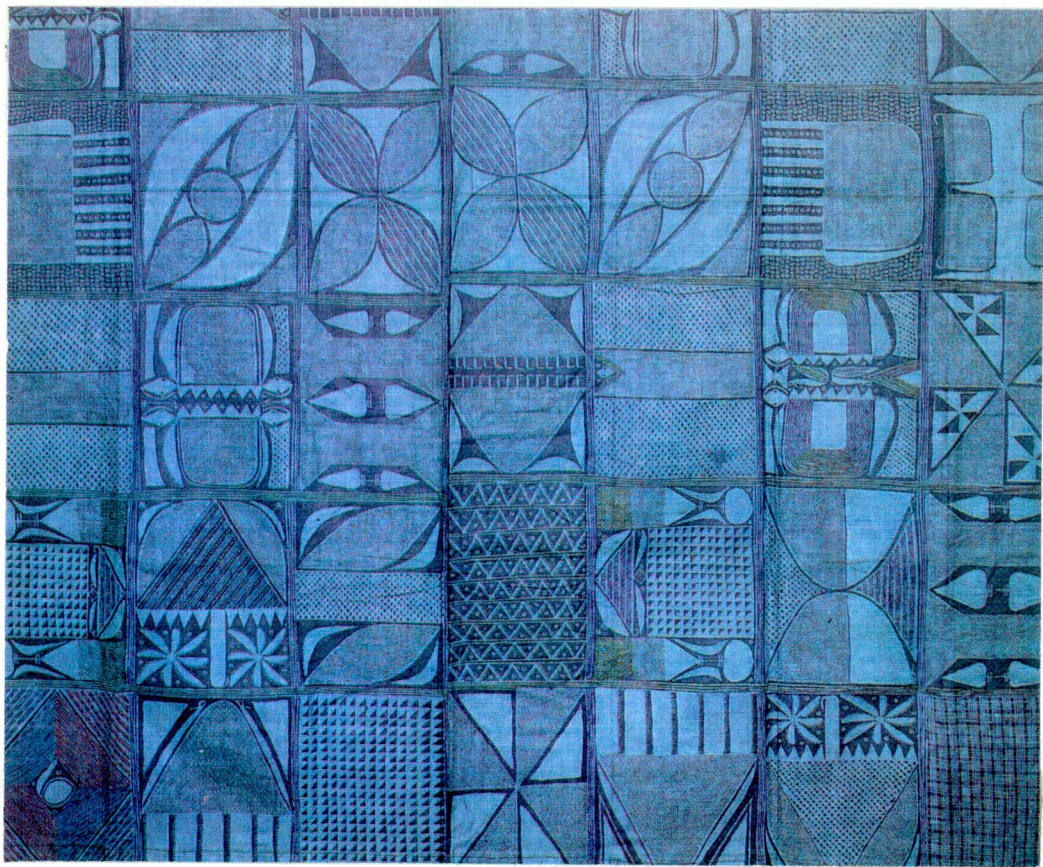


FIGURE 17.

Detail of an adire cloth, from Yoruba, Nigeria, painted freehand with starch before dying in indigo, in order to resist the dye. The combination of designs is called Ibadandun - 'Ibadan is a happy place.' The pillars of Ibadan town hall, alternating with spoons, can be seen at the bottom right, second square up. Width 71 inches (180 cm.). 1971.

known that the quality of the cloth can be decided by the number of spoons alternating with the pillars. The more numerous the spoons, the more valuable the cloth. No two composite designs of the Ibadandun are alike. The olokun is popular with the Yoruba people. Olokun means 'goddess of the sea' (13, pg 156). The distinctive marks on this cloth are the decorative 'ok ok', that is designs representing the olokun. (Figure 18.) Once again the cloth is made up of two halves of fabric sewn together. Each half is composed of two rows of five segments with a row of small rectangles around the edge of the cloth. The content of the ten large segments on each half is constant. Many of the patterns are geometric while others include objects such as chicken wire, crocodiles, birds, scorpions, fish, scissors, four-legged stools and leaves.

The majority of Akan speaking people live in central and southern Ghana and in the south eastern part of the Ivory Coast. Their country is part tropical rain forest and part savanna. The Asante are the dominant nation of the Akan group and are centred mainly around Kumasi. (Map 4.) Dress is a symbol of rank and status in the societies of the Akan. The traditional type of garment can be traced back to as early as the seventeenth century, (recorded in 1614, by Samuel Brann, 13, pg 113). There are three types of cloth produced by the Akan craftspeople today. The earliest woven designs are called kente, a word possibly borrowed from the language of the Fante. (13, pg 121.) These are beautifully woven multicoloured cloths often made from the finest woven silk, although nowadays cotton is more extensively used. The second is the adinkra cloth previously mentioned in Chapter 2, due to its highly symbolic motifs. The cloth is made of single dyed strips of fabric sewn

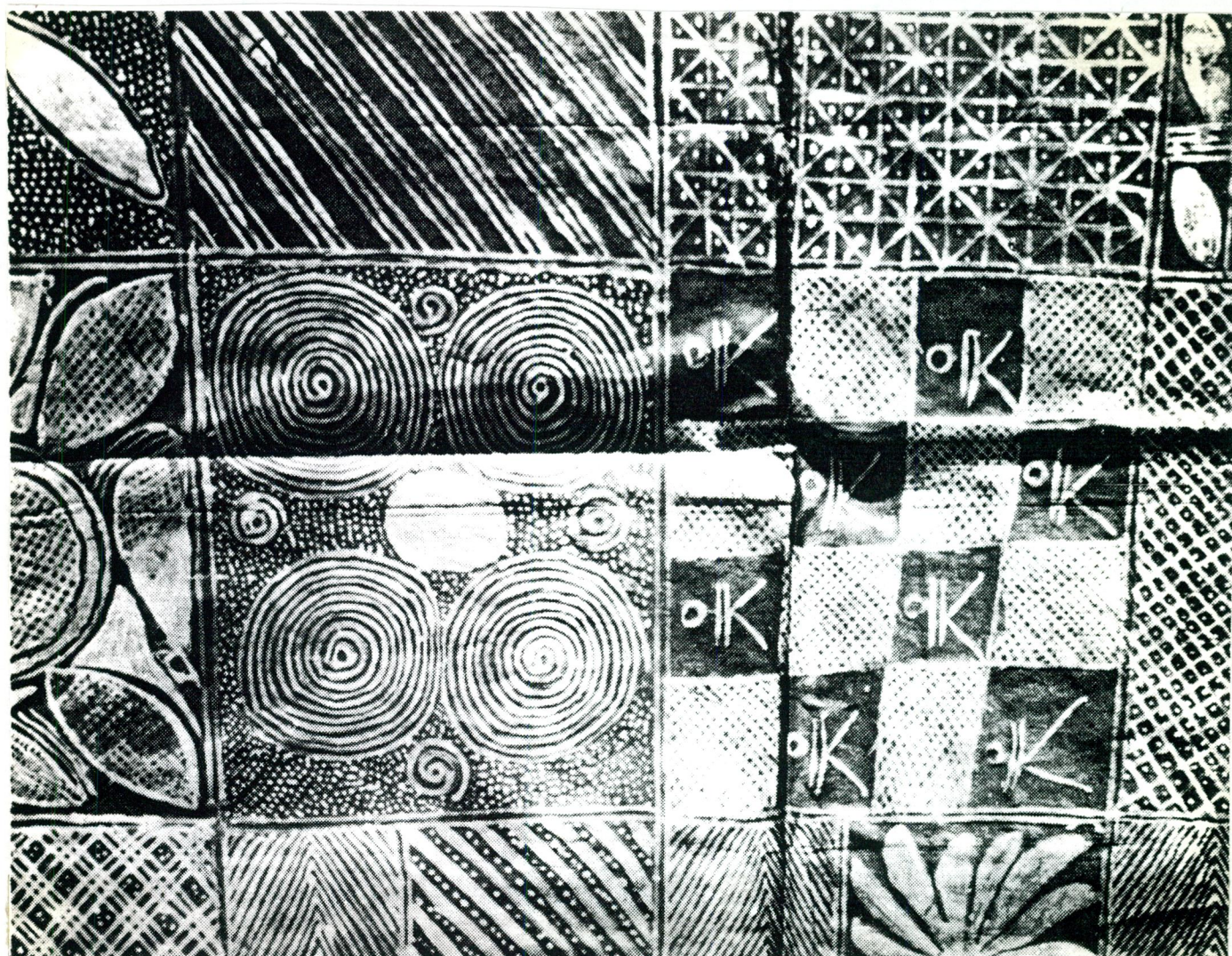


FIGURE 18.

Yoruba paste resist pattern entitled olukun, a design easily recognised by its 'ok ok' motif.

together and hand stamped with great varieties of patterns with a verbal interpretation for each pattern.

The hand printed cloth of the Asante of Ghana, known as the adinkra cloth, is a fine example of wax and paste dyed fabric (explained in chapter 2). Its history is slightly uncertain, despite the importance the cloth holds in African tradition. Claire Polakoff, in her book African Textiles and Dyeing Techniques (1980), notes that the cloths first appearance was in a battle between Asantehene or Asanti-king Nana Osei Bonsu-Panyin and Adinkera, the king of Gyaman (Ivory Coast) in the early nineteenth century. The adinkra cloth could have evolved from the plain unpatterned cloth or kobene which is dyed in the red hues associated with war and grieving. It could be related to the dark tannish brown cloth with black patterns of the kuntunkuni worn by mourners when a corpse lies in state. It is also possible that the word adinkra is related to nkradie or dinkra which means goodbye - in respect of mourning for the dead. The word adwinkena means the art of designing cloth so it could be another suggestion for the understanding of adinkra.

The basis of adinkra is a plain white, green, purple or blue cloth or a russet brown cloth (dyed with the bark of the kuntunkuni tree). It is on this fabric that the designs are printed. The paste used for the designs is from the okra, a small, green vegetable, itself often used as a design motif. However where a dye is used for printing the fabric, it is made from the bark of an Ashanti tree badie. The bark is cut up and boiled with some lumps of iron slag, etia. It is boiled for many hours to form a tarlike substance, called adinkra aduru. It is this that makes the distinctive black, graphic designs on the

cloth. (Figure 19.)

The motifs associated with early adinkra cloths are still used true to their symbolic meaning on contemporary adinkra cloth. The designs of the patterns are closely related to daily activities, while incorporating important representations of religions and spiritual ideas. It is common to see the name given reflecting the meaning of the cloth. There are almost fifty different examples of motifs in existence today. Their function on the cloth, apart from being beautifully crafted, is for the wearer to express specific messages; for example, if the chief wished to convey fearlessness and independence of another he would wear the adinkra cloth with the aya or fern motifs, which says 'I am not afraid of you- I am independant of you'. (14, pg 109.) The cloth can be printed with more than one design, conveying a variety of messages. A selection of design motifs follows with figurative drawings for each, plus a local translation and meaning for each design. (Recorded in Polakoff's book in 1980, from her own collection of stamps. The sources of meaning were recorded by Captain Robert Rattray, England's colonial district commissioner who collected information about the Ashanti people and recorded it in a book, published in 1927, called Religion and Art in Ashanti. His translations have been written about by many authours, including Claire Polakoff in 1980, Diction and Mack in 1989 and Venice Lamb, a renowned authority on west African weaving. Subsequent translations were written by E. Ablade Glover, who wrote a chart of interpreted meanings of the various symbols for the University fo Scince and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana called Adinkra Symbolism; some of these translations are included in the following diagrams.

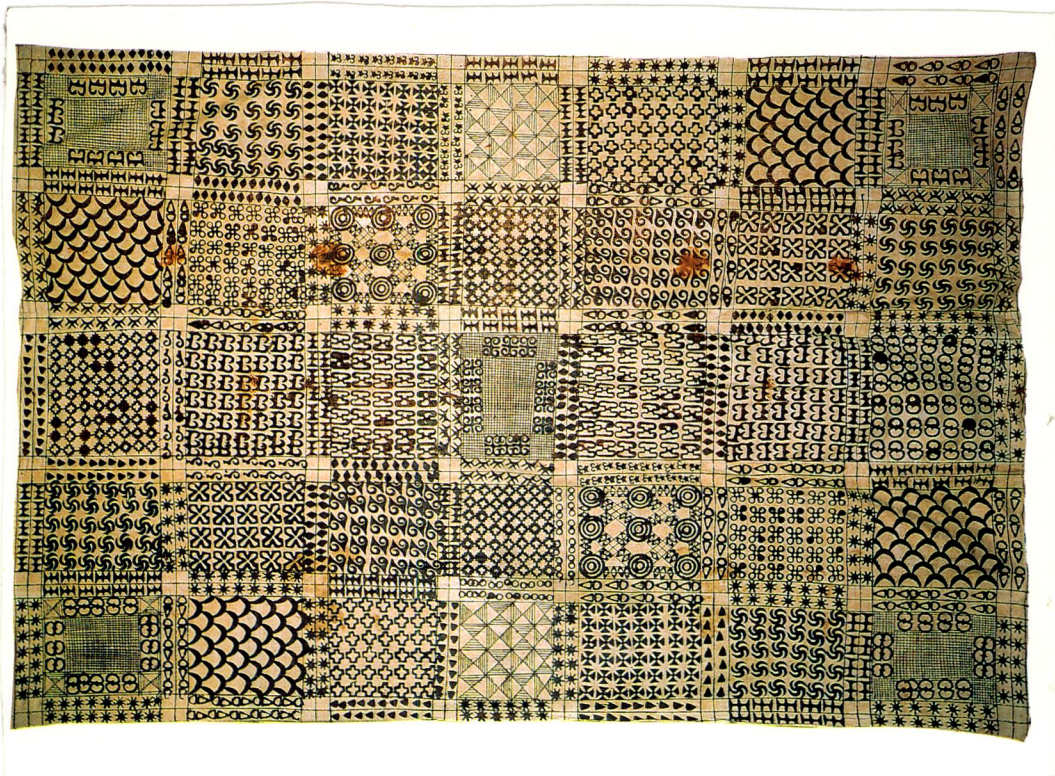


FIGURE 19.

Adinkra cloth.

Asante group, Akan peoples, Ghana. Cotton, natural dye. 112.25 x 76.25 inches (285.1 x 193.7 cm.). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. 1988.



FIGURE 20.

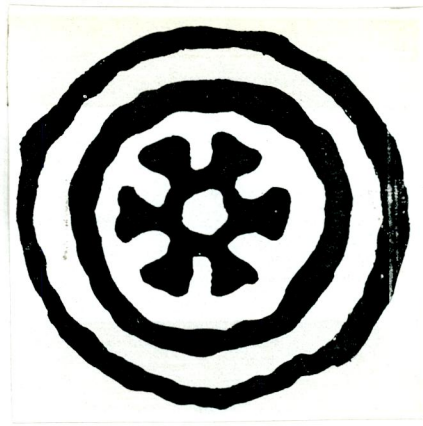


FIGURE 21.

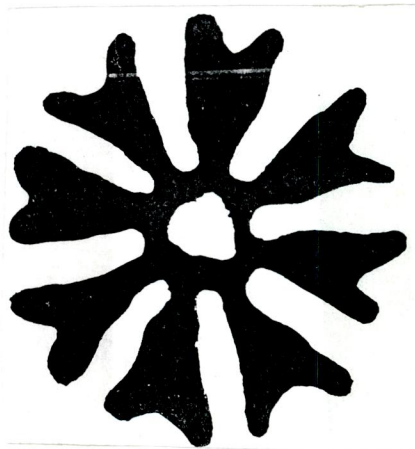


FIGURE 22.

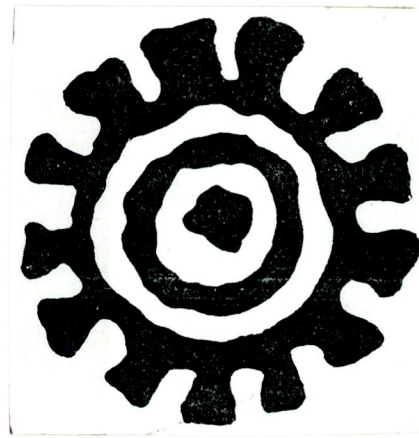


FIGURE 23.

FIGURE 20.

ADINKRAHENE - The adinkra king and chief of all these designs; form the basis of adinkra painting.

FIGURE 21.

ADINKRAHENE with Ananse, the spider.

FIGURE 22.

ADINKRAHENE variation (or flower variation, see figure).

FIGURE 23.

ADINKRAHENE variation.



FIGURE 24.



FIGURE 25.

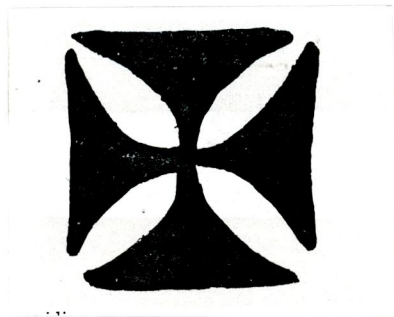


FIGURE 26.

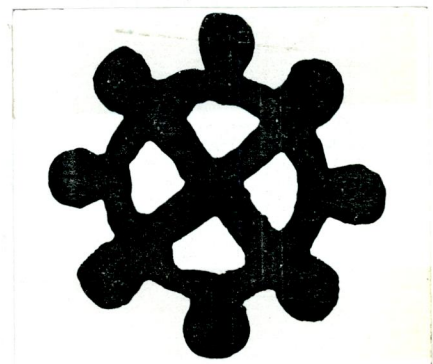


FIGURE 27.

FIGURE 24.

OBI NKA OBIE. 'I offend no one without cause.'

BI-NKA-BI. 'Bite not one another.' Avoids conflicts; symbol of unity.

FIGURE 25.

Kuntinkantan variation. Literal meanin, bent and spread out; used in the sense of 'do no boast, do not be arrogant'.

FIGURE 26.

MUSUYIDIE. Something to remove evil; a cloth with this design on it lay the sleeping bed of the king Ashanti, and every morning when he rose, he put his left boot on it three times; symbol of spiritual cleanliness.

FIGURE 27.

Ohene nwa. In the kings little eyes; that is in his favour.

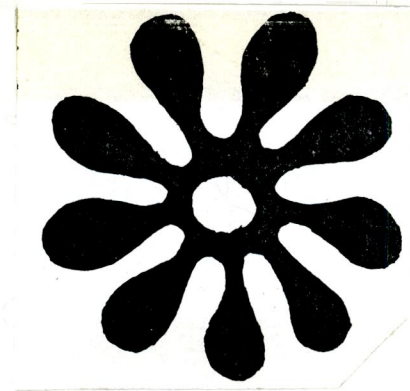


FIGURE 28.

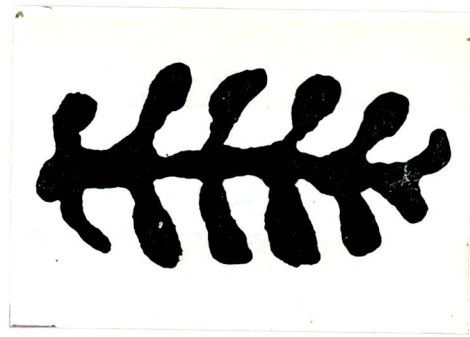


FIGURE 29.



FIGURE 30.



FIGURE 31.

FIGURE 28.

The fofoo flower. Sedie fofoo pe, ne se gyinatwi abo bedie. (What yellow flowered fofoo plant wants is what the gyinatwi seeds should turn black.) This is a well known Ashanti saying. The fofoo plant (*B idenspilosa* - botanical name) has a small yellow flower, which when it drops its petals, turns into a black, spiky seed; said of a jealous person.

FIGURE 29.

Aya, the fern - 'I am not afraid of you, I am independant of you.' A symbol of defiance.

FIGURE 30.

GYE NYAME. 'Except God, I fear none.'

FIGURE 31.

DWENININI ABEN. 'The ram's horns.' Dwani ne ahooden ne namen a na wo ayi no awie no. (The strength of the ram lies in its horns; once they are plucked off it is finished.)

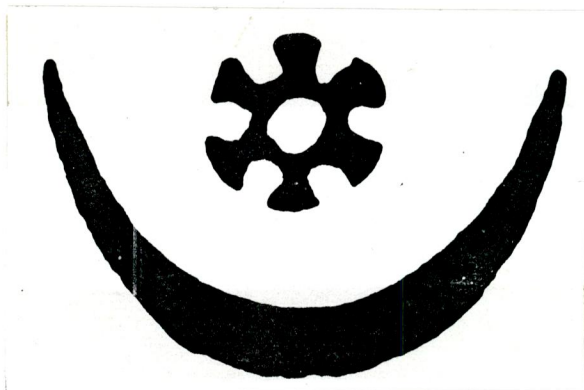


FIGURE 32.



FIGURE 33.

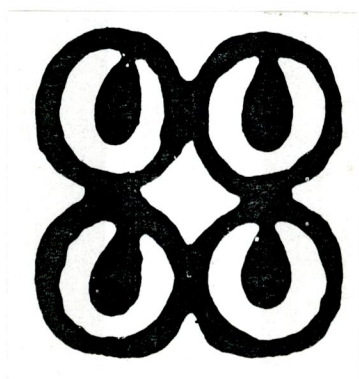


FIGURE 34.

FIGURE 32.

OSRANE NE NSORONA. The moon and star, representing royal blood (king and prince), both glowing; a symbol of faithfulness.

FIGURE 33.

MMRA KRADO. The Hausa man's lock, krado-mmra krado; seal of law and order, symbolising the authority of the court.

FIGURE 34.

'MA TE. 'I have heard what you have said.'

NEESIE - MATEMASIE. 'I have heard and kept it.' Nyanasa buu mu nne matemasie; symbol of wisdom and knowledge.

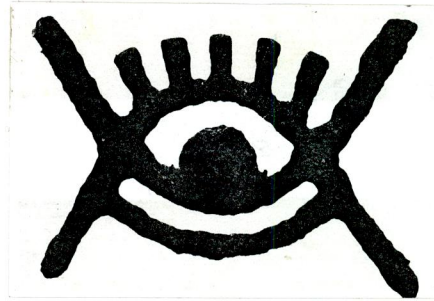


FIGURE 35.

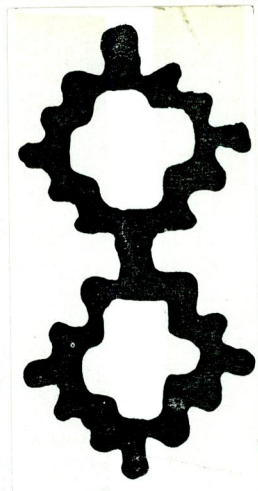


FIGURE 36.

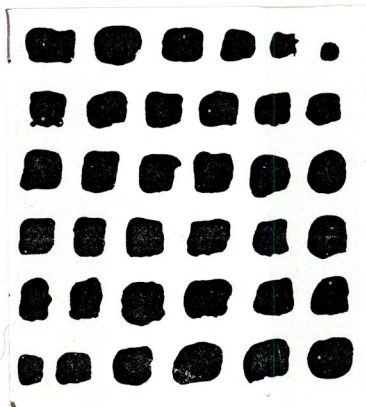


FIGURE 37.

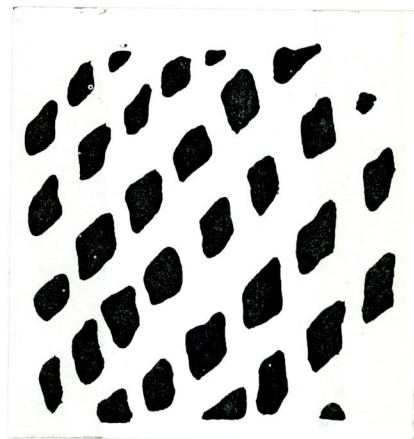


FIGURE 38.

FIGURE 35.

Symbol of total unity of the universe, incorporating the eye, the rays of the sun, the double crescent moon and the Ashanti stool. (Kojo Baiden.)

FIGURE 36.

(Double) Fihankra, the circular house, complete house, signifies safety or security in a home.

FIGURE 37.

Checkerboard.

FIGURE 38.

Pebbles.

The third type of cloth important to the Asante people is the kente cloth, beautifully woven (in many colours) in strips and sewn together. Both cotton and silk are woven throughout the Asante; cotton for general use and silk for ceremonial use by the kings. This cloth is known as the asasia which is distinguished by further elaboration of supplementary weft fleats. Non- asasia silk cloths are known as ntaina which simply means cloth. The ahwepan cloth, woven in cotton or silk, is dependant on the design of the warp stripes. The weaving of silk is a speciality of the village of Bonwire, about twelve miles from the Asante capital of Kumasi. The patterns and designs come out on these cloths through the weaving, as opposed to dyeing and printing techniques, although colour compositions are also important for the overall effect of the weave.

There are two main types of looms, the simplest being the single heddle loom. The heddle is the device by which threads of the warp (which have been separated by the shed stick so the weft thread can be passed through) are separated again in reverse order for the next passing of weft thread. Double heddle looms use two heddles instead of a shed stick and a heddle; these are linked together by a rope going over a heddle pulley and allowing the weaver to go much faster by using the foot pedal connected to both heddles. Single heddle looms are used by peoples all over the African continent, including the Yoruba. The double heddle looms are found mainly in the west and north east of Africa. The kente cloth is woven on the double heddle loom. There is a greater potential for design by adding supplementary weft threads with which you can do many inlay



FIGURE 39.

Oyokoman Asasia. Adwenesa, a fine Asante silk Nsaduaso cloth.

patterns, a main element of kente cloth. This cloth incorporates brocade and tapestry techniques combined with plain weave, while hand manipulation is used for intricate detail. Different patterns can be achieved by the alteration of the picks (types of shed or the pattern of warp threads that the weft threads are passed through). These weave patterns, combined with the use of different coloured threads in association with the strong techniques of colour symbolism in Ghana, allow for a beautifully, richly designed cloth. Each supplementary weft float design and each different pattern of warp stripes has its own name. The cloth, when finished, will be known by the warp stripe patterns or a name given to the cloth due to these combinations.

Figures 43 and 45 show contemporary woven cloths of Ghana. It is possible to decide the names of each of the designs by looking at the background pattern. Each background pattern has its own distinctive name. New designs are always being created. A new pattern which became popular about 1960 is seen in figure 43 (lower design). It is called Akosombo Neanea (light of Akosombo) and is a photograph of actual fabric obtained from Ghana. It is interesting to see how you can relate these designs to those in figure 42, a design recorded in West African Weaving, Venice Lamb. The upper design (in both figures), the dagger-like effect, is called Themaa aba Ghana, the New Ghana, also seen in figure 40, lower design. The spotted effect seen between the two designs, already mentioned, can be compared to figure 41. In figure 43, the red warp appears more frequently than in the upper and lower designs. This middle design is known as Akyem. The second cloth seen in figure 45 has similarities to figure 44. The stripy

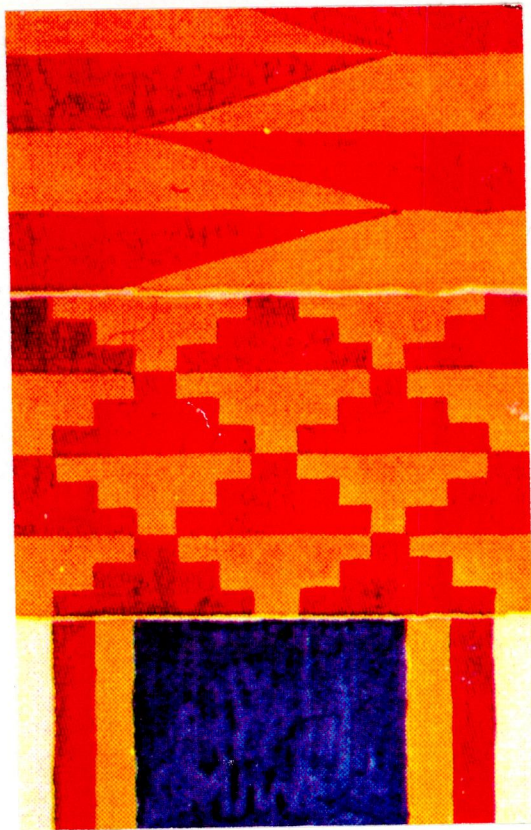


FIGURE 40.
OBINKYE, centre design.
OBIKWANMUSI, lower
design, seen in contemporary
examples in figure 43.

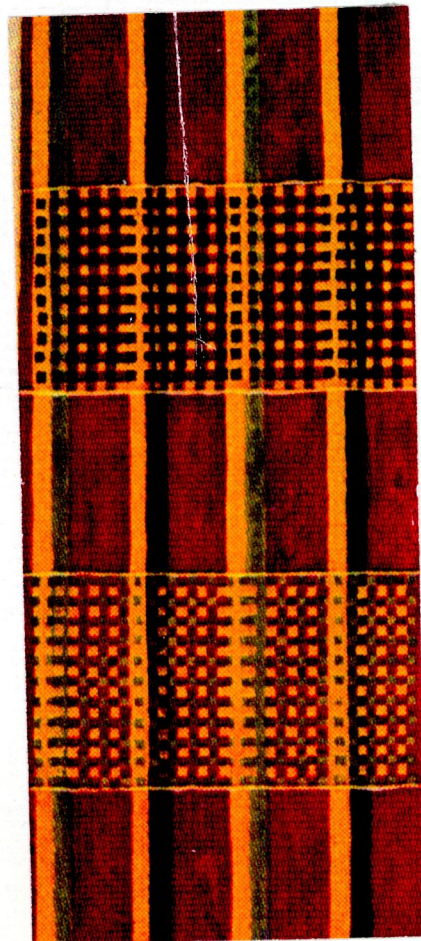


FIGURE 41
Akyem - similarities to
design on contemporary cloth
examples in figure 43.

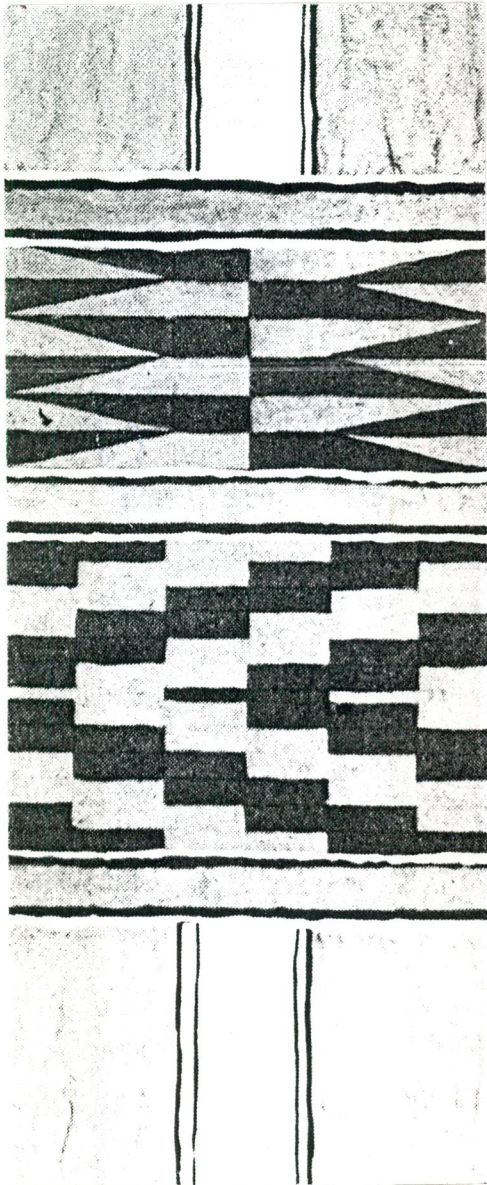


FIGURE 42. (Left.)

A new pattern which became popular about 1960. It is called Ako-Sombo Nkanea, light of Akosombo. This is a good example of how new patterns can be devised to mark important occasions.



FIGURE 43. (Right.)

An example of contemporary Asante cloth from Ghana. The lower design is the Akosombo Nkanea; the upper one is Themaa aba Ghana (the New Ghana), also seen in the black and white figure on the left.

(Actual cloth, photocopied.)

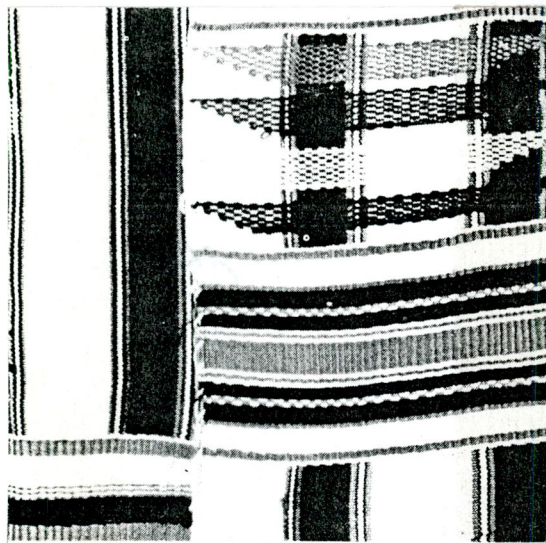


FIGURE 44.

Top design, called reko, the second category of Asante cloth, is a cloth with simple inlay patterns woven in 'simple weave', a method which gives a rather open effect to the design and alsosaves on silk.

This cloth is called Besehene.



FIGURE 45.

An example of contemporary cloth of Asante Ghana. Similarities can be seen between the design of the figure above and those in this cloth.

(Actual cloth, photocopied.)

design in both samples is beaten down tightly and woven with a weft faced weave, to obscure the warp. The patterns here are woven in a 'single weave' method. The cloth in both examples is known as Besehene.

CONCLUSION

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN TEXTILES AS AN EXTENSION OF TRADITIONAL. WILL THE CLOTH OF AFRICA CONTINUE TO SURVIVE ON ITS OWN STRENGTH AND BEAUTY, OR HAS IT BECOME SENSATIONALISED ?

In order to understand the role north west African textiles have in Africa today, we need to consider how traditional techniques have affected the production of cloth. It is noticeable that the need to understand the symbols of colour and design motifs has become less important than it was in the early to mid nineteenth century. As stated in chapter two, where I discussed colour as an expressive medium for the Africans, it is seen that the wearing of certain colours (and their combinations) translates a distinctive mood. However it is possible that the interpretation of the meanings of colour in Africa has become a lot more flexible, since in Western societies we do not stick rigidly to the wearing of colours with a purely symbolic intention. It is widely believed that colour effects our emotions and the way we subconsciously interpret things. However there is more versatility in the use of colour in Western societies. We use colour, more often, purely for the sake of it, with no intentions or ulterior motives. I feel that the north west African people have more of a spiritual insight and understanding of the intrinsic qualities of individual colours. The Yoruba of Nigeria achieve great tenderness through many subtle tones of indigo , for example in the Ibadandun cloth (see Figure, chapter 3.)

However, the colours used in north west African textiles have changed. Due to better trade links with developed and commercial countries, there is greater availability of chemical dyes. The craftsmen of the textiles are intrigued by these new tones of colours. It is mainly a fascination with products imported from Western societies. The people of Africa can now get hold of things which were so far away fifty years ago. They see successful, wealthy, Western people wearing and using these harsh colours and therefore they want to use and have what they think is desirable. I am not condemning the use of chemical dyes - I use them often in my own work. I feel that the African's have an understanding of their natural dyes and dye sources, for example indigo - blue, kola nut - brownish red, and that the insight and tenderness used by the dyers, spinners, weavers and printers of north west Africa is unique. I would hate to see its deterioration as a result of Western societies expectations. If the qualities obtained by the natural dyes remained as an existing art form for the craftsmen of Africa and the chemical dyes used became a medium of new expression, I feel they might be able to coexist in the same art form, but not on the same cloth. I wonder if the strong, almost lurid colours seen in the Asante cloth in chapter three, (see Figure 43 and 45), would have the same symbolic meanings as the softer, more temperamental colours of natural dyes. They definitely appear in different tones. The natural dyes seem richer, of a warmer vibrancy. Chemical dyes potentially have the same qualities if they are mixed properly, both before dyeing and in a colour composition. Personally I find that some chemical dyes have an almost plastic and lurid feel. Could the red tones achieved from natural sources, for example camwood (baphia nitida) which produces a crimson dye, have the same symbolic meaning as those seen in the contemporary woven cloth in chapter

three (as above) ? The reddish colour seen here is more like the maroon of a Western school uniform.

As stated in chapter three where the changes in the Korhogo cloth were discussed, traditional craftsmen employed the cloth for religious purposes. The design of the cloth today is bolder, very graphic and each motif is much bigger. Due to Western interpretations, these symbols, which are ingrained in the Poro people's way of life, are becoming merely visual, only appreciated for their beauty and not understood in the context of the complicated, symbolic life of the Poro. It may be said that contemporary craftsmen are creating a new art form, based on and influenced by traditional cloth. There are different expectations of today's Korhogo cloth. There is a tourist market readily available with many interested buyers from Western societies. Has the production of Korhogo cloth become a business for the locals ? I see no reason why they should not use their talents as a means of survival. I see harm in using the traditional motifs for purposes other than those intended by the original artists. If contemporary artists are going to use nature as a source, they need to create new motifs and a new understanding.

It is interesting to see how factory production has affected the overall design of the cloth, especially the adinkra cloth (Figure 46). It is a particular characteristic of the adinkra cloth that no two pieces are ever alike. The motifs in the machine printed cloth are stiff and very regulated. The cloth has lost the individuality and spontaneity normally found in adinkra fabrics. This beautiful fabric, or copies of it, are now becoming more accessible to a wider market, including the increasingly interested West and America. Regrettably all of the symbolic motifs and

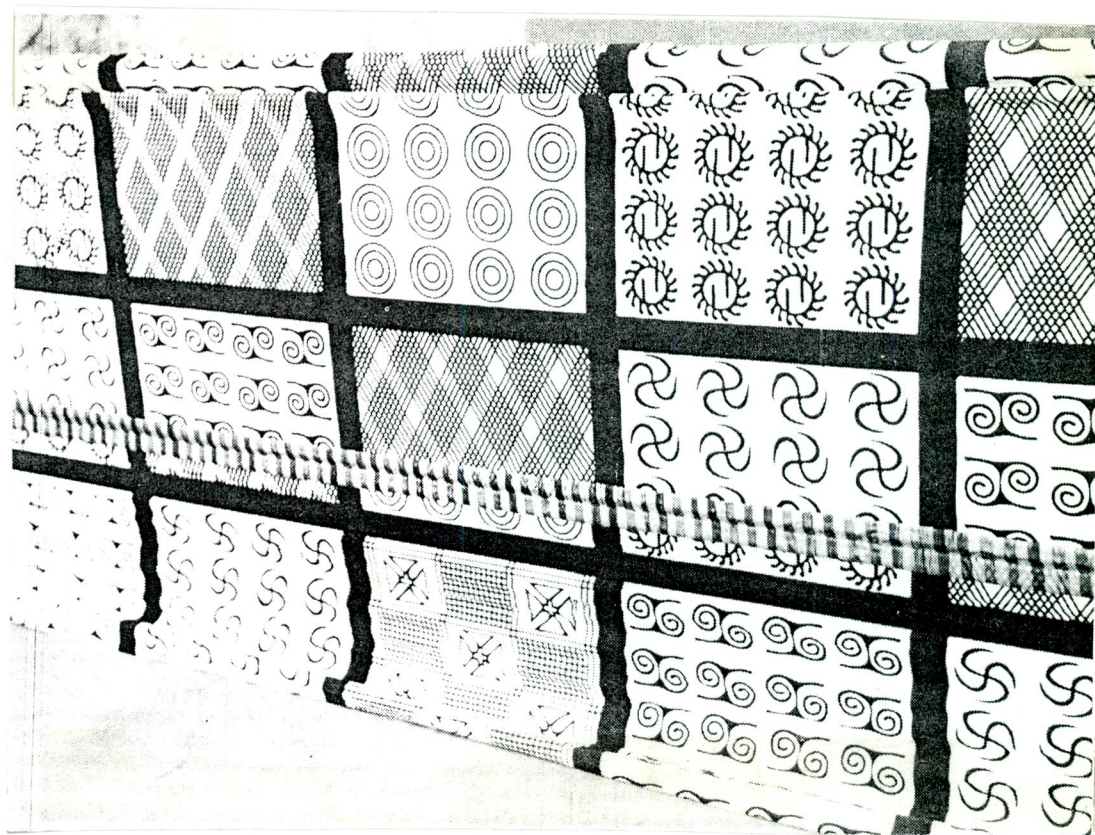


FIGURE 46.
Factory printed adinkra cloth.

colour ideas will lose their meaning when placed in the hands of those who do not understand them.

There is a positive side to commercialism; it appears that it is encouraging a new art form in each area. Western influences on African art cannot be suppressed. African craftsmen and women are extremely creative and able to express themselves through new art forms, based in essence on the complicated mythology, culture and history of a wonderful African heritage.

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