

DECODING THE SYMBOLISM OF BOGOLANFINI, KORHOGO AND FON FABRICS

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ABSTRACT

Many fabrics produced in West Africa come with many symbolic designs that seem to reflect the social concepts and cultural dichotomies of the areas from where they emanate. These designs and symbols always need to be decoded to communicate very important religious, historical and socio-cultural information about the settings to which they belong. This study, aims at investigating the designs and symbols of three unique fabrics from West Africa: Bogolanfini (Mali), Korhogo (La Cote d'Ivoire) and the Fon Appliqué (Benin). Realising the need to inform many people across the globe about the existence and meanings of these fabrics and their symbols, with the current trends in globalization, this study, therefore, set out to identify these unique fabrics and decode the symbols that are represented in them. As a broader effort to help globalise indigenous West African fabrics, these three fabrics were chosen to encourage their wide acceptance, usage and application globally. In order to effectively conduct the study, case studies were used while data were largely obtained from archival records, interviews, documentation, participant and direct observation and physical artefacts. Some interviews were also conducted with curators, fabric producers, and dealers of West African textiles. The study concluded that these three fabrics like others prevalent in the West African sub-region are produced from different places under different conditions but their symbols seek to represent similar characteristic traits that revolve around varied messages geared towards historic, religious and socio-cultural engagements that the people, both users and producers alike can identify with.

Keywords: *Symbolism, Bogolanfin, Korhogo, Fon, Textile Fabrics.*

INTRODUCTION

West African textiles and clothing communicate important religious, historical and social information about the cultures to which they belong. They act as markers of status indicating wealth and conferring prestige; they identify members of specific cultural or social groups and play a significant part in ceremonies of initiation, marriage and death. Throughout history, the elite members of society, who created the necessary socio-political, cultural and economic environments for clothing practices to develop, have determined clothing trends. The origin of fabric production, dyeing and patterning in West Africa is not accurately known, and as with all searches for points of origin, ultimately proves more and more elusive as the research for these beginnings intensifies. However, records show that the weaving and dyeing of cotton already existed before the first Portuguese traders landed on the west coast of Africa in the middle of the 15th century (Gascoigne, 2001). Most of the West African tribes that had been part of the ancient Mali, Ghana or the Songhai Empires thrived between 800 AD and 1600 AD around the upper part of West Africa (Ade, Ajayi and Crowder, 1989; Connah, 2001). It was speculated that they migrated into the forest and the coastal regions as splinter groups to escape the wars and suppressions by their rulers that were prevalent at the time. It is believed that they acquired the skill of weaving and decorating fabrics while they were still part of those three empires and practised various textile modifications and

innovations at their new settlements. The tradition of strip weaving and dyeing or patterning cloth using natural dyes such as indigo, cola nut, bardie dye, mud and camwood dyes, was an integral part of the region. These fabric production processes and materials are still predominant, although to a lesser extent, in modern day Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Senegal and Niger. This is so despite the introduction of synthetic dyes and brightly coloured factory-made fabrics.

According to changing historical contexts, individuals and social groups, have used clothing as a form of body modification and to enhance personal and social image and identity. Dress has also been instrumental in reinforcing images and social boundaries with outsiders; such images are both projected on the body itself or the clothes covering the body. Belting (2011) indicated that an image is more than a product of perception. It is created as the result of personal or collective knowledge and intention. People live with images as the result of personal or collective knowledge and intention. These associations exemplify individuals' bonds with cultural codes and conventions. The best-known of these frock-like articles of clothing is the Kente (made by the Akan of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire), who wear them as a symbol of national pride. Weaving fabrics and stitching them into garments have been regular customs in West Africa for quite a long time, as demonstrated by the creation of different breeches, shirts, tunics and coats.

Traditional activities such as festivals and celebrations of war victories and heroism, cultural symbolism and the decrees of kings, chiefs and overlords have all contributed to the shaping of fabric design and manufacture in the region. Gordon (2011) states that, for sacred celebrations, men and women clothe themselves in meaning that is alive and changing, yet anchored in belief. The textiles and dress of West Africa have been greatly influenced over time by designs and practices in several parts of the world, especially Europe. With the arrival of European traders in the late fifteenth century came new kinds of textiles as well as imported garments. On the coast, where the most direct contact between Africans and Europeans occurred, men of style and substance wore tailored garments such as coats and trousers and brimmed hats (Kriger, 2006).

This study seeks to help decode the hidden meanings of these fabrics and enable users to understand and use them in context. Indigo Cloth, Adinkra, Adire, Bogolanfini (Mud cloth), Fon Applique, Korhogo and are the most prominent amongst the breadth of indigenous fabric production tradition in the region. However, Bogolanfini (Mud cloth) made by the Bamanas of Mali, Fon Applique by the Fons of Benin and Korhogo by the Senufo of Cote d'ivoires are discussed in this paper. The Malian mud cloth is traditionally referred to as Bogolanfini or Bokolanfini. 'Bogolan' is a Bamana word which means something made by using mud while 'fini' means cloth. The designed motifs are usually abstract or semi-abstract representations of everyday objects. Studies placed dyes and fabric used in mud cloth can be traced back to the 12th century AD and for many years, much confusion existed on how mud cloth was made. It has been described as probably the most influential ethnic fabric referenced of the 1990's' (Luke-Boone, 2001). Bogolan designs are used together to represent a historical event or commemorate a local heroes. The unambiguous, geometric, black and white designs can today be found on everything including furniture, book covers, wrapping paper and more importantly clothing (Imperato & Shamir, 1970).

Fon appliquéd cloth were created at the royal court and was primarily devoted to the celebration of the Fon monarchs assumed name and outstanding deeds, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries. Kent (1971) states that oral tradition handed down by the families of artists at the Abomey court attributes to the introduction of this art at the court of Danhomè to King Agadja (1708-1740). Fon applique attained a sufficiently high degree of art for them to be often given to

other nations with which the kingdom had connections. They served as marks of friendship. Since the conquest of the kingdom by the French in 1894, appliqué cloth has portrayed a wider variety of subjects relating to daily life. They are also a source of inspiration for contemporary creators. While on campaign in the Wémè, Agadja is said to have been impressed by Tedoe voodoo adepts in Gbozoummè whose skirts formed circles of colour like a rainbow during their dances. He decided to bring them to the court so he could be dressed in rainbow colours. Because at first they did weaving only, they were restricted to decorating the royal clothing with simple designs having no link between them. After the conquest of Whydah in 1727 by King Agadja, however, there was an upsurge in the art of appliqué cloth due to the massive import of Western manufactured cloth. From that time on, the court artists had access to a broad range of plain fabrics that is now the basis of appliqué work (Adandé, 2011). In the Abomey workshops and elsewhere, the old forms linked to the royal pictographs are copied, though there is also constant innovation of the themes. The tourist market has opened new directions - nature and animals that are different from those found in the Fon royal insignia are new subjects in appliqué cloths.

Korhogo is made by the Senufo people of the Cote d'Ivoire; this type of cloth is designed by using mud to paint the cloth in various abstract and geometric designs. The mud is typically black, brown or rust and it is taken from various parts of western Africa. The fabric is used for clothes, as well as pillows and home furnishings (Luke-Boone, 2001). Using simple tools, men make fine line drawings of human and animal forms on coarsely spun, narrow-woven cotton strips sewn together to form the large hanging. Their "paint" may be brown or black fermented mud or modern pigments that they apply while sitting or kneeling in front of their homes. The designs relate to paintings that decorated ritual houses in years past. The artists take free reign in creating the stylized human, animal, bird and snake forms, some relating to costumed dancers. When entering a Korhogo village, the visitor is met with hundreds of such drawings attached to mud-brick walls and spread on the ground (Luke-Boone, 2001; Polakoff, 1982).

This study, aims at investigating the designs and symbols of three unique fabrics from the West African sub-region namely Bogolanfini from Mali, Korhogo from La Cote d'Ivoire and the Fon Appliqué from Benin. This is a way of bringing attention to their designs and to portray their significance to the religio-socio-cultural set-up of the communities where they are produced from. This study, therefore, set out to identify the unique fabrics of Bogolanfin, Korhogo and Fon and decode the symbols that are represented in them.

Problem Statement

Globalization is making it possible for everything that exists in the world to be made readily available to everybody. This accounts for why many designs and fabrics from the remotest parts of the world like Greenland, Canada or even Iceland and Siberia in Russia are readily available on the market for consumers to purchase in numerous varieties. Clearly, many fabrics in West Africa are not documented and showcased to the world like other fabrics from other parts of the world, and this is very unfortunate. Lack of documentation of the designs, symbols and motifs in fabrics produced and mostly used in West Africa accounts for why many designs from this part of the world die out without ever being acknowledged in the global community. Discussing these fabrics out of the numerous ones in West Africa is one way of helping to document and bring these unique fabrics to the attention of the global community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper emerged from a broader research project that is investigating the contemporary commercial application of West African fabrics. Case studies that are derived from qualitative research were employed. Data were obtained largely from documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artefacts (Yin, 1994). Interviews were conducted with producers, curators of West African textiles, and dealers of West African Textiles. Observation was also employed as a tool for data gathering. The visual analysis draws on Charlotte Jirousek's Art Design and Visual Thinking and has come with the following observational dimensions and criteria. Medium (what the object is made of); Technique (how the object was made); Size (Is it large or small); Composition (the arrangement of elements in the work); Space (the relationship of object to the space around it); Colour (elements of colour hue, value, intensity or saturation, local colour); Line (Uses of line description, expression, decoration); Space (Methods for creating space in a 2-D object, overlap, vertical perspective, linear perspective). A visual meaning for the various designs was also sort through the social semiotic approach to the visual analysis (Goodwin, 2000).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bogolanfini (Mud Cloth)

All Bogolanfini or bokolanfini fabric designs are made from some basic pattern units that are repeated several times to complete the required size of fabric. 'Bogolan' is a Bamana word which means something made by using mud, while 'fini' means cloth. The Bamana lived to the east and north of Bamako in Mali and traditionally made the cloth. The unambiguous, geometric, black and white designs can today be found on everything from clothing and furniture to book covers and wrapping paper. Luke-Boone (2001) describes it as 'probably the most influential ethnic fabric referenced of the 1990's'.

Traditionally, bogolanfini production is a purely manual process; it starts with the weaving of the fabric which is done mainly by men. The weaving is done on narrow looms that produce stripes of barely six inches in width. These stripes are pieced together by women into various sizes, ready for dyeing. Until quite recently, vegetable dyes were the main dyes used for dyeing bogolan. Luke-Boone (2001) asserts that the dyes and fabric used in mud cloth can be traced back to the 12th century AD. The fabric is first soaked in a dye bath made from milled or ground leaves boiled or soaked over time. The fabric which turns yellow after immersion in the 'leaf dye' is then dried in the sunshine for some time. The designs are then painted onto the dyed fabric with a piece of metal or wood. The paint in the form of mud slurry is carefully and repeatedly applied to outline the intricate motifs on the cloth. The mud is collected from the river beds and fermented for up to a year in special receptacles – mud jars. After that the mud is painted on the fabric; through some complex chemical reaction between the mud and the 'leaf dye', the brown colour of the mud remains when it is washed off. The undersigned area that is, 'the yellow base' is then discharged by applying soap or bleach which makes it white all over again.

They are mainly used for making hunters' shirts or tunics, women's wrappers or wrap-arounds, skirts and men's sleeveless loose tops. A woman would wear these cloths during important transitional periods in her life: after excision; prior to the consummation of her marriage; immediately following childbirth and finally as a burial shroud (Rovine, 1997). In recent times, Bogolanfini has found many more applications due to the tourist market. Artists also paint Bogolanfini using vegetable dyes and mud but often feature designs unrelated to those of traditional

fabrics; their newer motifs are also often found on clothing. Such designs have found a wide range of application in commercial products, such as coffee mugs, curtains, towels, sheets, book covers and wrapping paper (See figure 1).

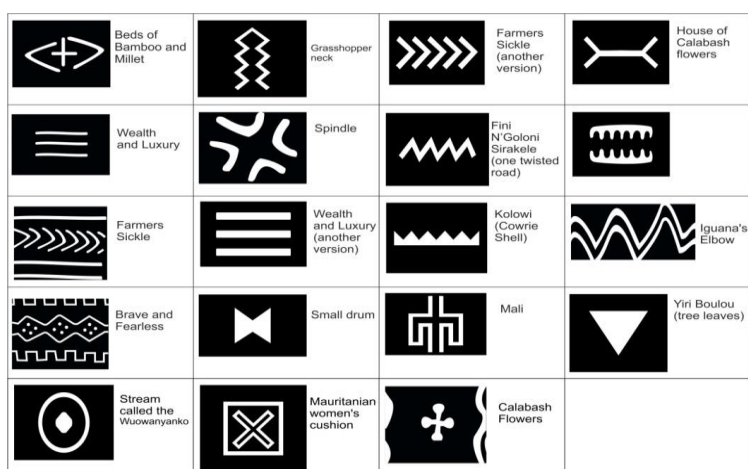


Figure 1: Selected Bogolanfini motifs and their meanings

There are several of such pattern units but the most predominant ones are *Beds of Bamboo and Millet*, *Farmers Sickle*, *Iguana's Elbow*, *Wealth and Luxury*, *Spindle*, *Brave and Fearless* and *Calabash Flowers*. These pattern units are sometimes representational, symbolic or both and they have meaning and implication in usage. Although there have been several variations and modifications some of these basic units are still very visible in Bogolanfini fabrics either individually or in combinations of two or more.

Beds of Bamboo and Millet: it is said that this pattern unit is used by women who wish to show their superiority to their rivals in a typical West African polygamous marriage setting. However, the pattern is extremely popular and so it is not always assumed that a woman wearing it is making any rivalry references. 'Beds of bamboo and millet' is more representational than symbolic.

Farmers Sickle: the sickle is an important farming tool in West Africa; it has a semi-circular blade attached to a short handle and is used for cutting grain or tall grass. The inside of the blade's curve is sharp, so that the user can either draw or swing it against the base of the crop, catching the stems in the curve and slicing them at the same time. This pattern has a unique story. A farmer had a sickle he particularly liked. It worked well for him and he thought it deserved its own pattern. So this pattern is named for the back of the sickle.

Iguana's Elbow: the African iguanas are relatively small herbivorous lizards compared to the same species in the Americas, averaging around six and a half feet (two metres) long and weighing about eleven pounds (five kilograms). They have a series of irregular scales on their cheeks and legs; these scales most often are in a variety of colours and are visible from a close distance. They are very endearing and that makes them easy pets for most people. A very common reason is that iguana's are very common in many parts of Africa and represent good fortune. An iguana can lead a hunter to water and is also symbolic of African people in warfare with foreign powers. Apart from the symbolism of the iguana, its natural appearance and beauty is enough design inspiration.

Wealth and Luxury: this basic design unit is more representational than symbolic. It is believed to have originated from the Mauritania area and was done on cushions of rich women. Such women are so wealthy they do not have to work but just rest their heads on pillows such as those designed with this pattern unit.

Spindle: this design represents the spindle which is a rod or pin, tapered at one end and usually weighted at the other, on which fibres are spun by hand into thread and then wound onto a bobbin. It is a very old and traditional design; this was originally designed to highlight the usefulness of the endearing spindle.

Brave and Fearless: this pattern represents a belt used by warriors before they went off to battle. Although it is a foreign concept, the warrior belt became very essential in many West African cultures. It is believed to possess super natural powers that make the wearer's strength invincible. Only the top of the range brave men and women in some cultural contexts wear such belts for battle. The design from this pattern unit, therefore, signifies braveness and fearlessness.

Calabash Flowers: this refers to the elegant and unique flowers of the calabash or gourd plant. Unlike most plant flowers, calabash flowers come much alive in the night hence pollination is done by night insects for the setting of its calabash fruits. The matured fruit varies in shape and size and they have a variety of uses. The dried calabash or gourds are hollowed out and are very typical utensils in households across West Africa. They are used to clean rice, carry water and as food containers. Smaller sizes are used as bowls to drink palm wine or other traditional drinks. Calabash has also found application in musical instruments such the harp–lute, lute, traditional fiddle and percussion instruments. The calabash flowers are very significant because without them there would be no calabash or contribution from them to the social life of West Africa. *Calabash flowers* is a popular pattern that shows prosperity from the calabash flowers.

Bogolanfini fabrics are mainly used for making hunters' shirts or tunics, women's wrappers or wrap-arounds, skirts and men's sleeveless loose tops. A woman would wear these cloths during important transitional periods in her life: after excision; prior to the consummation of her marriage; immediately following childbirth and; finally as a burial shroud (Rovine, 1997). In recent times, Bogolanfini has found many more applications due to the industrial manufacture. Artist also paint Bogolanfini using vegetable dyes and mud but often feature designs unrelated to those of traditional fabrics; their newer motifs are also often found on clothing. Such designs have found a wide range of application in commercial products, such as coffee mugs, curtains, towels, sheets, book covers and wrapping paper (See figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2: Monochrome Bogolan



Figure 3: Multi coloured Bogolan with sickle motifs

Fon Appliqué

As with every art, Fon appliqué cloth was influenced by the repercussions of history. Created by kings, conceived by families supported by real patrons, the disappearance of the royal household should have brought about its own. (Adande, 1999)

These appliqués were made by Fon men and boys who belong to a family guild that passed designs down each generation. The guilds maintained vast collections of visual images that a client could specify for a banner. The kings then controlled the production and use of these works of art for the purpose of presenting themselves in splendour to the people. The artisans executed these designs to the specifications of their kings and they were hung as banners of battle in the palaces. Each textile depicts the story of a king, chief or warrior and tells of their achievements in history. Some of these banners were quite large and the symbols of the king and other symbols of their political power were appliquéd. A frequent subject matter for banners was the symbols of the twelve kings of Dahomey.

An examination of the oldest pieces shows that the creators avoided leaving gaps by arranging the material. The banners were displayed on special occasions on rooftops, on pavilions, on large umbrellas and on hats worn by royalty. The banner is read from left to right and from top to bottom, beginning with the oldest, most ancient kings and ending with the last kings before the country was claimed by France (Adandé, 2011). There were often many symbols for any particular king because the meaning of an image might reflect a distinctive characteristic of the king, such as his strength, or it might commemorate a specific event during the king's reign, or it might relate to a magical story about the king. The artists design the composition, using the image against a dark or contrasting background. In terms of style, the images – birds, animals, people, weapons and, occasionally, plant life such as vines and trees and fruit – were simple, direct and minimal. They could be readily identified with the essence of the object. As such, they became symbols rather than detailed reproductions.

Several steps are involved in making the appliqué cloth: the shape of the objects is cut out and tacked onto a backcloth to hold them in position; this flexibility allows for easy changes of place in the design. When an artist is satisfied with his composition, he hems the pattern into its definite form after tucking in the edges. The artist also pays a lot of attention to the outside borders of the background cloth which are treated as though they were a picture frame. The fact that these clothes can be hung up and looked at explains the word "hangings" applied to them. The Fon word "avo" is used both for appliqué and plain cloth.

Black and white was the favourite background colours in the 19th century. However, in recent times, brightly coloured cloth motifs and patterns of birds, fish, animals and other symbols were cut of plain weave cotton and stitched onto the black background. Fon appliqués, like Ashanti Kente, play on the relationship between the visual and the verbal within the context of leadership. But unlike the latter, which evoke ideas, people and historic events through their colours and weave structures, Fon appliqués do so through cut-out representational images that are then appliqué to a cloth surface.

European accounts from the mid-nineteenth century illustrate the presence of appliqué cloths for use as tents, umbrellas and wall hangings. Even since the 1890s, when the Fon kingdom was officially defeated by the French, appliqués continued to be used as emblems of power and authority for enduring royalty and other leadership contexts. For example, men's social groups, which share work or expenses of funerals, still use appliqué banners with designs whose proverbial meanings express the "articles of faith" of its membership (Adams, 1980). Such cloths also console mourners at funerals, in which case the cloths are referred to as "the cloth to dry your tears". Today in Benin and elsewhere the appliqué continues to contain the simple, symbolic images of the older traditions. However, the pieces are less likely to contain the aggressive and war-like images of the older royal messages. Now made both for tourists and local consumption, Fon appliqué cloths are endearingly symbolic to the locals and as items of trade.

Figure 4 shows the royal insignia that forms the basis of modern day Fon appliqué.

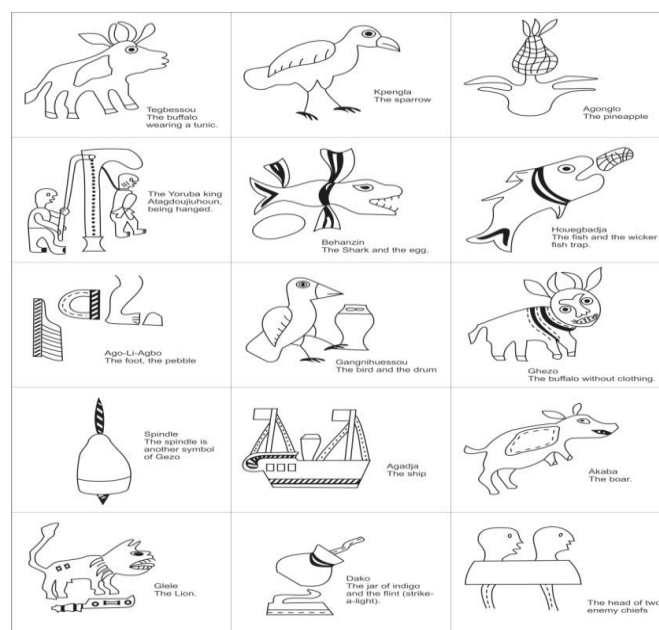


Figure 4: Fon appliqué insignias

Tegbessou: the buffalo wearing a tunic. *“A buffalo wearing clothing is difficult to disrobe.”* Under King Tegbessou, Oyo (Yoruba) captured Abomey, and thereafter an annual tribute, including 41 young men and 41 young women to serve as slaves, had to be sent to Oyo.

Kpengla: the sparrow. *“The stone in the water does not fear the cold.”* This represents the king who died of smallpox, as did many Dahomean kings.

Agonglo: the pineapple. This means *“Lightning falls on the palm tree, but the pineapple escapes it.”*

Atagdoujiuhoun: the Yoruba king Atagdoujiuhoun being hanged. Glele had captured him as he had been selling Dahomeans as slaves. When Glele died, Behanzin hanged the Yoruba.

Behanzin: the Shark and the egg. *“The world holds the egg which the ground wants.”* This represents the last great king of Dahomey. Conflict with the French led to his down-fall. He was taken to Martinique where he died. Although his bones were returned to Abomey for burial, many Dahomeans preferred to believe he had changed himself into a bird and survived.

Houegbadja: the fish and the wicker fish trap. *“The fish which escapes from the trap does not return.”* The represents the second king of Dahomey who was also a cultural hero. He is credited with solidifying control of the plateau of Abomey and, among other things, introducing weaving to the people.

Ago-Li-Agbo: the foot, the pebble, the bow and the broom. *“Allada tripped but did not fall. This represents a king who was considered a puppet of the French; he is not usually included in the list of true kings.*

Gangnihuessou: the bird and the drum. This represents the older brother of the first king.

Ghezo: the buffalo without clothing. *“No cardinal-bird with red tail and wings ever starts a brush-fire.”* This represents a powerful king who freed Dahomey from Oyo in 1827. He was in direct contact with the Ashanti king. He was defeated by the Egba at Abeokuta in 1851. Although considered humane, he refused to stop the sale of slaves.

Spindle: the spindle is another symbol of Gezo. It signifies that *“as the thread comes close to the spindle, people should come close to Gezo for protection.”*

Agadja: the ship *“Nobody could set fire to the tree fallen with all its limbs and green leaves.”* Agadja represents a king who conquered Whydah and extended his rule to the sea. The first to contact Europeans, his graphic symbol is a European vessel. He also conquered Allada, thus establishing the kingdom of Dahomey as it was known to the whites.

Akaba: the boar. *“Slowly, softly, the chameleon reaches the top of the bombax tree.”* This represents the son of Houegbadja the last king to rule before the coming of the Europeans.

Glele: the Lion. *“The lion’s teeth are fully grown, and he is the terror of all.”* Glele’s insignia is given elsewhere as the elephant.

Dako: the jar of indigo and the flint (strike-a-light). “*Dako kills his mother-in-law and the jar of indigo rolls.*” Other reports use the *Tacoodonou* or *Daho*. In some traditional histories this is said to be a chief of the *Fon* who murdered a neighbouring chief named *Da*, cut open his belly, *Home*, and built a palace on the body at Abomey, thus the Kingdom of Dahomey.

The head of two enemy chiefs: these were defeated and ordered to live in Abomey. They refused to do so, and were killed. Their heads were set on the house which had been built for them.

Nowadays, these insignias are used individually or combined to design appliqué panels and sold as wall hangings. It is apparent that the original meanings and implications are not considered before they are combined. However, they still maintain strong pure colours on a dark background (See figures 5 and 6).



Fig. 5: *Fon* appliqué panel containing *Ghezo*

Figure 6: *Fon* appliqué panel

Source: Indigo Art Gallery http://www.indigoarts.com/gallery_fon4.html

Korhogo

Korhogo fabrics are produced in Côte d'Ivoire and are named after the village of Korhogo in the northern part of the country. The style originally started as a wall painting at the various shrines in the area. The wall paintings usually wore off in no time because they were painted with natural dyes that did not last. The need to prolong the life of drawings on the walls of shrines in the town inspired the sub culture of making the cloth. Over time, the Senufo people have developed an indigenous cottage industry in fabric production. They divide the fabric production processes along gender lines. Both men and women may tend the cotton plants. After harvest, the women usually clean and spin the cotton into yarns. Men then weave the rough yarns into strips about four inches wide, using hand looms. Several strips are sewn together to make a "canvas." Women make the dyes that the men use to design the cloth. Korhogo cloth has fairly loose weave and sometimes stretches during machine stitching, although the amount of stretching varies with each piece of fabric. The cloth has an obvious weave and looks similar to raw silk.

The woven cloth is stretched very flat on a board and secured by means of small pegs. Without any preliminary sketch, the designer traces the designs with his 'knife' after having dipped it into the dye. The first lines are very fine; they are subsequently reinforced by new tracings. In more recent times, this is done using a stencil and the painting is done with a specially fermented solution that turns black after a reasonable amount of time has passed. The design can be done in one of two ways. Firstly, the pictures are painted, often with several applications of dye to darken the look.

Then, either the pictures or sometimes the entire cloth is painted in another dye. This further darkens the drawings or colours the whole cloth. If the whole cloth has been covered, it is then washed, removing the dye bath from all but the designs, but permanently fixing them to the cloth.

Traditionally, the mud decoration is produced using the application of two natural dyes. The first of these dyes is made from boiled leaves and is greenish-yellow in colour and the second is formed from decayed swamp mud extracted from the roots of trees. An iron-bonding agent in the mud is said to cause the dye to interact with the coarse fibres and thereby create a permanent colour. The mud decoration is hand painted onto the cloth using a stencil. In another process a yellowish solution that contains a dye from the *nigeneme* tree is painted directly, without preliminary sketching, onto the cloth. The cloth is immersed in a black dye obtained from the marigot, a pool or muddy place in a stream bed. When washed later, only the surface covered by the *nigeneme* dye retains the black dye. The *nigeneme* dye makes the black dye fast and permanent. Artists also paint directly with a mixture of dyes and *banga* and juice from lemon. *Banga* is a strong solution which helps to make the dye permanent. This dye produces rich magenta-red and burnt sienna hues when mixed with the ingredients.

Korhogo cloth is similar to mud cloth which uses larger, more recognisable forms to symbolise intangibles. It contains stylised figures of humans and animals painted directly onto the fabric. Korhogo cloths use striking imagery and symbolism to tell stories. For example, motifs of fish represent life and abundance, birds represent freedom, goats represent male prowess and hunters represent the mysteries of the universe. Occasionally colours other than the traditional dark black-brown are used as well. Colour application is in two stages; firstly an application of yellow-brown dye and secondly an application of mud dye solution are stroked or painted onto the fabric – one directly upon the other – to form a final dark design against the natural, off-white colour of cloth. More recently, however, black ink is used in place of the natural dye and machine-woven fabric is used in place of natural cotton.

Korhogo cloth is used in making clothing and craft items but it is most popular as a truly authentic wall decoration. The cloth is used for clothes, as well as pillows and home furnishings. Originally the Korhogo cloth was used for religious purposes; they were never worn. The designs on the cloth will always represent a cherished ideal, favoured celebration or give honour to respected animals. Korhogo cloth is used in making clothing and craft items but is very popular as an authentic wall decoration.













	Goat signifies Male Prowess from the beginning of time		Bird signifies Freedom		Tree signifies Society's Shadow
	Crocodile signifies The Fertility of Male		Fish Bones signifies Bareness		Hunter signifies Life's Mysteries
	Snake signifies Earth's Abundance		Swallow signifies Life's Interdependence		Chicken signifies Fertility and Grace
	Fish signifies Vitality and Abundance		Lion signifies Royalty		Guinea Fowl signifies Inner Beauty

Figure 7: Selected Korhogo motifs and their meanings

The tree, chicken, snake, goat, crocodile, guinea fowl, hunter, bird, swallow, fish bones, fish, lion, chameleon and turtle are the common motifs for Korhogo fabrics. The tree signifies society's shadow. The tree represents the sacred woods where Poro ceremonies take place. The chicken signifies fertility and grace. The snake signifies earth's abundance. The snake is a symbol of the earth which he encircles with his tail in his mouth. This circle represents the world; the day the snake lets go of his tail the world will cease to exist. The snake is often represented in different Senufo art objects, especially jewellery such as bracelets and rings. The Senufo constantly remind West Africans that their existence is tied to the slightest gesture of the snake.

Goat: this signifies male prowess from the beginning of time. The goat evokes male sexual power. It is often a liturgical subject for the Senufo sculptor who makes the statue for certain propitiatory rites by the priestess of the Poro women's school.

Crocodile: this signifies the fertility of the male. The crocodile and the big lizard: "from the water to the shore". These symbols are found in Senufo ritual acts and show the definite transfer from land to water. According to folktales, there was a sacred crocodile in the waters of Korhogo whose back was decorated with cowries. He appeared every ten years to announce future events. The ten years correspond to the ten days of the creation of the world in the Senufo religion.

Guinea Fowl: this signifies inner beauty. The grey guinea fowl and the domestic chicken: birds in general have important roles, being animals associated with celestial powers. The guinea fowl and the chicken represent maternal virtues and feminine beauty. A bird in the sculpture is the big "Senufo calao" that symbolises hope and fertility.

Hunter: the hunter signifies life's mysteries.

Bird: the bird signifies freedom.

Swallow: this signifies life's interdependence. A Senufo chief must always have swallows in his home. With the swallows he makes sacrifices to win the trust of the population and power over them. When there's a tribal war, a man's testicles are applied to this bird, which is sent to the enemy; the war will be won.

Fish Bone: this signifies barrenness. Fish bones indicate inevitable drought, thirst and famine.

Fish: this signifies vitality and abundance. Where there are fish, there is bound to be water – a vital necessity in a drought-prone area such as northern Côte d'Ivoire – so the fish represents life to the Senufo.

Lion: the lion signifies royalty. The specialist in religion used lion eyes mixed with other elements to inspire fear of the chief and submission of the people.

Chameleon: the chameleon is the messenger of death and the leprosy carrier. The Senufo have given the chameleon an important dual role as an animator: sometimes harmful, sometimes beneficial. Its evil side is the messenger of death and the leprosy carrier. (An initial elder who meets a chameleon in the sacred woods will soon see the end of his days.) Its good side permits the chameleon to cure epilepsy.

Turtle: the turtle is considered one of the first animals created. It is believed that its slowness indicates its fear that the earth will crumble under his feet.

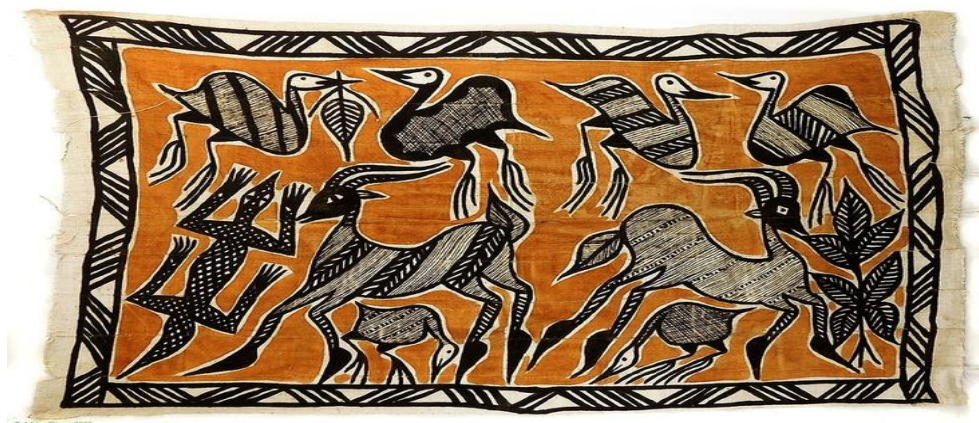


Figure 8: Korbogo Panel

Korbogo Panel: this plays out around optical balance. At a glance one will think it is symmetrical but it is not symmetrical but rather the designer has used the shape of the images and texture to create the illusion of symmetry. The most outstanding point is the tree symbol (bottom right corner) set against the lizard symbol (the bottom left corner).

CONCLUSION

West African textiles and clothing communicate important religious, historical and social information about the cultures to which they belong. They act as markers of status indicating wealth and conferring prestige; they identify members of specific cultural or social groups and play a significant part in ceremonies of initiation, marriage and death.

This study sought to decode the hidden meanings of the Bogolanfini (Mud cloth) made by the Bamanas of Mali, Fon Appliqué by the Fons of Benin and Korbogo by the Senufo of Cote d' Ivoire and enable users to understand and use them in their proper contexts. The study found that the Bogolanfini (Mud cloth), Fon Appliqué, Korbogo, among a few others are the most prominent of all indigenous fabric production tradition in the West African sub-region.

The findings indicate that the Bogolan designs are used together to represent a historical event or commemorate local heroes. The unambiguous, geometric, black and white designs can today be found on everything including furniture, book covers, wrapping paper and more importantly clothing (Imperato & Shamir, 1970). In a similar vein, the Fon appliqué fabric was recognized as cloth that was created at the royal court and was primarily devoted to the celebration of the Fon monarchs with outstanding deeds, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Fon applique attained a sufficiently high degree of art that they were meant to be given often to other nations with which the kingdom had connections. They served as marks of friendship. Finally, the study found that the Korbogo fabric is made by the Senufo people of the La Cote d'Ivoire and it is designed by using mud to paint the cloth in various abstract and geometric designs.

The study finally concluded that these three fabrics, like others prevalent in the West African sub-region are produced from different places under different conditions; however, their symbols seek to represent similar characteristic traits that revolve around varied messages geared towards

historic, religious and socio-cultural engagements that the people, both users and producers alike can identify with.

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