



bogolon

Artistry in Mud
by Robert Irwin & Magie Relph

Suddenly, the night is dark and quiet. The fires are out. The murmur of village chatter fades to nothing and a desert silence descends. On the flat roof of a mud brick house in the remote Bandiagara escarpment, twenty miles from the nearest town and a century away from home, we lay out under the stars. Their glittering canopy stretches – why exaggerate? – only forever.

We are fed, beered, dusty and exhausted. So we sleep. And we dream – of mud. "You see, tomorrow," says our Dogon guide AG, "we play with mud." Let us explain.



Bandiagara Escarpment, Pay Dogon, Mali

Imagine a landscape of sand and rock, of sparse trees and even sparser crops, of melting heat and blinding dust. This is Mali in West Africa, a land of Islamic devotion inhabited by animist spirits. Here, the meanings of life are defined by your family, your tribal ancestors and a myriad of ancient traditions. One of those traditions is *bogolan*, or mud cloth – perhaps Africa's most

distinctive and mysterious textile. And tomorrow, Magie Relph, the African fabric hunter, and our friend Trish Graham, a beaded jewellery designer who often joins us on our travels, hope to decipher the mystery of mud cloth.

We rise with the sun. Its warm glow washes across the *falaïse*, the cliff face that towers above us and the village is awake. Already, men with hoes and boys herding goats criss-cross the dusty fields of millet. Women and girls fetch fire wood and water. AG brings us bread, honey and the ubiquitous Nescafé, then we shuffle down the sandy path through the village to the place where they make mud cloth. It's not far, but it takes some time to get there. We pass by the indigo dyeing ladies we'd worked with before* and we must greet them. Greeting is very important to the Dogon and they are never, ever in a hurry.

Eventually, we pass the mud brick mosque and the shady square where the elders meet. An old man sits under a tree. He is stitching together long strips of unbleached, hand-woven cotton. We look around. On the walls, on clothes lines, everywhere, hang *bogolan* cloths, distinctly patterned in black, terracotta, ochre and white. This is what we have come for. The mud cloth artists are already at work. Let the lesson begin.

Cotton, leaves, bark and mud

For centuries, Mali's people – the Bamana and the Dogon – have used mud and other natural dyes to apply symbolically powerful designs to their cloth. In Bambara, Mali's main language, *bogo* means 'earth' and *lan* means 'strip'. For the Dogon, the equivalent



Mud cloths in the village of Endé

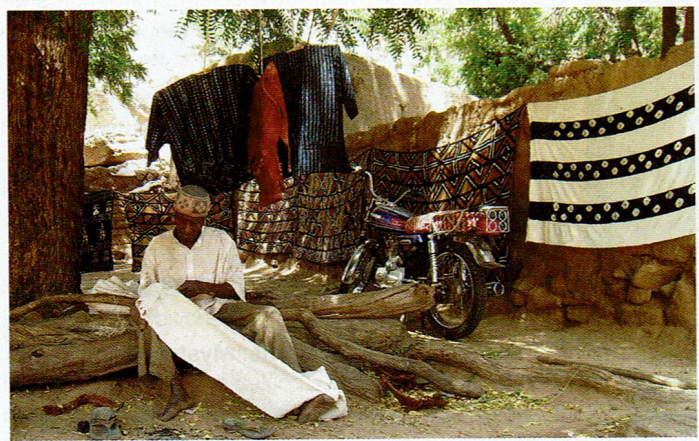


Traditional black and white mud cloth

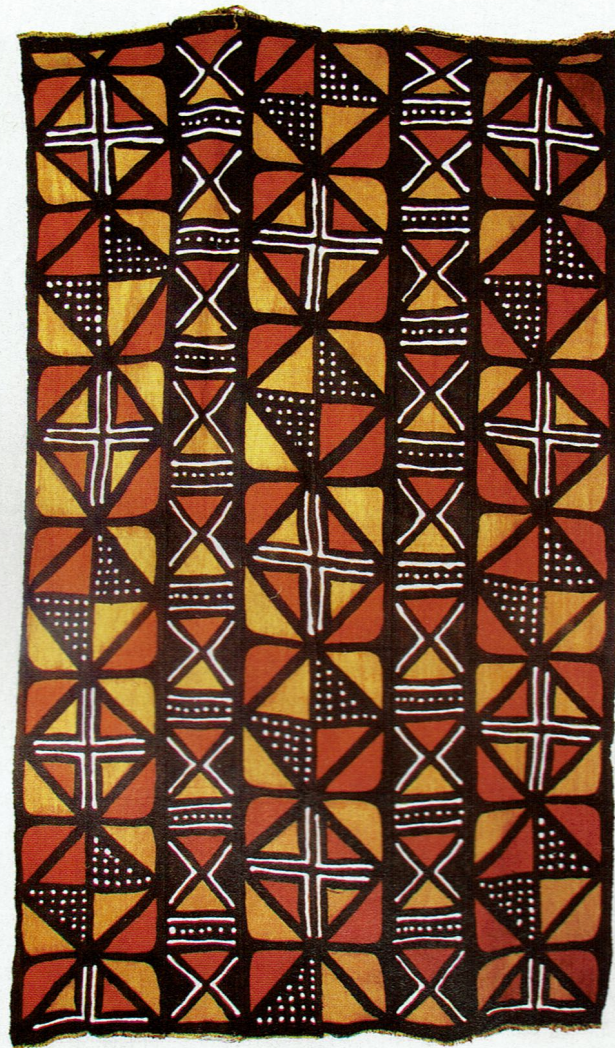
translations are 'leaf' and 'cloth'. The raw materials of mud cloth are basic: Cotton, leaves, bark and, of course, mud. 'Why these particular things?' we wonder.

Anthropologists are still in the dark about the origins of mud cloth. But AG is a Dogon and he knows the truth from the Dogon perspective. 'Long ago, a hunter fell into the mud while chasing a rabbit,' he explains. 'The mud would not wash out of his garment and mud cloth was born.'

As we watch the artists at work, ask questions and photograph, we learn more.



Sewing cotton strips together for mud cloth



Mixed colour mud cloth

Like everything in Mali, the mud cloth process – and even who does what – is bedded in tradition. Women hand-spin yarn of locally grown cotton. Men weave this undyed yarn into long strips, about 10cm wide and 20 metres long. Next, men sew the strips together, either into whole cloths about 100 x 175cm, or into garments – traditionally wrappers for women; shirts, smocks and sometimes trousers for men.

Then, the artistry and the alchemy begin and the traditions really take hold. Because of their special, mystical knowledge, mud cloth artists have an exclusive status in tribal society. Elsewhere in Mali, in the Bamana region, only women have the power to create mud cloth. But here in the Dogon, mud cloth is the sole domain of men: Magie and Trish are the only women present.



The things of mud cloth: Cotton strips, tree bark, pounded leaves and mud



Artist painting mud cloth

Preparing the cloth: Mud meets mordant

First, we watch one artist dip a whole cloth into a vat containing a murky brown solution. This is a mordant made from two types of tree leaf. 'What are the trees?' we wonder. But, of course, AG only knows their indigenous Dogon names and most of the published research is not precise. As the mordant impregnated cloth dries in the baking sun, it turns a mustard yellow colour.



Mud is painted onto the yellow mordant

Next, comes the special mud which the artist uses to create his designs. He gathers this mud from centres of ponds that have dried up after the rainy season. It is stored for up to a year in a large earthen pot and kept moist under a layer of water. Some artists add a special mix of leaves and herbs to the mud, but they will never tell the exact ingredients. 'Do these additives contribute to the dyeing process or merely have a mystical significance?' AG is not sure and the artist isn't telling.

Creating the traditional design: Black on white or white on black?

Most people think that the design on a mud cloth comes from applying a resist to the cloth, similar to the batik process, before dipping in the dyes. In fact, the opposite is true. To understand this, look at a traditional black and white *bogolan* and think, 'photographic negative.'

Using a wooden spatula or piece of bamboo (or sometimes today a small brush), the artist paints a layer of mud onto the surface of the mordant-treated cloth. Gradually – a complex design can take two days to create – almost the entire cloth becomes coated in mud. However, the areas that are not covered with mud remain mordant yellow.



Hunters' tunics dry in the sun



Magie and our guide AG

After drying in the sun, the artist sometimes applies a second layer of mordant, then another layer of mud, which will deepen the colour. Where ever he applies the mud, the iron oxide in the mud reacts with the tannins in the mordant. When the mud is washed away with pure water, it leaves behind a rich black colour. Any areas that were *not* painted with mud remain yellow, the colour of the mordant. These areas will eventually define the white on black design of the finished cloth.

Finally, the artist carefully applies a soap solution (or sometimes a bleach solution) to the remaining mordant yellow areas, turning them white. What is left is the final design of black on white. To the eye, this appears in the negative as white on black. The mud cloth and the magic are now complete.

The designs and patterns: Mystery and meaning

With the mud cloth process now perfectly understood (!), we turn our attention to the designs.

AG explains that traditional mud cloth artists draw upon a large repertoire of design elements, which all have names and carry with them deep, symbolic meanings. For example: a square with a dot in the centre represents a woman who is still too young to marry and a line with spikes represent the much-feared tail of a scorpion.

When the artist combines design elements, these combinations take on their own names and meanings. A talking drum with a scorpion begins to tell a story: the farmers use drums to scare away scorpions and other evil things. Very complex mud cloth designs using many combined symbols tell more complicated stories, with more depth, meaning and mystery.

When mud cloth is worn as clothing, either traditional wrappers or modern dresses, shirts and trousers, the symbolism runs deep. For the Bamana, mud cloth has great spiritual importance, especially when associated with male and female circumcision and the rights of passage to adulthood. In the Dogon, *chasseurs* (hunters) wear mud cloth as camouflage and to protect them from evil.

'The Dogon have a proverb about mud cloth,' says AG. 'No clothes, no language.'

Beyond the black and white traditional: Ochre, terracotta and more

While the most traditional mud cloths use the white on black design concept, artists use other natural dyes as well – ochre from the leaf-based mordant and terracotta from bark. Today, some innovative artists like Baboucar Doumbia of Group Bogolan Kasobané in Ségou are introducing tones of green and even indigo into their work. These modern designers are adapting traditional symbolism to create bold, contemporary textiles that could only come from Africa, indeed only from Mali.

Inspired by mud cloth

Mud cloth came to prominence in Europe in 1979, when Malian fashion designer Chris Seydou showed his first *bogolan* inspired wrap on the Paris catwalk. Before his untimely death in 1994, Seydou worked tirelessly to promote mud cloth as a textile and as an inspiration. Now, western textile artists are discovering the expressive potential of mud cloth.

In England, artist Liz Hewitt was so inspired by mud cloth and its raw material – woven cotton strips, that she created an entire 'forest' of it – her three-dimensional hanging titled *Forest of Cloth*. Her solo showcase *STRIP: joint* was one of the most exciting and innovative exhibitions at the Festival of Quilts 2009 in Birmingham.

From its origins in the baking, dusty Sahel of Mali, ancient *bogolan* has evolved to become a modern icon of all things African. Africans in Europe and America, even if they are not from Mali, recognise



Magie and Trish painting mud cloth

mud cloth as a symbol of their tribal roots. From printed textiles to furnishings, from the fashion houses of Paris to the studios of European and American textile artists, mud cloth continues to leave its distinctive mark.

Magie Relfh and Robert Irwin travel extensively in Africa, researching textile traditions and buying fair trade materials for The African Fabric Shop. Magie gives talks about African textiles and brings her fabrics to major quilt shows. As she runs the shop from home, visits are by appointment only, please. www.africanfabric.co.uk 01484 850188.

Their next UK event is **World Textile Day**, Saturday 19 March at the Minerva Arts Centre, Llanidloes, Wales SY18 6BY, 10am – 5pm.

More about Liz Hewitt: www.needlevision.co.uk

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