



african fabrics

To The Dogon In Quest of Indigo
by Robert Irwin and Magie Relph

Pay Dogon, Dogon country in Mali, is a long way from anywhere. Bandiagara, the nearest town, may only be 20 dusty miles away by quatre-quatre, or 4WD, but it's a century in time. Bamako, the capital, is on another planet. It has roads and shops. England is merely a dialling code, somewhere in another universe.

Today, when adventure travellers descend the remote and rocky cliffs of the Bandiagara Escarpment, they come to trek along the 30 mile donkey track that connects the villages strung along the base of the falaise, or cliff. In the unrelenting brightness and heat of the Dogon, it's a gruelling expedition. But for Magie Relph, the 'African fabric hunter' in search of textiles and inspiration, the Dogon had a different appeal: Indigo. She knew it was there somewhere and with her Dogon guide AG, she was determined to find it.

First, she had to get there. She didn't want to walk, so she, Bob and their friend Trish Graham, a beaded jewellery artist who lives in Ghana and often joins them on their travels, climbed with AG into a battered but reliable quatre-quatre and headed south to the Bandiagara Escarpment and the vast Gondo plain beyond. Their destination? The tiny Dogon village of Endé.

"The ladies there make Indigo cloth," remarked AG. "It's the last village before we must walk."

That was good enough for Magie. We were off.

When we reached the cliff edge, we stopped¹. We had to. The view redefined 'forever'. On our left, the cliff stretched 125 miles. Before us, sprawled beneath a haze of heat and dust, lay a

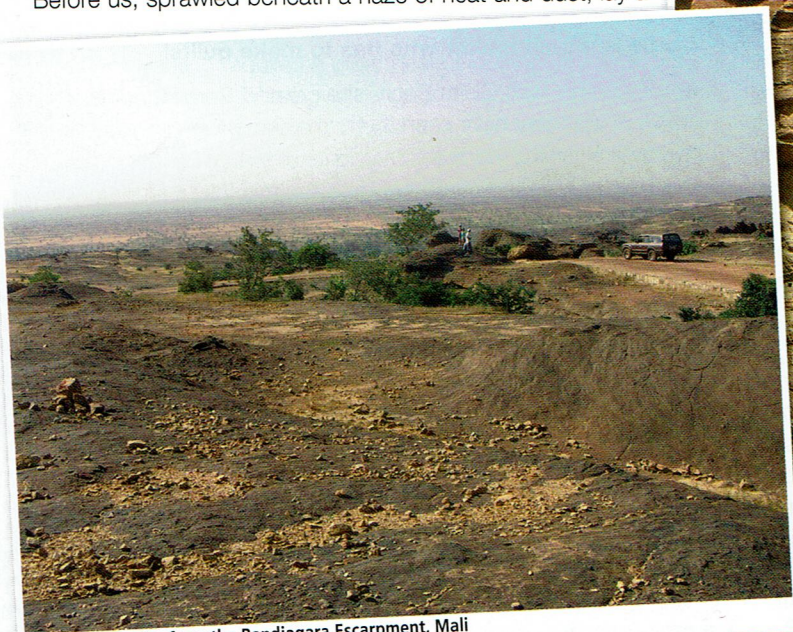
semi-desert landscape dotted with acacias, baobabs and mud brick Dogon villages.² The last time we stood here was 1985 and nothing had changed since. But wait. What used to be a donkey path had been transformed into a cobbled track of switchbacks, snaking 1,000 feet down to the flat and endless plain. We saw no other people and no vehicles. An occasional bird of prey hovered overhead. This place was utterly, breathtakingly silent.

For our quatre-quatre, Endé was the end of the line. AG showed us our campment and took us onto the flat roof of a hut that would be our bedroom under the stars. We rehydrated with a few Fantas and started exploring. Endé, along with the entire Bandiagara, is a UNESCO world heritage site. It's easy to see why. Its mud brick houses and thatched-roof granaries cluster in the shadow of the towering cliff face. And it's the cliff face that really captures the imagination.

High above the village, carved into the yellow-red rock of the escarpment, we saw caves and cliff dwellings. These were the homes of the Tellum, ancient pygmy hunters who were displaced by Dogon farmers around the 14th century. The Dogon lived in the cliff until the 1930s, when they started to build on the plain below. Today, the villagers still use the cliff dwellings to bury their dead and store grain.

Ritual is everything to the Dogon. Though most have converted to Islam, and a few to Christianity, their animist roots run deep. Spirits, ceremonies and sacrifices are still the norm and western archaeologists have never fully fathomed it all. Only the Dogon completely know and understand the traditions.

We followed AG along sandy alleyways between mud brick walls. Even in the heart of the village, it was quiet. Most people were tending their fields and all we could hear was the odd bleat of a tethered goat. Eventually, we heard the buzz of human voices. Rounding a corner, in the shade of a wall with the Bandiagara towering above, we found a half dozen women and their children – the Indigo ladies, at last! Draped over the surrounding walls, we could see their work in progress. Some whole white cloths, tied and stitched to create a resist, were ready for the dye vat. Others,



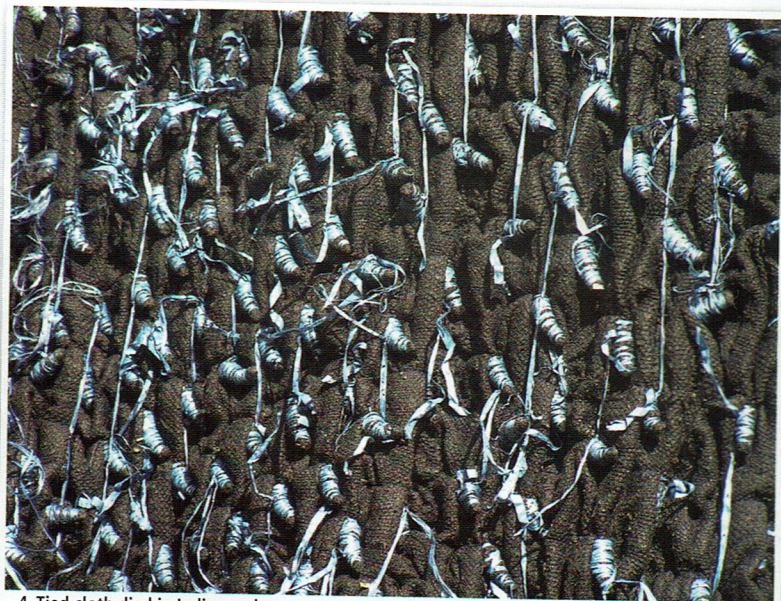
1. Dogon country from the Bandiagara Escarpment, Mali



2. Tellum cliff dwellings at Endé



3. Tied cloth died in Indigo



4. Tied cloth died in Indigo – close up

already coloured a deep, shimmering blue, were drying in the sun.^{3&4}

AG made the introductions, which took some time. In the Dogon, greeting is an important ritual of etiquette. Then, with AG interpreting because the ladies only spoke Dogon, Magie joined their circle and became a student of Indigo. She had a lot to learn and nothing moves fast in the Dogon.

Dyeing with Indigo has a long tradition in Mali and all over West
Magie creating stitch resist with Fatmata

Africa. In the national museum in Bamako, we saw Indigo dyed yarn dating to the 12th century. Probably because Indigo works in such a mysterious way, it is associated with animist spirits and gods, who are given offerings to ensure a healthy dye vat. Indigo dyers are generally well-respected because they make something that is valued by their society. Dyeing tends to be a family craft, passed on from mother to daughter or from father to son, depending on the region and tribe.

Historically, African dyers used natural Indigo. This comes from the leaf of one of the varieties of Indigo plant. Here in the Dogon, asking which variety drew a blank. Nobody knew the name in either French or English and knowing it in Dogon wasn't going to help Magie. Today, the Dogon mix their vats with a varying blend of natural and synthetic Indigo.

"Does that matter?" you wonder.

"Not at all," is the Dogon answer. But there are two schools of thought on that. Indigo is the only dye that is chemically exactly the same in both its natural and synthetic form. Some western dyers believe there is a slight colour difference. Others, like the Dogon, see



5.



6.

no difference and mix the two together. Here, in Endé, it's really a matter of what ever you can get.

Magie has studied and bought Indigo cloth from many West African countries, primarily Nigeria, Senegal and Guinea Bissau. But here in Mali, she was sitting down with the actual dyers and working with them to see how they create their wonderful patterns. Fatmata, in her embroidered Indigo wrap-around skirt, western blouse and green wax print head-tie, was the senior and most animated dyer. She took great, grinning delight in showing Magie how she stitched her resist into the undyed, white strip woven cloth.

Magie and Trish were both fascinated by her technique. They leaned in close to study her pattern and method. Gales of laughter erupted around us, as the others joined in the joke: Two factor 40 toubabs (whites) trying to fathom what the Dogon ladies have been doing since childhood. Then, when Magie took Fatmata's needle in her left (!) hand and tried to mimic her stitches, that really brought the house down.^{5&6} With Magie making copious notes and sketches, the stitching and tying,

along with simultaneous baby nursing and gossiping, continued. Then, came the moment of truth for any textile dyer – the inevitable dip in the dye vat.

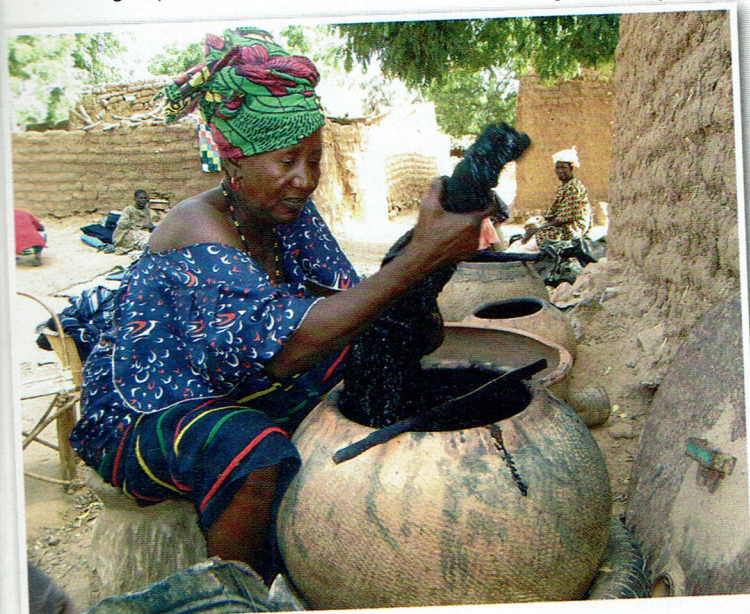
Fatmata plunged her prepared cloth into the etched clay vat.⁷ Using her bare hands and sometimes a stick, she pushed the cloth under the surface. After about 15 minutes, out came a mustard yellow cloth. Onto the wall it went and then the magic began. As the oxygen hit the Indigo, the cloth slowly turned lime green and then blue, the same colour as Fatmata's hands. Magie knows from watching other Indigo dyers in Africa and from her own workshops that it can often take multiple dips to achieve the deep, rich blue we associate with Indigo.

Now, it was Magie's turn.

"No Marigolds in the Dogon," she thought, as she pushed another virgin cloth deep into the vat.⁸ The uproar was calamitous. Normally, when adventure trekkers pass through Endé, they take a few photos of the picturesque cliff dwellings, the goats and the bare-bottomed children, and then stride down the track to the next village. We weren't sure, but from the reaction, Magie must have been the first toubab to stick her hand in the Indigo. While we were all so immersed, both literally and figuratively, in the dyeing process, we hadn't noticed the crowd gathering. We were surrounded by curious onlookers and by now the Indigo ladies had brought out their wares – stacks of resist dyed Indigo fabrics ready for the market.⁹

But why ride a donkey up the cliff to Bandiagara when Magie Relph is in town?^{10&11} Needless to say, Magie succumbed to temptation and those stacks of Indigo are now in Yorkshire waiting for the next African Fabric Shop outing.

That night in our Endé campement, we ate spaghetti with local sauce washed down with Flag beer and slept on the roof under the endless African sky. We talked with AG about the Dogon, with their picturesque cliff villages, animist rituals and indigenous Indigo. And, we thought ahead to the morning.



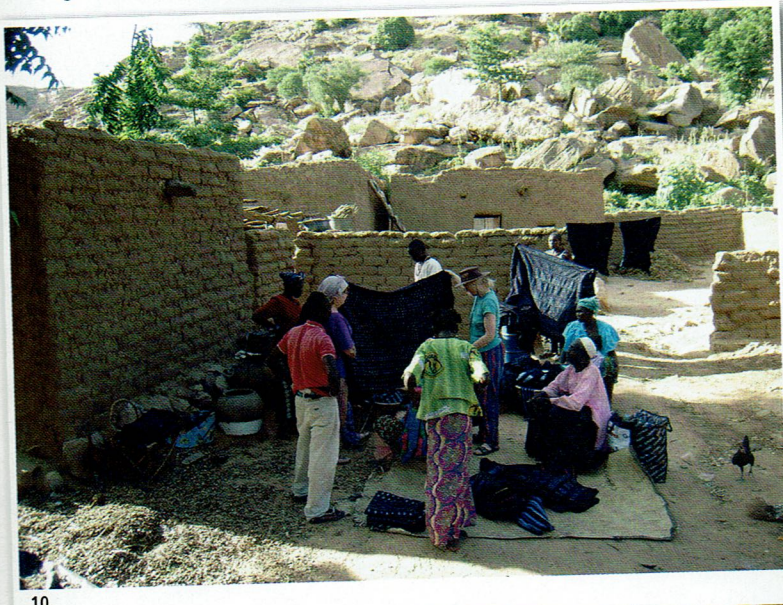
7. Fatmata Indigo dyeing



8. Magie Indigo dyeing



9. Magie with Indigo ladies at Endé



10.

Just up the alleyway from the Indigo ladies, past the mud brick mosque and the shady place where the elders meet, is another dusty square at the foot of the falaise. The men squatting in the sand there paint Mali's other distinctive textile – mud cloth, or bogolan. For the 'African fabric hunter', joining them and learning the mysteries of mud cloth was tomorrow's textile adventure.

Robert Irwin is a writer, web designer and The African Fabric Shop's Saturday Boy.
www.wordsandpixels.co.uk

Magie Relph and The African Fabric Shop

Magie gives workshops and talks about African textiles and brings her fabrics to textile groups and major quilt shows. As she runs the shop from home, visits are by appointment only, please. Tel: 01484 850 188 email: magie@africanfabric.co.uk
www.africanfabric.co.uk

Magie will have Dogon Indigo cloth and many other new African textiles at World Textile Day, 14 March 2009 at the Minerva Centre, Llanidloes, Wales. See Exhibitions' listing for more details.



11.



Doughty's
 5 Capuchin Yard, Hereford HR1 2LR

SHOW DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

SATURDAY 21ST FEBRUARY 2009
 SALE - U.R.C, MONTAGUE ROAD. 10.30 - 2.30

SATURDAY 21ST FEBRUARY 2009
 HUDDERSFIELD - GREENHEAD COLLEGE. 10.30 - 2.30

SATURDAY 14TH MARCH 2009
 EMSWORTH - ST JAMES COMMUNITY CENTRE. 10.30 - 2.30

SATURDAY 21ST MARCH 2009
 RADLEY COLLEGE. ABINGDON. 10.30 - 2.30

RING THE PATCHWORK SHOP TO CONFIRM
 VENUE AND DETAILS BEFORE TRAVELLING

CHECK OUT THE WEBSITE:
WWW.DOUGHTYSONLINE.CO.UK

N.B. All quilters are welcome at any of our road show venues

Have you heard of the Sunrise Quilts for John appeal?
 For further information ring 01432 267542
 or click onto www.doughtysonline.co.uk



Borderland Fabrics Ltd



WE ARE DELIGHTED TO WELCOME GROUP VISITS AND REFRESHMENT PACKAGES CAN BE ORGANISED TO CATER FOR YOUR REQUIREMENTS.

www.borderlandfabrics.com

 e-mail:
mail@borderlandfabrics.co.uk

 tel/fax :
 01835 862228

 Unit 2,
 Riverside Works,
 Edinburgh Rd,
 Jedburgh, TD8 6EA.

**QUILTING •
 PATCHWORK FABRICS
 WORKSHOPS • COFFEE SHOP**

Classes for all ages and abilities from beginners to experts in our custom designed teaching workshop with stations for 20 pupils.

Please contact shop or check web site for current list of classes. We will also be pleased to discuss custom designing a specific workshop to your requirements.

You will be most welcome to drop in for a look at all the fabrics, accessories, a coffee or just a chat.

OPENING HOURS:
TUESDAY - SATURDAY 9.30 AM - 5.00PM