Abomey (AH-bo-may) applique: Fon, Benin (formerly Dahomey)

Bright-colored designs depicting animals, objects, and humans are cut out of plain weave cotton fabric and are sewn to a monochromatic cotton fabric background. Details may be added by embroidery. Motifs are heraldic symbols of particular Dahomean kings and, as such, represent great achievements, historical events, or moral teachings. The appliqued prestige cloths are used as the regalia of royalty, as religious apparel, or as funerary cloths. In addition to appearing on royal banners, the emblems are sewn on chiefs' caps and state umbrellas.

Applique workers are men living in the city of Abomey who belong to a family guild that transmits patterns for design units from one generation to the next. A traveler reported seeing banners made by the Fon in 1734; other accounts, from 1851 and 1874, describe banners with motifs identical to those made today. Although much of the work is sold to tourists now, tradition dictates style and composition. *BB: 31, 39, 44

*BB = Bibliographical Reference Number

Adanudo (a-da-NOO-doh): Ewe, Ghana

See Ewe weaving.
Adinkra (ah-DING-krah): Asante, Ghana

Rectangular areas on a toga-size cloth measuring 3 × 4 yards are stamped with symbols representing proverbs, historical events, persons, or objects. Within each rectangle, stamps carved from calabash are applied repeatedly in rows. Thick black tar made from bark of the badie tree serves as the ink for the stamps. While designs carved on the stamps appear to be basically geometric, they also bear a visual resemblance to such objects as ladders, drums, and combs, and are named accordingly. As many as 150 different designs may exist.

The cloth, originally worn as a symbol of mourning, gains its name from that function. Di nkra means "to part" or "to say goodbye." Adinkra cloths in brick red, brown, or black are worn by mourners, but adinkra in a wide array of solid colors is also worn for other occasions.

Popular innovations to adinkra include (1) tearing the base cloth into strips approximately 14 × 18 inches wide and joining the strips together again with either multi-colored embroidery or narrow, striped woven strips, and (2) using tie-dyed fabric as the base cloth. BB: 10, 39, 63

Adinkra: Asante, Ghana.

Adire (ah-DEE-ray): Yoruba, Nigeria

Indigo-dyed fabric is patterned by a resist method. Starch, raffia, or thread provides resistance to penetration of the dye. Two lengths, each 2½ yards long by 1 yard wide, are designed with matching motifs and are sewn together to form the customary size for a woman's wrapper.

Adire alabere: Tie-dyed fabric using thread as the resist. Thread is stitched into a pattern either by hand or with a sewing machine. In these fabrics, universally known by tie-and-dyers as tritik, stitches may be drawn together tightly, so that the dye is prevented from penetrating the folds, or may be left flat, depending on the pattern desired.

Adire ọlekọ: Fabric designed by hand-painting or stencilling with starch. Cassava or corn flour starch is either (1) applied with a feather or brush in geometric designs or stylized animal or plant forms, arranged horizontally and vertically in rows of rectangles or squares, or (2) forced through a metal stencil. The former method is employed by women; the latter is men's work.

After the starch dries, the cloth is carefully dyed, dried, and scraped so that starch is removed. Hand-painted cloths are more finely detailed than are stencilled cloths, because hand-painting allows greater intricacy in execution. Hand-painting is also much slower than stencilling, but both types of adire ọlekọ sell for approximately the same price in the market.

Adire oniko: Tie-dyed fabric on which the pattern is tied with raffia. Many pattern variations are possible. When the artist forms little peaks or clumps by tying the
cloth alone or by tying seeds or small objects into it, the resulting fabric is called onikan. One common design variation, uniform rings arranged in a circular pattern, is called ilesa. Folding the cloth into pleats which are bound with evenly spaced strands of raffia creates olino. BB: 3, 18, 39, 61

Adire alabere: Yoruba, Nigeria. 64.5 × 80 in. 1975.
Hand-stitched, indigo resist piece collected by Paul and Kathleen Beckett in Kaduna, Nigeria.

Adire eliko: Yoruba, Nigeria. 72 × 90 in.
An example of stencil resist, named Coronation stencil.
From the Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection.
Hand-painted version of adire eleko called "Ibadun dun", which means "Ibadun is pleasant." Collection of Betty Wass.

Adire eleko: Yoruba, Nigeria.
Yoruba women painting cassava starch resist with a feather.
Akwete (ah-KWE-tee) cloth: Ibo, Nigeria

Handwoven on vertical looms by women in the town of Akwete in eastern Nigeria, a contrasting weft of low twist cotton, silk, or shiny rayon yarn is usually inlaid on a solid-colored background (see inlay). Traditionally, several different colors were used in the weft designs, although in contemporary cloths wefts may be monochromatic on matching backgrounds. As many as 100 different motifs exist, bearing names such as "comb", "tortoise", "bowtie", and "scissors", but no more than three or four motifs are commonly found on any one cloth.

The cloths, intended primarily as women's wrappers, are woven with uneven tension, causing one end to be three to five inches wider than the other. The variation in width allows the bottom edge of a wrapper to hang evenly when the wearer tucks in the wider end at the waist to secure the wrapper to her body. Akwete cloths are also identified by their ample width, roughly 45 × 65 inches, which is sufficient for a wrapper without seaming. These items are sold in pairs; one cloth serves as the wrapper, while the other section is either used as a stole, made into a matching top, or wrapped as a second layer over the bottom wrapper in a typical Ibo style called "up and down." \(BB: 18, 39, 57, 75\)
Aso-oke (ah-SHOH-kee): Yoruba, Nigeria

Narrow strips or bands measuring from two to five inches wide, but usually 3½ to 4 inches, are woven by men on horizontal looms. Lengths of the strips are sewn together so that they form one large cloth. Generically called aso-oke, most bands are given additional names referring to quality, color, or pattern in the weaving.

Traditional colors are deep red, tan, blue-black, and black. However, synthetic dyes and imported yarns provide unlimited colors in contemporary aso-oke. Fibers used are cotton or indigenous wild silk. Warp striping is common. Another decorative effect often seen on aso-oke is created with a series of small holes joined by long, loose yarns floating vertically or diagonally from one hole to another. Inlaid weft yarns may also be used.

In the Yoruba language, aso means cloth; oke refers to upland country. Literally, aso-oke is cloth made in the north, meaning the northern part of Yoruba land. BB: 5, 18, 20, 39

Barkcloth

Barkcloth is made from the inner bark of various trees and bushes. Once used throughout sub-Saharan Africa, it is found now only in a few countries in Central and East Africa. Soaking the bark of some trees in water makes the bark malleable, allowing it to flatten and stretch when beaten. Treating the bark with oil and drying it in the sun completes the process. Painted or stamped designs may be added for decoration. BB: 37, 74
Berber weaving: Berber, Morocco

The Berber in Central Morocco, particularly the Imaghizen or Zemmour people, weave functional textiles on a fixed heddle, vertical loom (see Vertical loom, fixed heddle: North Africa). Almost invariably geometric in design, these Berber textiles are characterized by their predominantly dark red backgrounds, which in some geographical areas are accented with dark blue, and in others, with black, yellow, and white. The designs are based on the square with horizontal bands, horizontal and vertical bands, or overall designs, in contrast to another style of North African patterning based on a diamond or chevron motif. Some researchers consider the term “Berber weaving” to be too general, and prefer to classify all North African weaving according to the two aforementioned styles. Traditionally, the motifs are non-figurative, although the abstract designs are representations of common objects, and are named accordingly.

Practical and ceremonial uses for Berber weaving include women’s or men’s blankets or shawls, carpets, pillows or cushions, saddlebags, wall coverings, and tents. Using fibers of wool, cotton, goat hair, rayon, dwarf palm, and esparto grass, as well as sequins, Berber women make their textiles in woven structures of plain weave and skip plain weave, as well as in knotted pile techniques including the Ghiordes, Spanish, and clove hitch knots. Some pieces, such as the woman’s shawl, can incorporate a combination of these techniques. It is interesting to note that a pile carpet is placed pile side down to both cushion the floor and preserve the carpet. BB: 15, 21, 23, 48
Bida (BEE-da) cloth: Nupe, Nigeria

Bida cloth is woven by the Nupe women living in the town of Bida, Nigeria. Using the typical West African vertical loom, Nupe women weave a rich cotton cloth with multi-colored inlaid silk or rayon designs appearing on one side of the fabric. Red predominates as background color, but blue or yellow, with wide sections in one harmonizing color, are also popular. Thus, the length of the fabric may be broken into two or three wide stripes of contrasting colors. Two matching cloths, each about 24 inches wide, are sewn together into a wrapper. Borders woven with rows of decorative holes constitute another characteristic feature.

Nupe men also weave narrow bands, but the number of male weavers has decreased drastically in the past century, while the number of women weaving has increased. It is women's weave that is recognized as Bida cloth.

The Nupe have interacted with Yoruba and Hausa through years of war and trade, a contact that textiles have reflected. Early 20th century Nupe cloth was indistinguishable from Yoruba weaving. Current motifs have a geometric quality that suggests an Islamic influence from the Hausa. BB: 39, 59
Bokolanfini (boh-koh-lan-FEE-nee):
Bamana, Mali

Narrow bands (approximately 4½ inches wide) of handspun, handwoven, indigenous cotton are joined together, dyed in a natural yellow dye, and painted with an aged mud solution. Small abstract and semi-abstract representations of common objects or historical events are uniformly repeated in rows over a large area of the cloth, appearing as off-white designs on a dark brown background. The background is darkened with a year-old mud solution applied with a bamboo stick. The cloth may be coated with mud three times to deepen the color. Finally, light areas are bleached with locally made soap containing caustic soda. Women are the artists who design bokolanfini but it is commonly made into men’s clothing. BB: 32, 66, 74, 77

Buguma (BOO-ga-ma) cloth:
Kalabari, Nigeria

Women modify commercially woven gingham by systematically snipping and removing threads from the checked or striped cloth to produce a sheer, lace-like pattern added to the original pattern of the gingham. Checked or striped gingham in any color is used. The drawn thread work reveals intricate solid-colored geometric shapes. The cloth is worn as a wrapper for special or ceremonial occasions. BB: 18

Country cloth:

Country cloth is a term used imprecisely to identify a variety of handwoven or handcrafted West African textiles. In a more specific context, country cloth is handloomed cotton fabric produced on the West African horizontal loom. It can be made from handspun or machine-made thread. Woven by men, this cotton cloth is usually a plain weave with a plain, striped, plaid, or checked surface. It is not a prestige cloth.

The term “country cloth” probably originated as a reference to handcrafted fabrics brought from outlying areas for sale in urban markets. This fabric is also called “Sudanese cloth,” a reference to the Sudan as a place of origin for country cloth. BB: 2, 16, 39, 44
Djerma (JER-ma) cloth: Djerma, Mali and Niger

A large strip cloth, often called Djerma cloth, is named for its producers, the Djerma people. Men are the weavers. Types of Djerma cloth include a variety of weft patterned squares of predominantly black and red, woven into a white background. The finished blanket-sized pieces (about 65" x 110") are used for protective garments and as walls for nomadic tents. BB: 4, 44

Djerma cloth: Djerma, Mali and Niger. 64 x 105 in. 1976. Strip cloth with red and black designs woven into a white cotton background collected by James and Barbara Murnane in Zinder, Niger.

Djerma cloth, detail.
Egyptian applique: Egypt

Fabricated by Egyptian men, these colorful abstract applique designs are made from commercial cotton fabric sewn onto a heavy canvas backing. The pieces vary in size, and are sewn together in a patchwork fashion to form a large tent used for ceremonial occasions, such as religious celebrations or weddings. Tables and chairs are set up inside the tent which has the applique facing inside. The exterior is plain canvas.

Egyptian appliques: 17 x 17 in. 1976.

Sewn in colors of black, blue, green, red and white. Collection of James and Barbara Murnane.
Ewe (E-vay) weaving: Ewe, Ghana

Ewe weavers are known for two types of handwoven cloth: (1) a variety of warp or weft-striped cotton fabrics are sold widely in the markets for everyday use, and (2) Adanudo cloth of high grade cotton, silk, or rayon woven with small representational or geometric designs inlaid on a plain background is made by request. Both types of cloth are woven by the Anlo Ewe in southern Ghana, the Adangbe Ewe near the Togo border, and the Central Ewe.

In addition, the Anlo have developed a twisted warp technique for yarn which produces a tweed appearance when woven into cloth. A checkerboard-style cloth (similar to that woven in Mali; see Mali blanket) associated with the Adangbe Ewe has evolved into alternating squares of weft bands and warp striping or representational inlay designs. The Central Ewe are distinguished by the use of handspun cotton yarn as well as weft-striped and inlay-designed Adanudo cloths.

Although much of the Ewe weaving has evenly spaced designs, Ewe also make a strip cloth which is sewn together with patterns and colors randomly placed for an interesting and unusual effect.

Even though the Ewe probably produce more cloth than do their fellow Ghanaians, the Asante, the latter are the renowned weavers, perhaps because Ewe customs do not include the dazzling display of textiles and other objects which surrounds ceremonies of the Asante court. In contrast to the bold colors of the Asante, one of the immediately distinguishing features of Ewe weaving is its subdued and subtle color choices. BB: 39, 44

Fulani (foo-LAH-nee) blanket: Fulani, Mali

The Fulani (also called Peul) weave patterned blankets in the Mopti region of Mali. Men weave the distinctive designs with elaborate geometric patterns of predominantly black plus red and yellow on a white background using a cotton warp and wool weft. Brocade-like designs are spaced evenly in the horizontal direction on the blankets, which are traditionally composed on eight, six inch wide panels. Men wear the articles as protection against mosquitoes and cold temperatures.

Also called kassa, khasa, Kano, or Peul blankets, they are not made in Kano, but they are widely available in the Kano market. *BB*: 6, 34
Gara (gah-rah): Any ethnic group, Sierra Leone

Any cloth dyed locally in Sierra Leone in natural indigo dye or in synthetic dyestuffs is called gara. The term originally referred to the leaves of a leguminous plant from northern Sierra Leone that yields indigo dye, but “gara” has developed a broader meaning, applying to all dyeing done as a small scale industry. The majority of gara produced is tie-dyed through such methods as machine or hand sewing, or binding with cord into gathers or pleats, but Sierra Leonean dyers are also known for resist-dyeing by dripping or stamping candle wax onto fabric, applying cassava starch in a pattern (see kalingie), or lifting areas of the fabric (bunching) and distributing dye on those areas to achieve a marbled effect. BB: 7, 77

George: Ibo, Nigeria

“George” is machine-made cloth produced in India for the West African market. This popular cotton fabric has a plaid appearance, with contrasting border colors, and often includes occasional abstract or representational designs woven with a shiny thread within the body or borders. The origin of the name “George” is uncertain. The Ibo women of Akwete, Nigeria, weave an imitation of this moderately expensive Indian fabric, using cotton warp and weft highlighted by lustrous rayon inlaid designs; this hand-woven version is also called “George.” BB: 57
Hausa (HOW-sah) embroidery: Hausa, Nigeria, and many other countries

Embroidery of the Hausa people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, has a distinctive style known throughout West Africa. The expansive monochromatic designs on the riga (a man's gown worn as an outergarment) and the small, detailed, multi-colored patterns on hats are usually nonrepresentational, a reflection of Islamic religious dictates. Two distinct types of patterns used are (1) interlacing forms of an abstract character and (2) angular and spiral shapes.

Embroidering is a man's occupation, and most of the embroidery is done on men's garments—caps, gowns, and trousers. Despite the advent of machine embroidery, hand embroiderers continue to work in both spun silk and cotton threads, executing their traditional designs, one being the interlaced oval called dagi (knot) seen throughout West Africa.

Innovations in the process and the patterns have appeared. Machine embroidery has become popular in many West African countries, and its practitioners tend to be less traditional and more experimental in style. Experimentation has also influenced cap embroiderers, who occasionally incorporate representational motifs into their designs. In addition, women have begun to embroider representational forms, such as plants and animals, on domestic items like bed covers and pillow cases. BB: 26, 27, 28, 29, 30


The Dagi (Hausa knot).
Horizontal loom: West Africa

The horizontal loom used by West African men is a double heddled loom operated by foot treadles; it produces the narrow bands characteristic of "men's weave." A product of this loom can be identified by its narrow strips, ranging from one and a half to fifteen inches in width, sewn together to make a cloth suitable in size for a variety of purposes. Men's weave is also called strip cloth or narrow band cloth, and it can be plain, striped, checked, or patterned.

The component parts of the horizontal loom are the cloth beam, the beater or reed, heddles in pairs, and heddle pulleys that are attached to the feet of the weaver. These parts may vary slightly in construction, but the operational concept remains standard throughout West Africa. Held in place by sticks driven into the ground, the cloth beam secures the warp threads and stores the cloth as it is being woven. The beater, or reed, consists of a frame in which the bottom section is wider than the top and sides, a shape which facilitates the motion of beating; the teeth of the reed are made from bamboo or palm fiber. The beater not only packs the weft in tightly, but also keeps the warp threads evenly spaced. Heddles are constructed in heavy strings attached to a stick. Heddle pulleys are often plain, but in the Ivory Coast one still sees carved-figure heddle pulleys, and the Asante in Ghana have used fetish figures for this purpose.

Portability, a characteristic of the horizontal loom, is an advantage for nomadic groups. A weaver can roll up his work at any time and then remount it on a frame when he is ready to resume weaving. This framework can be as simple as an overhanging tree, with forked sticks driven into the ground to hold the cloth beam. In other cases, a shelter is built with rafters for attaching the loom parts. A third example is a more formal box-like frame made to
specifications by a carpenter. The weaver does not cut the warp to a specified length, but rather weaves a continuous long strip which is later cut into sections and sewn together. He winds this long warp between at least three sticks—one at either end and an additional one to form the figure-eight cross which defines the shed openings. The warp is attached to the cross beam and stretched out a distance from the loom; tension is created by wrapping excess warp around a dragstone, which is pulled toward the weaver as the cloth beam is turned.

Both men and women within an ethnic group may be weavers, but only the men use the horizontal loom which produces the narrow band cloth. These continuous bands are often wound into a wheel shape which is then cut in lengths appropriate in size to their purpose. A width of cloth made by sewing narrow strips together has greater bulk or body than is found in most cloths woven to size. In some areas one can buy either the strip wheel or a piece of cloth with the strips cut and sewn together; this cloth is often used for men’s and women’s garments or for tent walls by nomadic groups.

If the cloth is to be plain, striped, or checked, there is no need for planning. But if a pattern is introduced and is to be regular, the weaver must calculate and measure so that when the cloth is cut and sewn together, the pattern is in the proper position for matching patterns. Examples of this careful planning are seen in the Fulani blankets and in those woven in Mali. See also Aso-oke, Fulani blankets, Mali blankets, and Djerma cloth. **BB: 18, 39, 44, 66**

**Indigo dye**

Indigo is a natural dye used throughout West Africa to color textiles blue, navy blue, or deep blue-black. Indigo is said to have been imported from India around 1600 as a consequence of the spread of Islam. However, more than one West African plant yields the indigo dyestuff. Traditionally a vegetable dye, it has been replaced in some areas by a synthetic indigo.

The dye is used in a variety of ways: to dye handspun cotton fibers, yarns, handwoven cloth, or commercial cloth, in their entirety; or in resist methods, including tie and dye, sew-dye, fold-dye, and adiré (see adiré).

Indigo blue fabrics are especially popular with the Yoruba. Dyeing is considered women’s work in Yoruba land, where the dyebath is prepared in pots above the ground. Hausa men, to the north of the Yoruba, dye fabrics in deep pits dug into the ground. Both Hausa and Yoruba load fabrics with additional color by beating the powdered indigo into the cloth with heavy mallets, a process which imparts a blue-black sheen. In Northern Nigeria and Niger, this beaten indigo cloth is called “Dan Kura,” named for the village Kura outside Kano, where men produce this cloth. Shiny indigo cloth is expensive and prestigious; in traditional Hausa society, a man wearing a shiny indigo turban belongs to the upper class of slaves to the Emir, a traditional Moslem leader. “Dan Kura” cloth also has cosmetic value, in that the blue-black color rubs off onto the skin. **BB: 3, 35, 37, 55, 70**
Inlay

Inlay is a method of achieving patterned weaving. As it is practiced in West Africa, inlay is usually woven into a warp-faced weave. The pattern rests on top of, or floats on, the plain weave structure; in most cases, it appears on only one side of a cloth. To make the design, weavers attach pattern heddles to the warp structure, in addition to the plain or tabby weave heddles. If the design is picked or patterned by hand, technically, it is not inlaid weaving. (For West African examples of inlay, see Akwete, Bida, and Okene cloths, and Ewe Adanudo). BB: 18, 19
Kasai (ka-SIGH) velvet: Kuba, Zaire

A pile surface (raised brushy surface) of raffia palm fibers is added to a woven raffia backing. On a vertical loom, men weave fine smooth strands scraped from palm fronds. The fiber is used in natural browns, or it is bleached white or dyed to various colors, including blue, purple, green, and yellow. Width of a cloth is limited by the size of leaf fibers, which range from 12 to 20 inches.

The material is not a true velvet, but a velvet-like texture is created as women embroider or insert additional raffia into the woven structure. The added raffia forms standing threads which may be cut or left in loops. This embroidery is done in traditional angular shapes, interlaced in designs as an all-over pattern. The designs have conventional names, such as “Back of Lizard” or “The Feathers of Baba”—Baba being a character in folktales of the Kasai area.

Raffia velvets were once worn in wrap-around fashion by men and women, and were esteemed as prestige cloths for weddings and burials. BB; 37, 45, 73, 74, 78

Kente (KENT-ay): Asante, Ghana

Kente woven by the Asante people is the product of narrow band weaving done by men on a horizontal loom with four heddles. Known for its vibrant colors and complex patterning, the "silk" (usually rayon) brocade cloth is made of 20 to 24 strips (each about four inches wide) sewn together to make a man's garment. A woman's kente wrapper and stole are smaller.

Patterns are nonrepresentational, but each pattern of background warp has its own distinctive name, as does each weft pattern; and cloths as a whole are also named. The sources of these names include proverbs, current events, and common objects, examples being "Gold Dust," "New Ghana," and "Money Attracts Many Relatives." One cloth, comprised completely of weft patterning, is aptly called "I Am Exhausted."

Originally, kente was a garment worn only by chiefs, royalty, and court officials, but now the rich, elaborately patterned cloth is worn by anyone who can afford it. The quantity of "silk," the intricacy of the weaving, and the time involved contribute to its value. A good craftsman can weave only about nine feet of a narrow band in a day. A sign of wealth and prestige, kente has evolved for Ghanaians into a symbol of pride in their traditions. Men wear kente as a toga-like garment with one shoulder exposed. *BB:* 24, 39, 44.
Keta (KAY-ta) cloth: Ewe, Ghana

Cloth produced by the Anlo Ewe of Ghana (See Ewe weaving) is often called Keta cloth, after the coastal town of Keta, the main marketplace for Ewe woven cloth from as early as the 17th century. Because of flooding in the 1960's, the cloth market for that region moved inland to Agbozume; presently, the Ewe sell their cloth mainly through the Agbozume market. *BB: 44*

Khasa (KAH-sah) blanket:
(see Fulani blankets)

Kolingie (koh-LIN-jee): Any ethnic group, Sierra Leone

Wavy or circular lines created by the starch resist method used in Sierra Leone (see gara), add subtle pattern to fabric. Kolingie means "comb" in Mandinka. Paste made from cassava or rice starch is spread on background fabric, favorites for which are satin and damask. A comb is drawn through the paste to produce a textural effect. The fabric is then dyed and dried before the starch is removed. *BB: 77*
Korhogo (kor-HOH-goh) cloth: Senufo, Ivory Coast

Black or dark brown stylized animal and human figures are painted on off-white, coarsely handwoven cotton cloth. Men execute the fine line drawings. Similar to bokolanfini, the dark dye used is made of an aged mud solution. Motifs of geometric shapes and stylized human and animal figures, especially lizards, were painted in the direction of the warp threads on older cloths. Motifs on contemporary cloths have similar subject matter but appear in a randomized arrangement, placed crosswise rather than lengthwise. The zoomorphic figures had religious significance for secret societies, whose members wore the cloth for hunting or for dance. They seem to serve no traditional function today; Korhogo is produced for purchase by foreigners. *BB*: 22, 39, 43, 77
Mali (MAH-lee) blankets: Peul, Mali

The term "Mali blanket" is associated with different types of blankets: multi-colored checkerboard blankets; colorful, wide, horizontally striped blankets; and white blankets woven with black and red weft patterns. A blanket made of a bright strip cloth, with solid-colored squares carefully planned to join together in a striking, massive geometric design of staggered blocks has become somewhat of a national design in Mali. Used for nomadic tent walls or as garments, these blankets are primarily woven in Mali, but are also made in parts of Niger (see Djerma cloth). BB: 43

Men's weave: West Africa

Men's weave is the product woven on the horizontal loom (see horizontal loom, aso-oke, Fulani blankets, Mali blankets, Djerma cloth).

Mud Cloth:

See Bokolanfini and Korhogo

Okene (oh-KEH-nee): Igbirra, Nigeria

Okene cloth, a prestigious fabric woven by the Igbirra women of Southern Nigeria, is most often identified as a "silk" (actually rayon) cloth, with elaborate overall inlaid patterning on a smaller scale than in Akwete cloth (see Akwete cloth). But Okene weavers produce and market a wide range of cloth, from simple cotton fabric to the currently popular prestige cloth woven in stripes of cotton and metallic threads. Renowned for fine quality, the Okene women are experimental weavers, incorporating popular techniques and patterns from Yoruba men weavers and Akwete women weavers.

The fabric is named after the city of Okene, which has the largest Igbirra population and is the main distribution point for the cloth. Made on the typical West African vertical loom, it is woven and sold in the traditional fashion of three matching panels, each approximately 24 inches wide by 84 inches long; two pieces are sewn together for the woman's wrapper and one is used for the head-tie (see vertical loom). BB: 39, 57, 58
Raffia cloth: Kuba, Zaire

Men weave fine raffia fibers in plain weave on a vertical loom. The fibers are obtained by scraping raffia palm or pineapple leaves until they are a mass of fine, soft threads, which may be further softened by pounding. Combinations of natural shades of brown with fibers colored with locally produced dyes make striped, checked, and plaid patterns. Sources of dye are camwood (red), local vegetables (yellow), and clay (charcoal gray and white). Decorative fringes are exposed on pieces of cloth, which are joined together by overlapping, forming a larger cloth worn as a mantle. *BB*: 45, 73
Sanyan (SAH-nyan): Yoruba, Nigeria

A coarse silk cloth of natural tan or gray tones, sanyan is a luxury in Nigeria. Rare fiber obtained from the cocoon of a wild indigenous silkworm is woven into narrow bands which may be accented by a white cotton stripe appearing through the length of each band. The bands are sewn together to make widths ranging from a woman's stole to a man's robe. The term "sanyan" is also used, regardless of fiber content, to identify a tan color resembling that of wild silk. BB: 18, 20, 39

Strip weaving: West Africa

Strip weaving refers to cloth woven in narrow bands (see Adanudo, aso-oke, Djerma cloth, Fulani blanket, horizontal loom, kente, Mali blanket).

Shamma (SHAH-ma): Amhara, Ethiopia

Shamma, or chamma, is a word meaning "attire" or "dress" in the Amharic language of Ethiopia. The fabric used in the traditional Ethiopian garment is called shamma by English speakers. Made by men, the material is a white, gauze-like cotton cloth with a colorful brocade-like border woven in at either end.

Both men and women at all social levels wear the shamma, which is made in different textures for different purposes. For example, a heavier double shamma provides warmth and longer wear. Men drape the cloth, measuring approximately 5 by 10 feet, over trousers. Women may drape a stole of shamma cloth over a fitted dress of the same handwoven cloth with matching border designs. BB: 13, 47
Tie and dye

Raffia, string, or thread is systematically wrapped, tied, or sewn on to areas of a fabric to create a pattern. As the fabric is dipped into a dyebath, the material for tying resists penetration of the dye leaving tied areas in their original color. Tie dyeing is done by many ethnic groups including the Yoruba (see adire). Countless variations in patterns are possible.

*BB: 18, 39, 61*

Tie and dye: Hausa, Nigeria. 54 x 70 in.
Called "pebble dye", this indigo-blue and white fabric is from the collection of Robert MacGregor.
Tie and dye: Sierra Leone. 55.5 x 70 in.
Designed by Mary Tholey, dark green and white tie and dye on damask fabric. From the collection of B. Robert and Jeanne Tabachnick.

Fold and dye: Hausa, Nigeria. 50 x 65 in. 1976.
Indigo-blue and white fabric. Collection of James and Barbara Murnane.
Vertical loom, string heddle: West Africa

The vertical loom used by West African women is an upright, string heddle loom; it consists of a framework to which warp beams are attached. Cross sticks are fastened by means of rope at the edges of the warp beams, and the warp is wound continuously around these sticks to form two crosses, one for plain weave and one for inlaid patterns. The warp beams are rounded, so that the cloth may be rotated; the weaver is thus able to weave cloth twice the size of the visible working area.

A string heddle is attached to one set of warps for the first shed opening of plain weave, and a cross stick remains to define the second shed opening. The weaver creates patterns, planned in advance in her mind, by attaching string heddles to create shed openings, allowing the pattern weft to float on top of plain weave wefts. She uses a wooden beater or sword to prop the sheds open, allowing the weft to pass; she then turns the beater and thrusts it downward to pack the weft in tightly.

Cloth woven on this vertical loom is referred to as women’s weave. It is wider than its counterpart, men’s weave. The structure of the loom dictates the size of women’s weave, which averages 20 inches wide by 80 inches long. An exception is the cloth woven by the Ibo women of eastern Nigeria, who weave a cloth approximately 48 inches wide, using the same vertical loom. A weaver will generally create three matching panels, since two pieces are traditionally sewn together for the woman’s wrapper or skirt, while the third is used for a head-tie. A single tufted piece might be woven for a baby wrapper, a strip of fabric that ties around the mother’s torso and holds the baby comfortably and decoratively against the mother’s back.

Women’s weave can be plain, warp-stripped, weft-stripped, checked, plaid, or patterned. Elaborate patterning can be achieved, since any number of pattern heddles can be attached. The women from Akwete, Okene, and Bida in Nigeria are well known for their pattern weaves. (See Akwete cloth, Bida cloth, Okene cloth, inlay.) BB: 18, 39, 66
Vertical loom, fixed heddle: North Africa

The loom used by the Berber women is a vertical, fixed heddle loom—that is, one set of heddles is permanently raised. Upright beams fixed near a wall form the basic structure. Warping is done on three spikes driven into the ground; two spikes specify the length, and the third forms the cross. The weaver walks her warp around these spikes, while two helpers twine cord around each warp to allow for proper spacing. When the warping is completed, bamboo poles, inserted to hold the warp, enable the weaver to lift the warp off the spikes and place it on the ground for inspection. These bamboo beams are secured to the upright loom, and every other warp is fastened to a sturdy heddle rod which is held in place by hooks on the wall; this is the fixed heddle. A shed pole holds the second shed, and the weaver, who sits between the wall and the loom, raises and lowers the pole to create the shed openings. BB: 21

Vertical loom: Central Africa

The vertical loom of the Congo River region of Central Africa is similar to that of West African women, but is used exclusively by men to weave raffia cloth. Both looms use a string heddle and cross stick to define the shed openings. But the method of warping used with the Central African loom is quite different, due to the rough nature of the raffia; the warp is tied to a warp beam in groups rather than being wound continuously around the warp beams. Weavers in Central Africa place their loom at approximately a 45 degree angle to the ground and sit underneath it to weave; the West African loom, on the other hand, is upright. Another difference between the two is the length of the woven piece: because the warp can be rotated, the West African loom produces a piece that is twice the visible working area; since the Central African weaver cannot rotate his warp, his cloth can be only as large as his working area. (See Kasai velvet and raffia cloth.) BB: 65

Women's weave: West Africa

Cloth woven on a vertical loom is known as women's weave. It is wider than men's weave. (See vertical loom, Akwete cloth, Bida cloth, Okene cloth.)