Textiles in Trade In West Africa

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An example of such an ethnography for Senegal is Lasnet, Dr., Chevalier, A., Cligny, A., Rambaud, P., 1900. Une Mission au Senegal, Paris, Augustin Challamet, Editeur.

Works Cited


Textiles in Trade in West Africa
Brigitte Menzel

Textiles in Africa since some time have become a topic of research, much of which is focused on aspects of art. The at least equally important economic aspects (production, consumption, and trade) are still rather neglected.

When doing field research in West Africa it is impossible to overlook the fact that most of the textiles in use could not have been produced locally. This applies not only to the colorful printed cottons but as well to handmade textiles.

In Asante (Ghana) I found woolen fabrics, which obviously were hand-woven but must have come from somewhere else as sheep and goats in the forest zone have short hair, unsuitable for spinning. I saw such woolen textiles as floor covering in stools, as material on state umbrellas, nasa kinye, of which the most important one is katamanso, protecting the Golden Stool and being a memorial for the lost battle of Katamanso 1826, as well as a lining of palanquins or covering of regalia like drums. For certain privileged persons can also be found as bed-covers such heavy blanket-like textiles. They are not only attributed protective but also healing properties. And are considered to be especially precious for this quality. To get even a tiny sample (Menzel 1973, 2:760) of an already completely tattered blanket covering the bed of an old lady of rank needed much convincing. The blanket I found bundled up in a stall in Kumasi market in 1973 was completely out of context there, as such textiles were never offered for sale in the open. No information was to be had from the seller; Bernhard Gardi suggested that it might have been brought to Ghana by Wago from Niger, in whose area such blankets were woven (fig. 1).

My aged Asante informants were unanimous of the opinion that this woolen textile, which they all called nasa, is the highest ranking of all traditional textiles in Ghana (which should read Asante, as they were giving information about Asante only). According to them, nasa could only be acquired in aspirir, the grasslands of the north (e.g. the Sahel). In Salaga they could be bartered by the representatives of the Asantehene for 40 headloads of each 2000 kola nuts, or 5 healthy male slaves, or several ounces of gold dust (equivalent to about £8 Sterling). This was the rate of exchange in the "Golden days" (before the turn of the century). Prices for more recent acquisitions they did not know. As almost all nasa I was permitted to see or saw during ceremonies, were more or less threadbare, although they were treated with great care, I assume that supply has ceased even before tourists and the antique market began to take their share in this traditional trade. It would be interesting to know which textile will replace nasa in its context of Asante culture if no replacements could be made for those worn away.

The name nasa, given in Asante to this special kind of woolen fabric, could not be explained by my informants as to its meaning. Christaller in his dictionary, compiled well before the date of the first edition (1881) gives "a certain blanket from the interior of Africa;" (1933:428). Linguistic research is much needed, as the word
**nsaa does not relate to the name given to this kind of textile by its producers, the casted weavers of the FulBé in Mali. They use the name *kerka*. Such woolen textiles are woven on order only, with yarns supplied by the woman ordering the fabric to be made for her (Gardi 1985) and they were expensive: Gardi reports equivalents of 50 sheep or 5 calves (1985:205). If traders' expenses and profits are added, the high price for *nsaa* in far away Salaga becomes understandable (even if one considers that prices were different once). Gardi/Seydou (1989:90) give information about a native Hausa, living in Mali since 1906, who used to walk two or three times annually to Kumasi, the capital of Asante, to sell, among other articles, two or three *kerka* which he had acquired in Korientze. Although the distance between Mali and Ghana is as much as 1100 km, the profit earned does seem to have made the efforts of this trader worthwhile (see Gardi 1985:62).

![Fig.1 Furniture textile *kerka*. Wool: warp=goat's hair, weft=sheep's wool, Z-spun. Colors: white, ochre-yellow, greenish, 3 different reds, 3 different shades of indigo blue, dark brown, grey. 2 parts, each composed of 5 strips, average width 32.5 cm, sewn together selvedge to selvedge. Width 169 cm, length 780 cm. Both parts sewn together along the upper side. (Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin, no. III C 4250; mislabeled as North Africa. Published: Menzel 1973, s-45 a,b.)

The second type of woolen textile considered to be very important by the Asante is *kaasa*. This blanket is interestingly known only by the name its producers (the casted weavers of the FulBé in the Massina area of Mali as in the case of *nsaa*) use for it. *Kaasa* is considered as a prestige fabric only; neither protective nor healing qualities are attributed to it. In the "olden days" it was considered less costly than *nsaa*; it could be bartered for 3-4 headloads of kola nuts or sometimes a slave. Another source to get *kaasa* was the tribute the Dagonba had to pay annually to the Asante for some time. Christaller (1881/1933:229) states: "A kind of carpet, (formerly) used only by the king of Asante, said to come from Marewa." (Marewa is the "Tshi name for Hausa and other countries on and beyond the Niger", Christaller 1881/1933:310).

It is interesting to note that the northern origin of *kaasa* as well as *nsaa* was known to the Asante. But the strict trade regulations imposed by the Asantehene once did permit only authorized persons to conduct trade with the northern towns, and no northern traders were permitted to come to Kumasi, so the actual origin of both textiles must have been unknown. Nowadays *kaasa* is used on ceremonial occasions like puberty ceremonies for girls, which sit in state on a stool placed on a *kaasa*, as pall anom lining and as bed-cover for persons of rank. It is often seen as decoration on a death bed, but in such cases it might have been supplied by relatives or friends for the occasion to be taken back later. The proverb "woda *kaasa* go? = do you sleep on *kaasa* = is your rank really as high as you pretend it to be? does confirm the blanket's evaluation as a mark of rank. Since recent times a considerable devaluation has occurred. The modern means of transport have facilitated the distribution of bulky commodities and the amount of *kaasa* being sold has increased. In Mali the *kaasa* is produced on a great scale and its marketing value is an important factor of Mali's economy. Such blankets are now sold in airports, in front of hotels and even in Kumasi *kaasa* were offered for sale by itinerant traders, almost all from the north (the term used for *kaasa* in such cases is either Hausa blanket or Timbuctoo blanket or camel hair blanket which it surely is not).

![Fig.2 Blanket *kaasa* laandaaka. Warp and weft: sheep's wool, Z-spun. Colors: white, ochre-yellow, red, black. Six strips, width 20 cm, 1 narrow middle strip, sewn together selvedge to selvedge. Width 140 cm, length 250 cm. (Cercle de Hopti, Mali. Private property.)

To judge from the very high value attributed still to *nsaa* and the value attributed traditionally to *kaasa* both seem to have been connected to the culture of the Asante since quite some time. It might be assumed that *nsaa* preceded *kaasa*. Both in turn were preceded by woolen textiles made by Berber.
in the Maghreb, which were supplied by long-distance trade to the
Asante after the Mandé network of trade had included the southern
gold fields. Later they were supplied by the Europeans through
their system of trade on the coasts of West Africa.

To achieve the best results in their trade with the Africans, the
Portuguese, being the first to intrude into the Yatam traditional African and Arab network, had to adjust to consumer preferences. The most important item of trade goods proved to be the woolen furniture fabrics produced by Berber women on vertical single-heddle looms. Such fabrics were not only in demand for their being of wool, even more so they were liked for their fast colors, especially red, which could not be achieved by the dyeing techniques known south of the Sahara.

The Portuguese called these textiles alaiibees and other versions of the word hambel (Ricard 1994) and bought them in increasing numbers in the coastal towns of the Maghreb (even opening a factory in Oran for some years as a collecting point and even tried to enhance the production by supplying wooden looms and dyestuffs). They secured an enormous profit in gold dust, the local means of barter, on the Costa da Mina (now Elmina, Ghana) (Vogt 1975).

Duarte Pacheco Pereira, who visited the West Coast of Africa and wrote his Espenralda in 1506-08, describes the lambens: *J.*e lambens, which could not be achieved by the dyeing techniques known south of the Sahara.

Pereira*s description of these woolen fabrics and his listing of towns of the Maghreb which were outlets for them allows to make a connection between the Berber textiles of his time and the recent Berber weavings which are still made in some areas and are still named in versions of the word hambel. A remarkable stability of the Berber textiles is obvious.

This in turn permits to make a connection with the fragments of woolen textile found in burial caves in the Bandiagara cliffs, Mali. They are datable to the 11th/12th centuries by analogy with the Tellem finds. They are of a wider weave than the usual textiles woven south of the Sahara (with the exception of those made in some areas where women weave on vertical looms, but no wool is available in areas like the south of Nigeria, a transfer from south to north may safely be excluded). One of the fragments found in the Tellem caves is 45 cm wide, which means that the full width was more than 65 cm (Bedaux/Bolland 1950-51:757). If the attribution of these textiles to the Berber could be verified by more evidence, the presence of Berber textiles south of the Sahara as early as the 11th/12th centuries would permit the assumption that the network of trade, connecting the Maghreb and the Sahel, was in existence before the Arab conquest of North Africa.

After the 12th century the Tellem do not seem to have received Berber textiles anymore. Why this was so is an open question, as well as the question whether there is proof for the possibility that the weaving of woolen textiles by the casted weavers of the

FulBe in the Niger Bend area south of the Sahara is to be seen in connection with the weaving of the Berber. The area the FulBe now inhabit is the only part of West Africa where sheep with a fleece and goats with hair long enough to spin do exist. The FulBe women do spin and dye the yarn and commission male weavers to work for them. The dyes they use are yielding fast colors and the outstanding one among them is red in several tones. Detailed research into the dye-stuffs used as well into the techniques of preparing dyes for wool would possibly allow very interesting insights.

If the actual weaving shifted from women to men, the wider fabrics which can be woven on the vertical single-heddle loom might have become narrower to suit the technical possibilities of the treadle-loom.

Some of the designs on either side show similarities, like the losenge (fig.3). Further research in this point is also needed.

Fig.3 Fragment of furniture fabric. Warp and weft: sheep's wool, 2-ply; warp threads SS. Colors now altered; especially yellow seems to have been fugitive, if the warp stripe which differs slightly from the natural white of the wool has been dyed yellow. The turquoise might have been green, based on indigo and yellow, the yellow having faded away. The red has now a brownish tone. The only dye which is well preserved is the indigo blue. Warp-faced plain weave. Weft stripes, one with a serrated part, where the red weft was inserted into the threads of the selvage in bundled form. Besides the losenge, an X-shaped design, composed of angular parallel lines, is brocaded in. One of the selvages and the end of a spiral warp remained.

W 40.5 cm, L 52 cm, Institut voor Antropobiologie, no. A 22-16. Courtesy Institut voor Antropobiologie, University of Utrecht.

The number of fragments of different woolen textiles among the Tellem finds is considerably smaller than the amount of cotton fabrics: 15% as opposed to 84% (Bedaux/Bolland 1950-51:66, 72). These cotton fragments are examples of a highly developed textile industry - although whether the Tellem wove them or whether they got them by way of trade is one of the many unsolved problems in connection with textiles in West Africa.

A number of these cotton fabrics show a distinctive lance design, which is composed of little quadrangulars, created by a weft in dark indigo blue, going over and under groups of each four warp
threads and being built in height by three successive wefts. The resulting blocks are found in a variety of compositions, already appearing in different shapes in the Tellem finds dated to the 11th/12th centuries (fig 4). They can be followed through to our time in textiles woven in the western Sudan. This design is given several names, among which the term used by the Fulbe weavers is referring to the patience needed to weave such a design (Gardi 1985: 215). The blanket-like cotton textiles are now rarely woven on account of the work involved, but Pinton/Mack (1989:10) show a Bamana weaver at work, using a shed-board to facilitate the counting of the warp threads while creating the lance design. It is feasible that the weavers who created the textiles found in the Tellem caves, although their designs are finer (fig 4), wove them also with the aid of such a tool.

Such relatively heavy blanket-like cotton textiles used by the Tellem to wrap the bodies of their dead in, might as well have been used as dress material. The so called "country-cloth" in West Africa is often a thick material, composed of two strips, sewn selvedge to selvedge. W max. 37 cm, L max. 19.5 cm. Found in cave A, dated to 11th/12th centuries. Tellem, Bandiagara cliffs, Mali. Institutuut voor Antropobiologie, no. A 23-1. Courtesy Institutuut voor Antropobiologie, University of Utrecht. Published: Gilfoy (1987:23, fig.9)
affirmation for him that the textile he acquired was never worn. Many details allow to classify the tunic no. 13 d as a product of the western Sudan. Probably it came through the Mande network of trade to the then Slave Coast. It seems dangerously fanciful to connect this (unique) object with another single item found in a burial cave in the Bandiagara cliffs (now Mali) - spatial distance as well as several hundreds of years of distance in time seem to exclude any such possibility. But the necessity to produce textiles true to type for a successful trade might have been one reason for the obvious longevity of African textile standards. That such standards existed is also shown by the use of textiles as a currency. The seemingly superficial similarity of the white and blue Tellem textile (fig.4) and the comparable stripes in the patchwork-like gown (fig.5) on closer scrutiny reveals almost identical details:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragment (A 23-1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material: cotton, Z-spun, Z-spun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal material (wool?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colors: white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark indigo blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red ( in traces)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technique: woven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weft-faced plain weave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warp count: 5 (double)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weft count: 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorat.: weft stripes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lanced with block-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(over/under 4 warp threads, three wefts high)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Width: 18.8 cm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main difference between the two textiles is the material used to weave the thin red/pink weft stripes accompanying the lanced designs: the Tellem fabric shows minute traces of red animal material, which would have been wool (by comparison with later textiles of the same kind and origin where more material is still to be seen), while the Ulm tunic has well preserved floss-silk, which does show hardly any difference in its color's intensity outside and inside that textile, although conservational considerations can't have been strong always since the objects existence as a collection piece. This is very obvious in the completely faded away red of the embroidery (only the tiniest traces of red can be seen in very protected spots). The still so colorful silk must have been dyed with a mordant dye of high quality to have survived so unchanged. So far no chemical analysis could have been made of either material. Silk was one of the important materials imported into West Africa and might have come down at an early time into the western Sudan. Silk was also supplied by the Europeans and Duarte Pacheco Pereira in his Exmeralda (1534:98) reports vermilion red fabrics (pano vermello) as a means of exchange in the Mande area as early as the first years of the 16th century - preceded probably by the Arab-directed trade from the Maghreb.
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