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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 handwoven 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 stoolhouses, as material on state umbrellas, nsaa kyinie, 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 Wogo 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 nsaa, 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, nsaa could only be acquired in esirim, 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 "olden days" (before the turn of the century). Prices for more recent acquisitions they did not know. As almost all nsaa 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 nsaa in its context of Asante culture if no replacements could be made for those worn away.

The name nsaa, 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;" (1933:418). 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 FulBe 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 Korientzé. 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 worth while (see Gardi 1985:62).

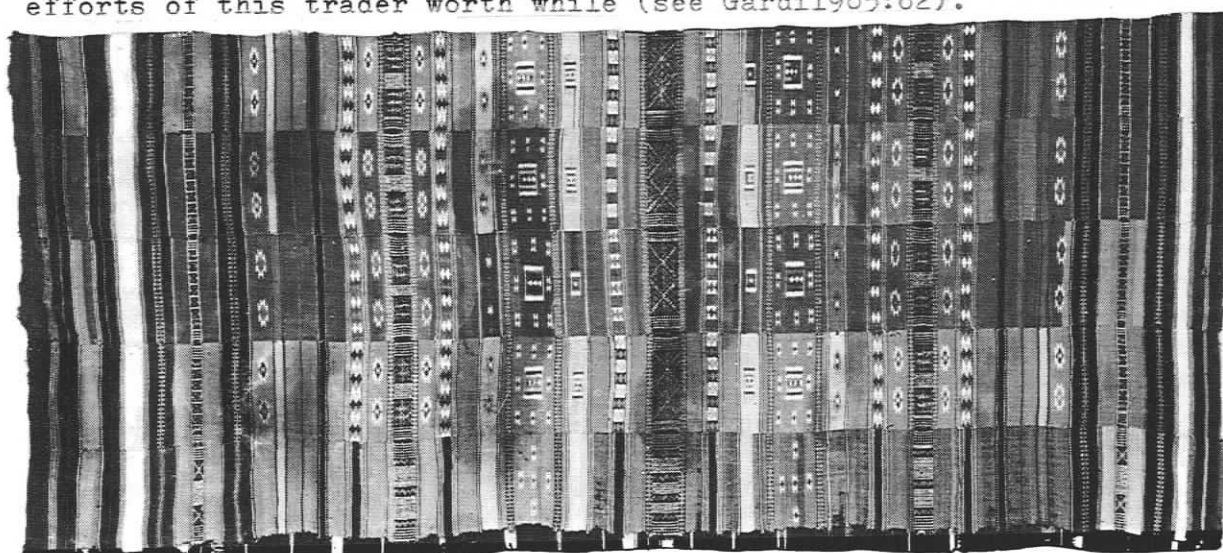


Fig. 1 Furniture textile Kerka. Wool: warp=goats' hair, weft=sheep's wool, Z-spun. Colors: white, ochre-yellow, greenish, 3 different reds, 3 different shades of indigo blue, dark brown, grey. 2 parts, each composed of 5 strips, average width 32.5 cm, sewn together selvedge to selvedge. W 169 cm, L 780 cm. Both parts sewn together along the upper side. Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin, no. III C 42838; mislabeled as North Africa. Published: Menzel 1973, 3: A 45 a, b. Courtesy Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin

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 FulBe 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 considerably 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 Dagomba had to pay annually to the Asante for some time. Christaller (1881/1933:228) still writes: "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 palanquin 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 so?" =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)).

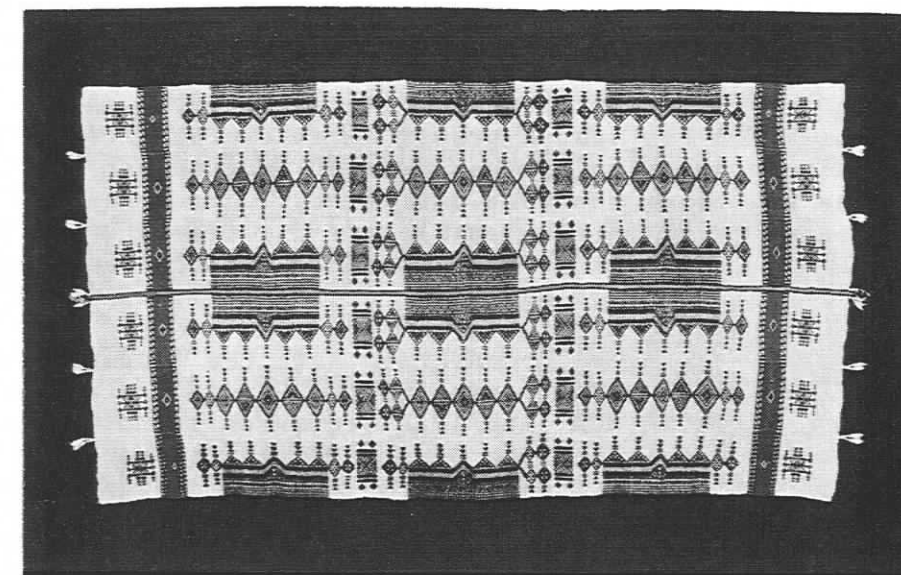


Fig. 2 Blanket kaasa laandaka. Warp and weft: sheep's wool, Z-spun. Colors: white, ochre-yellow, red, black. Six strips, W 24 cm, 1 narrow middle strip, sewn together selvedge to selvedge. W 144 cm, L 250 cm. Cercle de Mopti, Mali. Private property.

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 Mande 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 traditional African and Arab network, had to adjust to consumer preferences. The most important item of tradegoods 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 alambees and other versions of the word hanbel (Ricard 1954) 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 *Esmeralda* in 1506-08, describes the lambens: "e lambens, scilicet, ãa roupa feita como mantas d'Alentejo, que tem ãa banda vermelha e outra verde e outra azul e outra branca sãõ de largura de dous e trẽs dedos; e esta roupa se faz na cidade de Ourãõ e em Tenez do reino de Tremecen, e em Bona e Estora do reino de Bogia, e assim em Tunes e em outras partes da Berberia. E esta é a principal mercadoria por que se em Axem resgata o dito ouro, alem de outras de menos valia que também praticamos." (Pereira/Peres 1954: 138-9). 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 woolen 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 hanbel. A remarkable stability of the Berber textiles is obvious.

This in turn permits to make a connection with the fragments of woolen textiles found in burial caves in the Bandiagara cliffs, Mali. They are datable to the 11th/12th centuries in most cases. 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 as 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 "65 cm wide, which means that the full width was more than 65 cm" (Bedaux/Bolland 1980-81:73). 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 lozenge (fig.3). Further research in this point is also needed.

Fig.3 Fragment of furniture fabric.

Warp and weft: sheep's wool, Z-spun, warp threads ZS. Colors now altered, especially yellow seems to have been fugitive, if the weft stripe which differs slightly from the natural white of the wool had 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.

Weft faced plain weave. Weft stripes, one with a serrated part, where the red weft was inserted into the threads of the selvedge in bundled form.

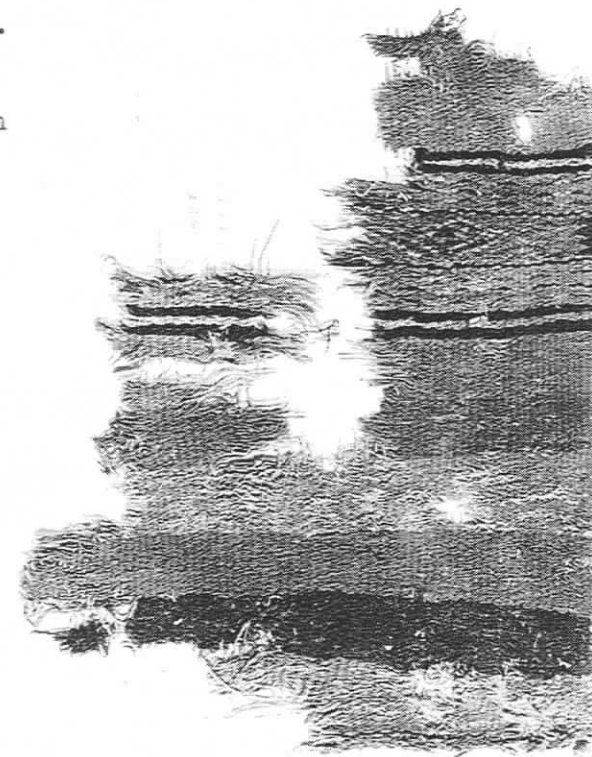
Besides the lozenge, an X-shaped design, composed of angular parallel lines, is brocaded in. One of the selvedges and the end of a spiral warp remained.

W 40.5 cm, L 52 cm. Instituut voor Antropobiologie, no. A 22-16.

Courtesy Instituut 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 1980-81:66,72). 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 lancé design, which is composed of little quadrangulans, 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: 213). The blanket-like cotton textiles are now rarely woven on account of the work involved, but Picton/Mack (1989:101) show a Bamana weaver at work, using a shed-board to facilitate the counting of the warp threads while creating the lancé 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.

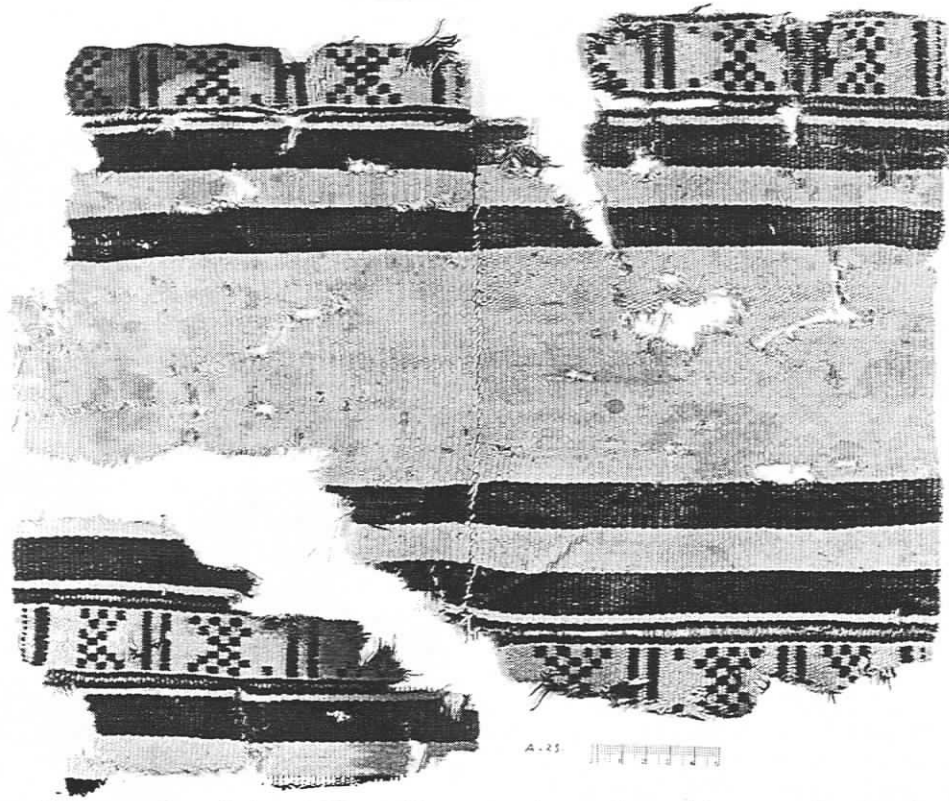


Fig.4 Fragment of textile. Warp and weft: cotton and minute traces of animal material (wool?). Z-spun. Warp threads very fine, dyed a light indigo blue. Weft natural white, dark indigo. Weft faced plain weave. Weft stripes and lancé design. Red weft accompanying these designs now appearing as "empty" stripe. W 18.7 cm. 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. Instituut voor Antropobiologie, no. A 23-1. Courtesy Instituut voor Antropobiologie, University of Utrecht. Published: Gilfooy (1987:23, fig.9)

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; comparing samples of their

woven textiles, the Asante group the heavy ones together and even declare that they are the old ones, having come from the north. Dapper (1670:353) shows a noble man of the western Sudan wearing a striped wrapper, which might be accepted as a type of such heavy-weight fabrics. The text he gives (at present available to me in the German translation of 1670) reads: "Der Adel hingegen hat ein weisses Hemde an/ welches bis über die Kniehe reicht. Die ärmel seynd sehr weit: und über das Hemde tragen sie/ an stat der Hosen/ ein Tuch/ um das Mittel geschlagen: welches sie Juba nennen. Dieses Tuch hänget gantz bis auf die Erde/ und ist so dicke/ daß sie darinnen kaum fortgehen können." This might not apply to the use of the Tellem made of their textiles, but it could explain the use of such a type of textile as a component of a tailored tunic, made about the middle of the 17th century.

This gown was acquired in Ardra on the then Slave Coast (later Dahomey, now Bénin) before 1659 (when its description was published in the first catalogue of the collections of Christoph Weickmann, merchant in Ulm (Germany)). It could not have been for a very long time on the coast before this date as the humidity of the climate is not favourable for the preservation of textile material. It does not show any signs of having been worn before it was brought to Europe, most probably by Johann Abraham Haintzel of Augsburg, who visited the West Coast in the middle of the seventeenth century and was acquainted (or even related to) Christoph Weickmann. The fate of his collection after his death in 1681 left some doubt whether the two textiles now in the Ulm Museum (nos 13 c and 13 d) are the ones he described in his catalog: "Ein Rock oder Kleid/ wie es die Könige zu Haarder zu tragen pflegen/ mit gar grossen und weiten Ermlen! And, for the second textile: "Ein Ritters=Rock oder Talar. so der König von Haarder in Africa einem zu verehren pflegt/ wan er ihne zu einem Edelman oder Ritter macht/ an der Form und Gestalt allerdings dem Königlichen Rock gleich/ doch anderst vom Zeug und Farben." (Weickmann 1659:51). Haarder is Ardra, one of the traditional areas to the west of Benin, active in the trade with the Europeans (Ratelband 1953: LXXIX).

Dapper's compilation of information of about the same time gives a description of what the inhabitants of Ardra were wearing as dress (1670:484): wrappers, but for the nobles, which added a tailored garment for the upper part of their bodies. In nearby Benin at the same time a new ruler was invested with a tailored gown as a mark of his new status (Dapper 1670:494) and nobles were wearing clothing only after they were given the privilege to do so by the ruler (Dapper 1670:488).

Tunic no. 13 d can safely be connected with the description in Weickmann's catalogue, especially when compared to the second tunic (13 c), a much less elaborated textile (published: Lamb 1975:87, fig.147; Schaedler 1987:147, fig.208).

In an area where the dress was of the wrapper type, tailored gowns were a speciality. Both tunics are of a style and material that shows that they were not products of the local textile industry, but items of long distance trade. This is proved at least in the gown no. 13c with its reserve-dyed decoration: its side-seams are tacked together only, leaving the sewing-up to the buyer, being an

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 strips in the patchwork-like gown (fig. 5) on closer scrutiny reveals almost identical details:

<u>Fragment (A 23-1)</u>	<u>Tunic (13 d)</u>
Material :cotton, Z-spun animal material (wool?)	cotton, Z-spun floss-silk, Z-spun
Colors :white very light indigo blue dark indigo blue red (in traces)	white very light indigo blue dark indigo blue red (faded to white)
Technique:woven	pink woven embroidered
weft-faced plain weave lancé warp count: 5(double) weft count: 22	weft-faced plain weave lancé warp count: 7 (double) weft count: 24
Decorat. :weft stripes lancé with block- composition (over/under 4 warp threads, three wefts high)	weft stripes lancé with block- composition (over/under 4 warp threads, three wefts high)
Width : 18.8 cm	19.2 cm

The main difference between the two textiles is the material used to weave the thin red/pink weft stripes accompanying the lancé 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 *Esmeralda* (Peres 1954:98) reports vermillion red fabrics (pano vermelho) 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.

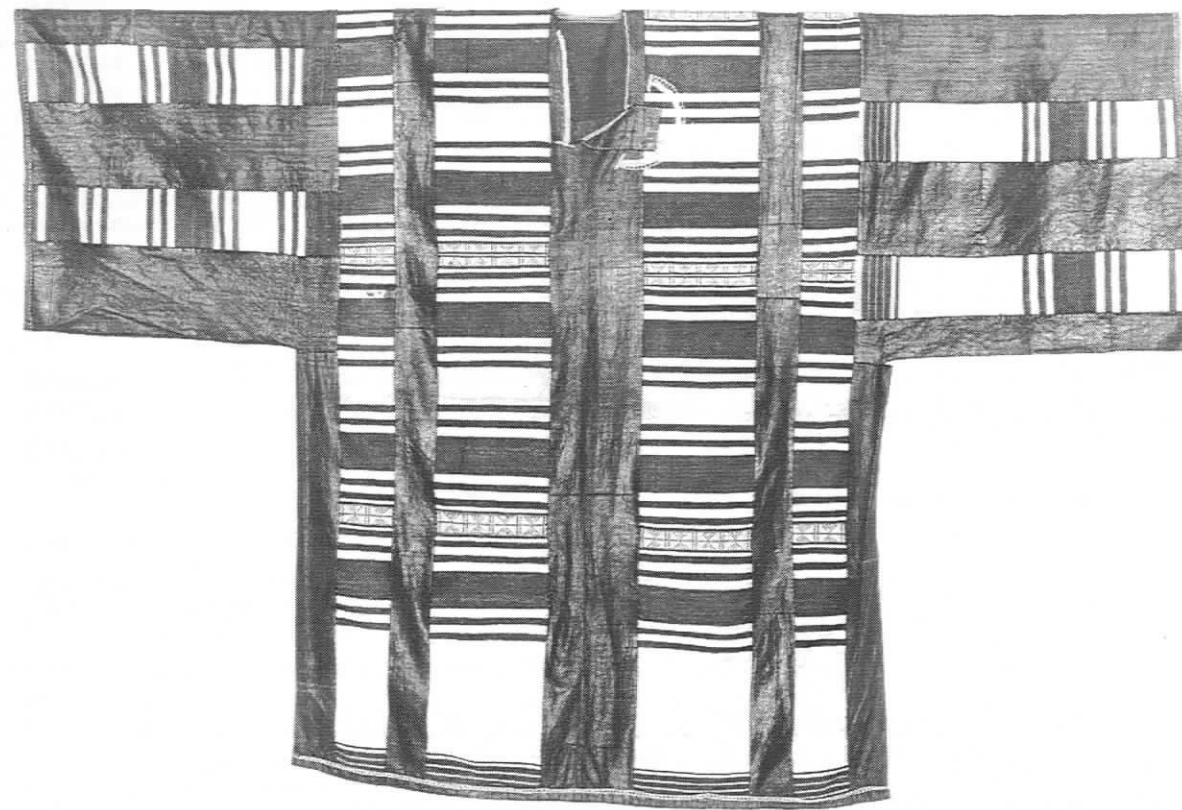


Fig. 5 Tunic, tailored, 3 types of band weave, cotton, Z-spun, floss-silk, Z-spun. Balanced and weft faced plain weave. Lancé design. W (indigo blue dyed strips): 14 - 15.8 cm; W (white and blue strips): 19.2 cm; W (white and blue strips, back): 20.3 cm. Embroidery and braid: cotton thread, once red. Width of tunic: 191 cm, length: 128 cm. Inv. Nr. 13 d, Ulm Museum. Published: Lamb 1975:87, fig. 148; Lamb/Holmes 1980:18, fig. 11; Schaedler 1987:142, fig. 203. Courtesy Ulm Museum

The history of trade in West Africa is almost unknown, especially where textiles are concerned. They are such a perishable material and finds like the many and variegated textiles in the Tellem caves in Mali are a rare event.

But even museum collections are yielding important data if attention really is paid to them. The same applies to research in Africa and it is much hoped that the trend to declare interesting textiles to be art and look at them under this aspect only will soon give way to the more reliable methods applied by the natural sciences. Especially textiles in trade can be used as research tools for African history and it is necessary to pay much more attention to them.

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So in Christoph Weickmanns Kunst-und Natural Kammer in Ulm zu sehen/ und welche von Ihme bey etlichen wenigen Jahren hero zusammen getragen/ unterschiedliches auch von Kunstliebenden Hochwehrten Herren und Freunden zum angedenken hinzu verehrt worden.... M.DC.LIX.Ulm