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# **Cloth in Contemporary West Africa: A Symbiosis of Factory-made and Hand-made Cloth**

Heather Marie Akou

## **Introduction**

The concepts of “tradition” and “fashion” both center on the idea of change. Fashion implies change, while tradition implies a lack of change. Many scholars have attempted to draw a line between the two, often with contradictory results. In a 1981 article titled, “Awareness: Requisite to Fashion,” Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins argued that,

If people in a society are generally not aware of change in form of dress during their lifetimes, fashion does not exist in that society. Awareness of change is a necessary condition for fashion to exist; the retrospective view of the historian does not produce fashion.<sup>1</sup>

Although she praised an earlier scholar, Herbert Blumer, for promoting the serious study of fashion<sup>2</sup>, their conceptualizations of the line between tradition and fashion differed. Taking a view of fashion as a phenomenon occurring in nearly all areas of human behavior and thought, Blumer wrote that in some areas,

...fashion occurs almost always without awareness on the part of those who are caught in its operation. What may be primarily response to fashion is seen and interpreted in other ways—chiefly as doing what is believed to be superior practice.<sup>3</sup>

This paper does not attempt to resolve the contradictions between these points of view, but makes another claim that they exist because there is no clear line between tradition and fashion to uncover. Instead there are many shades of gray between the black and white concepts of tradition and fashion.

A spectrum of subtleties can be demonstrated through a visual examination of West African textiles. Cloth that seems the most traditional—hand-woven with hand-spun threads, and dyed with natural dyes—has changed as artisans have experimented with new technologies and materials. On the other hand, factory cloth, manufactured quickly and inexpensively for a fashion-conscious public, often relies upon traditional aesthetics and cultural values for its appeal. In the realm of West African textiles, tradition and fashion seem to exist in symbiosis. They feed off of one another, and they are equally important forces. Traditional textiles do not exist in isolation, and fashionable textiles do not exist without consciousness of the past.

## **Traditions Change**

John Picton carefully reconsidered the role of tradition in his 1995 exhibition catalogue, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex*. Sixteen years

after publishing the first edition of *African Textiles* with John Mack, Picton wrote,

In 1989 [...] a second edition of *African Textiles* was published [...] I removed the word 'traditional.' At best it was redundant: it served no useful purpose and signified nothing that was not already obvious. At worst, it was misleading, supposing an essentially 'authentic' African practice. [...] It was no longer acceptable as representation of social practice to contrast the 'traditional' with the 'contemporary.'<sup>4</sup>

Claire Polakoff had expressed similar concerns in her book, *Into Indigo*, published in 1980. Going a step beyond Picton's statement she insisted that,

African textile arts are still alive because of their immediacy. The fabrics were created by people who made remarkable use of all that was around them, who learned techniques from their elders who in turn had learned from others. Any materials or devices found or won or learned from other people were used whenever they seemed appropriate. [...] the life in anything handcrafted must come from the reality around it.<sup>5</sup>

Polakoff also saw a continuum between tradition and fashion, not only urging that traditions change but that they must engage new generations to remain vital.

Indigo has always been a prestigious dye, imbued with a sense of tradition and legend. Indigo, made naturally and synthetically, and even imitated with navy-blue aniline dyes, is a constant in West African textiles—a tradition carried through many new techniques and forms. Indigo-dyed textiles run the gamut from the very traditional to the very fashionable with everything in between.

In 1997 I was able to spend four months in Mali, and I purchased a range of indigo-dyed textiles which together illustrate change within tradition. Two of these were completely spun, woven, and dyed by hand: a Dogon woman's wrapper (fig. 1), and a baby carrier from Djenné. Called "country cloth," pieces such as these are considered uncomfortable and out-of-date by some, but timeless by others. The technology to make them has existed in the region for at least one thousand years. A cloth from Kayes (fig. 2) though aesthetically similar uses a base of factory woven jacquard, and the resist lines were sewn on by machine.

Other methods of resist dyeing with indigo were developed elsewhere. The Yoruba in Nigeria use starch to resist dye. The resist lines on adire cloth are drawn on by hand or applied with stencils made from tin sheets. The use of factory cloth as a base allows a very high degree of detail. Such crisp designs would never be possible with a cloth containing hand-spun threads, because of its relative bulkiness and uneven surface.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Dutch textile manufacturers developed an indigo resist technique in imitation of Indonesian batiks. Resin is applied in a repeated pattern by machine, the cloth is dyed, and the resin is removed.<sup>6</sup> This technique is still used by the Uniwax factory in Côte D'Ivoire, and some factories in Nigeria. This fish pattern (fig. 3) is a classic design originally created in Europe, although this particular cloth was manufactured in Nigeria. Called "wax" cloth after the wax originally used in batik, this is still an expensive, prestigious textile. There are, however, less expensive imitations of

these imitations. This cloth (fig. 4) was manufactured at the ITEMA factory in Mali. It was screen-printed by rollers with navy blue ink and contains no indigo, although the color and association with wax cloth lend it prestige as well.

All of these textiles are still worn in West Africa as part of every-day dress. Although they show changes in technique and materials, they do not show an evolution; all of these forms are contemporary and meaningful to a living generation. None of them have been artificially preserved or cast aside in a “survival of the fittest.” Even this Dogon woman’s wrapper (fig. 1), made with generations-old materials and technologies, is both traditional and fashionable, because the Dogon have made a conscious decision to make traditional textiles a part of their present reality.

### **The More Things Change...**

More has been written about fashion’s use of tradition as a resource and source of inspiration. Susan Domowitz found that factory cloths in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana associated with traditional Akan proverbs sell more quickly and for more money than cloths with uninteresting names, regardless of the design.<sup>7</sup> This (fig. 5), for instance, is a European-style cloth with an Akan proverb attached. It’s called, “One Tree Alone Cannot Stand in the Wind.”<sup>8</sup>

In her survey of European factory cloth bound for West Africa and Zaire, Ruth Nielsen noted that,

Apparently there are various degrees of traditional designs, that is, some are more traditional than others, and, of course, some are not traditional at all and therefore quickly drop out of production and use. [...] When wax prints are not significant enough to be named by the consumers, they are not kept, not considered traditional, and soon cease to be produced.<sup>9</sup>

Although new, fashionable factory prints are continually being designed, their longstanding value to merchants and consumers depends upon tradition. As far as fashion goes, in a 1985 article, Christopher Steiner noted that,

As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, European merchants and metropolitan companies were [...] not only trying to determine African aesthetic values, but also attempting to monitor and predict the pulse of fashion change.<sup>10</sup>

Many of these designs catered well enough to African tastes that they are still popular today and have become “traditional” in their own right. Some do have European themes. This design (fig. 6) called, “Bon Appetit,” has been in circulation for several decades, and variations have been printed in many different factories. This one was manufactured in Nigeria.

Other enduring and popular prints depict aspects of African life. They contain symbols such as the Golden Stool (fig. 7), bronze Ife sculptures (fig. 8), and cowry shells (fig. 9). Others incorporate design elements from hand-made African textiles. These factory prints imitate paste resist (fig. 10), the figures on korhogo cloth (fig. 11),

mudcloth (fig. 12) (which is known in Bambara as “bogolanfini”), and kente (fig. 13). (Incidentally, this imitation kente cloth was printed in South Korea.)

Korhogo cloth, mudcloth and kente are all woven in strips which are then sewn together. This is a very old technology, but its influence on contemporary aesthetics is still very strong. The aesthetics of stripcloth have influenced printed designs, even as stripcloth itself has changed to take advantage of factory technologies.

Factory textiles today are most often printed with silkscreen rollers that come in standard sizes of 36 inches and 18 inches. This introduces an element of repetition and striping that is not lost on designers. There are the obvious imitations of stripcloth such as factory-imitation kente, but the head designer at the ITEMA factory in Bamako also pointed out several designs to me that resemble stripcloth when viewed on a large scale. This motif (fig. 14), for instance, looks any other design when viewed in isolation. On a large scale (fig. 15) it has a definite stripcloth effect.

Contemporary stripcloth also recalls past aesthetics even as technological innovations allow for greater variation. Most weavers now use factory-spun threads, which are strong, consistent, and inexpensive compared to hand-spun thread. The strength of factory-spun thread allows for wider strips, because it can withstand the added force necessary to beat longer wefts into place. The strips on this cloth (fig. 16) are approximately ten inches wide.

This innovation, however, does not always result in wider strips. Sewing machines allow weavers to create inexpensive cloths with many narrow strips. A cloth that might have taken several hours to sew together by hand now takes only minutes. Cloths made in Mali with hand-spun threads generally have strips approximately 6 inches wide – this is the limit of the technology. They could be made more narrow today (and sewn together by machine), but 6 inches is the standard aesthetic. Many cloths made with factory-spun threads have strips that are only 3 to 4 inches wide, although some are as narrow as 1 inch.

In some instances, factory-made textiles are cut into strips and interspersed with hand-woven lengths of stripcloth. This could reduce the cost and even weight of a finished piece, although these mixed stripcloths are often flashy and expensive because the factory cloth is satin or jacquard. The hand-woven strips on this particular cloth (fig. 17) have a float weave surface design, which also increases the expense and prestige. The strips on this wrapper are less than 2 inches wide.

These changes should not be seen just as imitations or worse as a corruption of “traditional” textiles. These forms are still changing, sometimes to make the textiles more affordable and sometimes to make them more expensive and prestigious. Artisans and factories create cloth with consumer demand in mind, and this demand itself is always changing.

## **Conclusion**

In her 1997 article “Bogolanfini in Bamako,” an exploration of the symbiosis between tradition and fashion in mudcloth (this is the English translation of “bogolanfini” which literally means “mud cloth” in Bambara), Victoria Rovine made a statement that seems appropriate to West African textiles at large:

*Bogolanfini* is in the midst of a renaissance. New forms of this Malian textile, whose characteristic patterns are achieved by using vegetal dyes and concentrated mud, are being developed at a dizzying rate. These recent versions of *bogolanfini* are generally referred to by their makers and their consumers as *bogolan*, a term that indicates their connection to the cloth that is their inspiration. While clearly distinct from *bogolanfini*, *bogolan*'s many varieties all retain aspects of the traditional cloth that its makers deem valuable, marketable, or attractive.<sup>11</sup>

Bogolanfini, the original version of mudcloth, has inspired fashionable contemporary designs, but it has also renewed interest in a long-standing textile tradition. This interplay between tradition and fashion keeps both more complex and satisfying for contemporary generations, and it has blurred the line between the past and the present.

Considering the interplay between tradition and fashion in the cloths presented here, two major points need to be emphasized. The first is that all of these cloths are being made today and are worn as part of everyday dress. Some Malians choose to wear handmade mudcloth produced with technologies that are over a thousand years old, while others choose to wear factory imitation mudcloth produced with technologies developed within the past 250 years. Depending upon the context, both can be seen as either traditional or fashionable. Where should a line be drawn between them, and who would draw this line? There are no clear answers to these questions.

The second point to consider is the symbiosis that exists between traditional and fashionable textiles in West Africa. Techniques and aesthetics will eventually come full circle. Today we have factory imitations of mudcloth, but can hand-made interpretations of these factory cloths be far behind? Already people are using hand-made mudcloth to construct fashionable cut-and-sewn garments (fig. 18) – a use that was not originally envisioned. Because traditional textiles have influenced fashion, and fashionable textiles have influenced tradition, every cloth has a little mixture of both influences. We can ask, “Where should a line be drawn between them?” but a more important question might be “Why are we even trying to draw a line?”

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<sup>1</sup> Roach-Higgins, Mary Ellen. “Awareness: Requisite to Fashion,” in *Dress and Identity*, eds. M.E. Roach-Higgins, J.B. Eicher, and K.K.P. Johnson. (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1995), 395.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>3</sup> Blumer, Herbert. “Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection,” *The Sociological Quarterly* (1969, vol. 10(3)): 286.

<sup>4</sup> Picton, John. *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex*. (London: Barbican Art Gallery, Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Polakoff, Claire. *Into Indigo: African Textiles and Dyeing Techniques*. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), 187.

<sup>6</sup> Bickford, Kathleen. “Knowing the Value of Pagne: Factory and Printed Textiles in Côte d’Ivoire.” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1995), 7, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Domowitz, Susan. "Wearing Proverbs: Anyi Names for Printed Factory Cloth," *African Arts* (July 1992, vol. 25(3)): 86, 87.

<sup>8</sup> Nielsen, Ruth. "The History and Development of Wax-Printed Textiles Intended for West Africa and Zaire," in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, eds. J.M. Cordwell and R.A. Schwarz. (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 493.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 481, 482.

<sup>10</sup> Steiner, Christopher. "Another Image of Africa: Toward an Ethnohistory of European Cloth Marketed in West Africa," *Ethnohistory* (1985, vol. 32(2)): 98.

<sup>11</sup> Rovine, Victoria. "Bogolanfini in Bamako: the Biography of a Malian Textile," *African Arts* (Winter 1997, vol. 30(1)): 40.

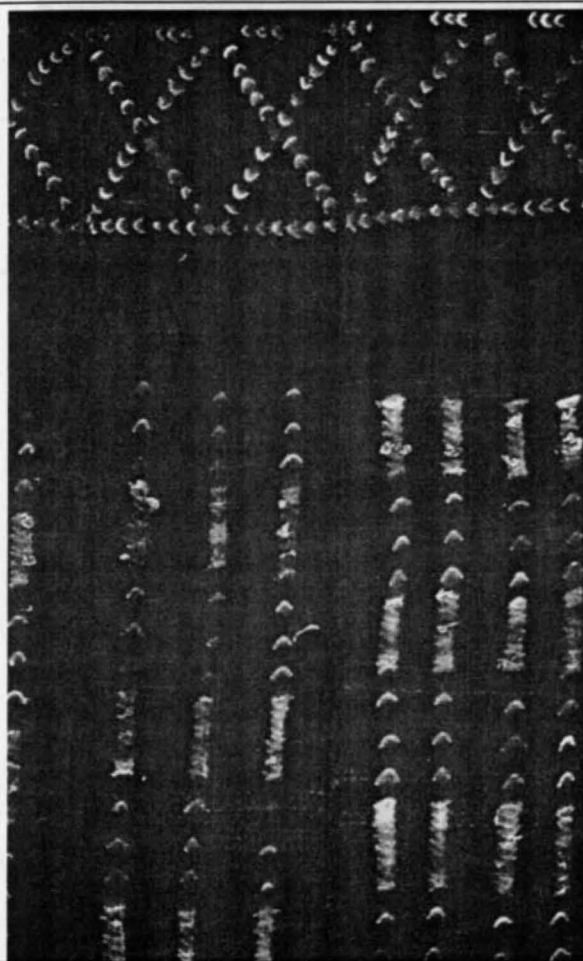


Fig. 1 – Dogon women's wrapper from Sangha, Mali

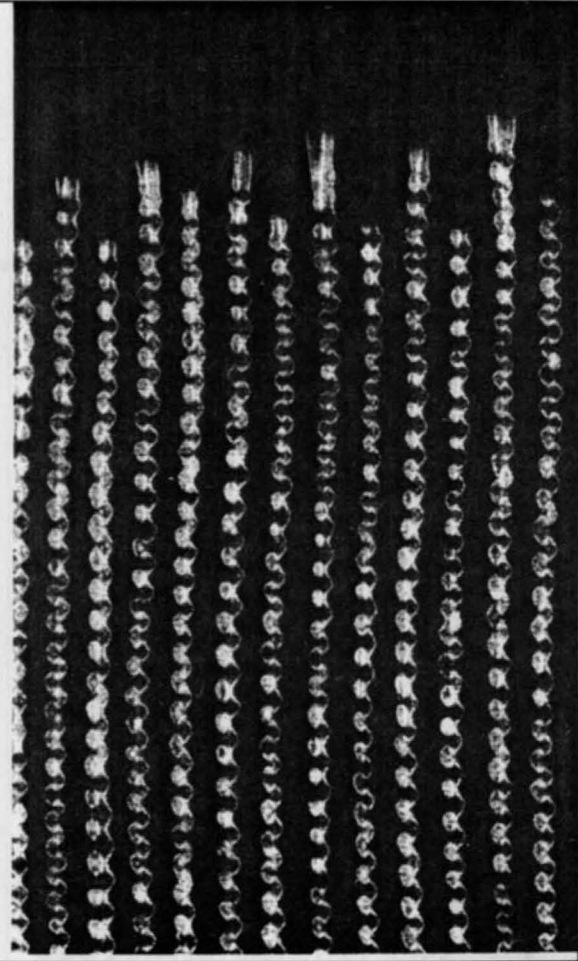
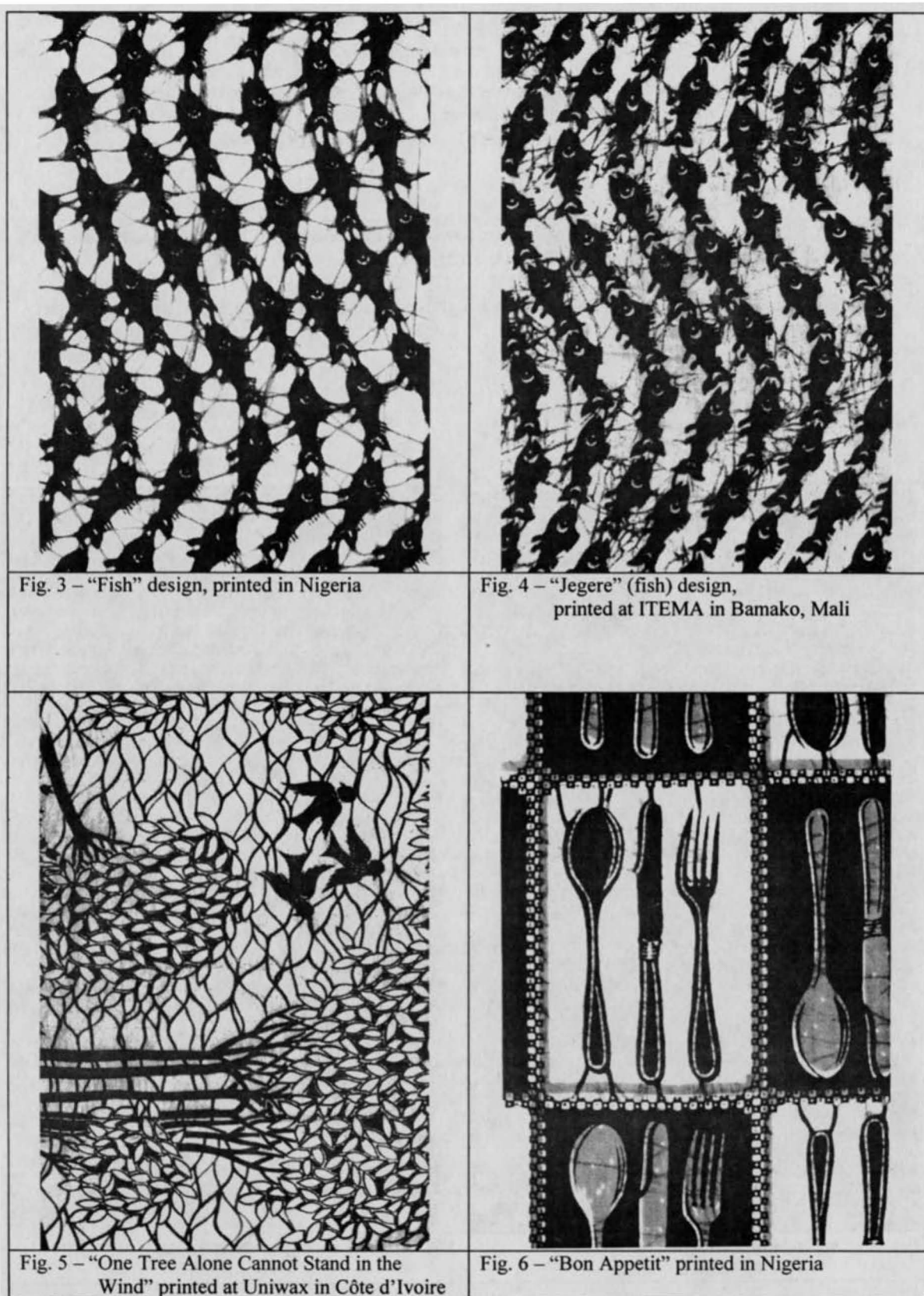


Fig. 2 – Indigo wrapper from Kayes, Mali







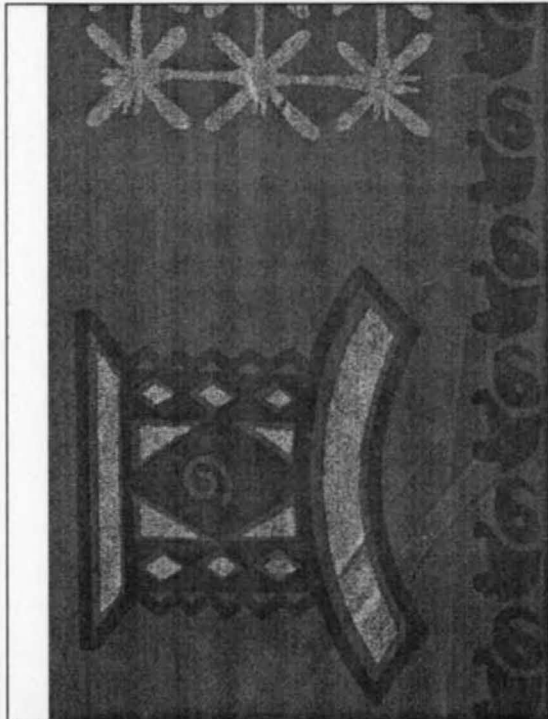


Fig. 7 – design with figures of the Golden Stool,  
printed at Sotiba in Senegal



Fig. 8 – design with figures of Bronze Ife sculptures  
printed at Comatex in Segou, Mali

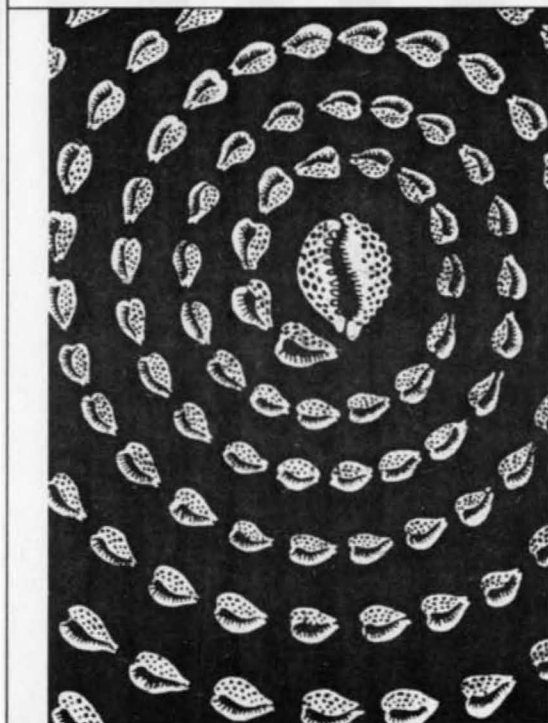


Fig. 9 – spiral of cowrie shells  
printed at ITEMA in Bamako, Mali

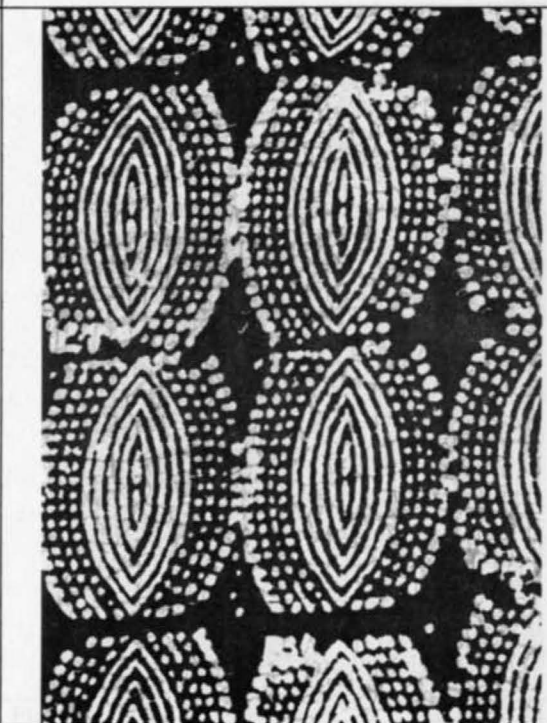


Fig. 10 – imitation paste resist design  
printed at ITEMA in Bamako, Mali

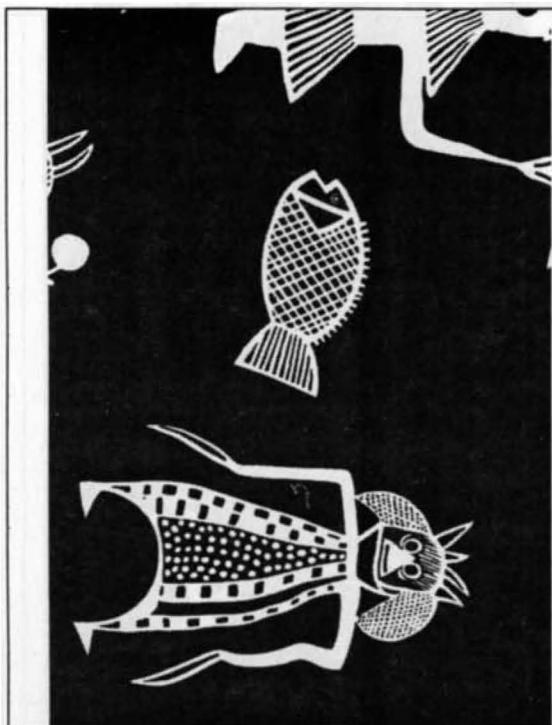


Fig. 11 – design with Korhogo figures  
printed at Kita de Woodin in Côte d'Ivoire



Fig. 12 – “Bogolan” (imitation mudcloth)  
printed at ITEMA in Bamako, Mali

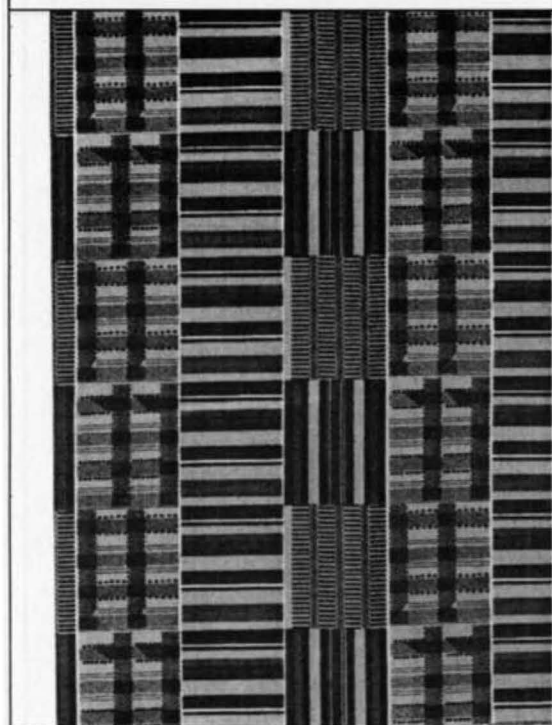


Fig. 13 – imitation kente cloth  
printed in South Korea



Fig. 14 – “36<sup>th</sup> Anniversaire de l’Armée Malienne”  
(detail) printed at ITEMA in Bamako, Mali



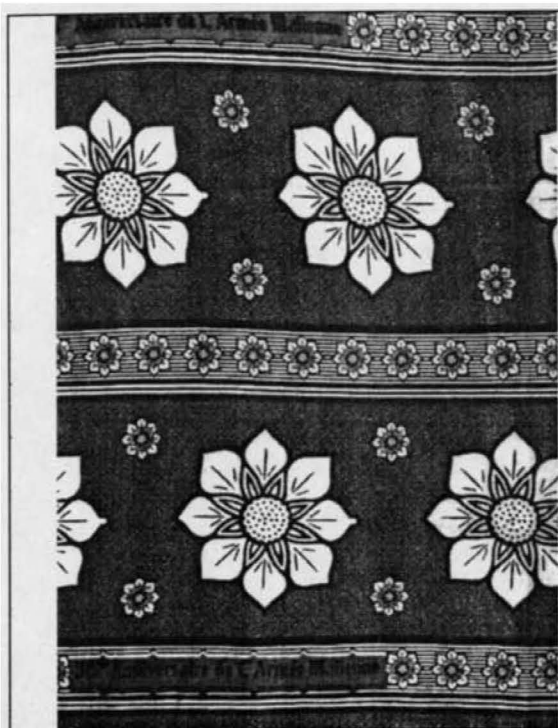


Fig. 15 – “36<sup>th</sup> Anniversaire de l’Armée Malienne”  
printed at ITEMA in Bamako, Mali

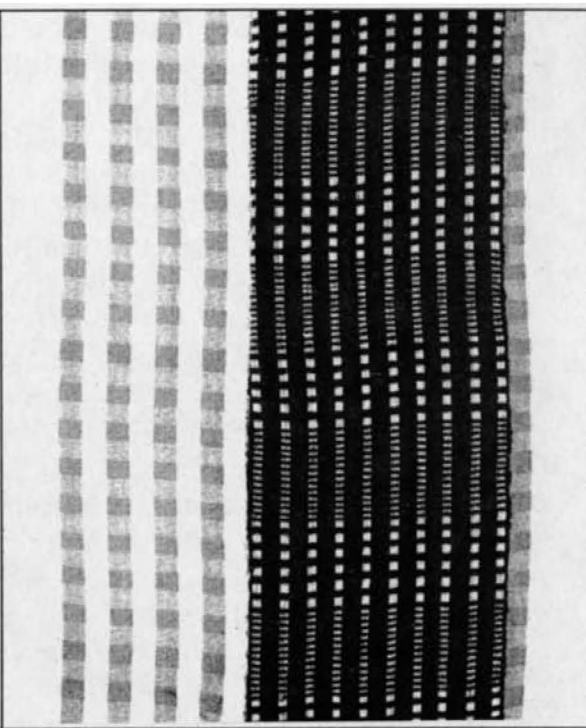


Fig. 16 – stripcloth wrapper from Djenné, Mali

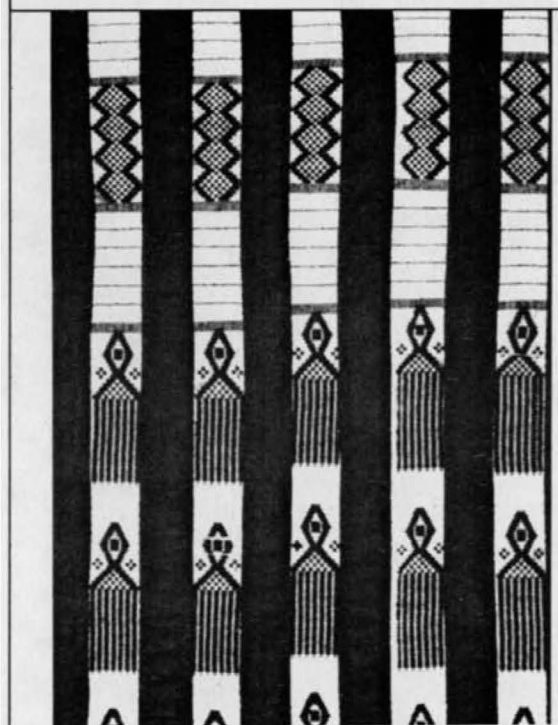


Fig. 17 – mixed stripcloth wrapper from  
Bamako, Mali



Fig. 18 – “bogolan” ensemble  
(photograph taken in Bamako, Mali by author)