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Introduction

The cloth-dyers of West Africa are known to produce indigo textiles which reputation needs no making. These various productions, often times centuries old, have been continuously exposed to the turmoil of a variety of external events which have often made them very fragile or, on the other hand, have brought about prosperity. Among those events, let us cite the caravan trade across the Sahara and the Sahel, the establishment of trading posts by the Europeans on the Atlantic Coast, the Senegal River and the Niger, the slave trade, the development of small indigo factories, colonization by the English, the French and the Portuguese, the chemical and industrial revolutions, local and regional politics, world conflicts, the 1929 economic crash, independences, climate changes, development programs and technical assistance, fashion globalization, terrorism, tourism, international fairs, etc.

While, in some areas, indigo dyeing has simply vanished and is no more than a cherished memory which the elderly women talk about while preserving carefully old indigo wrappers for special occasions, in other areas indigo cloth-dyeing seems to be prospering since the late 1980s, due to a renewed interest in the Western world for natural products (locally grown organic cotton, natural dyes, handmade crafts) and, an appeal for “ethnic” products which has prompted a revival of the “traditional” indigo dyeing craft in West Africa. Textile and fashion designers, NGOs and private businesses have been instrumental in promoting the all-natural process. They have diversified the indigo textile production to meet Western tastes and high level standards: the motifs and decors of indigo wrappers are now offered in a range of linen, upholstery fabrics, curtains, western style clothes, etc. The demand for this type of production has allowed the resurgence of a “tradition” in indigo cloth-dyeing, saving it from disappearance, and has created some employment. However, the overall impact, so far, remains limited to a few areas.

At the same time, early this XXI century, two major series of events have had a negative impact on the production of indigo textiles in West Africa, i.e. the economic penetration of the market of African textiles by China and, the wave of terror and insurgences led by Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria.

The Chinese manufacture synthetic textiles reproducing a variety of traditional wrappers, including indigo wrappers. These counterfeit wrappers are put for sale in the region where they are usually produced, directly competing with the local cloth-dyers. Despite the low quality of
these synthetic wrappers, many customers prefer to spend less than go for the more expensive locally produced cotton wrappers. As a result, indigo cloth-dyers have seen their sales decelerate and while some are struggling to stay in business, others have already given up.

For the last few years, Northern Nigeria has been off limit to tourists and buyers who purchased the famous Hausa indigo cloth from Kano, a town re-known for centuries in all of West Africa for its indigo production. In addition, Nigeria’s government policies regarding import of textiles have put local production at a disadvantage. As a result, sales have gone way down and many Kano cloth-dyers have had to leave their ground pits and find another occupation.

But, let us now focus on the productions of two specific types of women garments, the Fouta-Djallon wrapper and the melhafa from Mauritania and see how they have evolved since the XIX century. This paper draws upon research conducted in Guinea and Mauritania as well as on bibliographical research.

A - The indigo wrapper cottage industry in the Fouta-Djallon, Guinea

The indigo wrapper, a two yard rectangular piece of clothing of the traditional feminine wardrobe, has been produced for centuries in the Fouta-Djallon, a high plateau region in Guinea, known as the “Water Tower” of West Africa. This region has been inhabited by the Fula, the dominating group since the XVIII century, the Yalunka (Mandigo group) and the Diakhanka (Soninko group), who both preceded the Fula in the Fouta-Djallon. The Yalunka were the first to practice indigo dyeing in the region but it was the Soninko who in the late 1800s gave it a “commercial” aspect.

Figure 1: “Lames de rasoir”. Hand sewn resists on damask. Labé. Photographed by Erwan Lemarchand.

Figure 2: “Bulles et ampoules”. Ties on damask. Labé. Photographed by Erwan Lemarchand.

Nowadays, an outside observer visiting cloth-dyeing workshops in the Fouta-Djallon might think that this craft has not much evolved over time given the sort of basic way in which it is practiced. But the twentieth century was a period of many changes in the practices of indigo cloth-dyeing.
In addition to major technical changes, the cloth-dyeing industry, along with others crafts in the Fouta-Djallon, experienced many economical ups and down. Several major events had a considerable impact on the production of hand-made crafts: the internal move of populations within the West Africa region followed by the colonization of Guinea by France (1891), the two world wars, the crash of 1929, the independence (1958), the socialist regime of Sékou Touré, the liberal regime of Lansana Conté, etc.

Indeed, colonization expanded the routes of international and regional commerce into the Fouta-Djallon, creating new market places and towns, and an appeal for imported products. However, the development of commerce was disrupted worldwide during the two world wars and Guinea was not spared: imported products became rare and very expensive and craft people went back to their former practices to meet the basic needs of the populations. During those times of hardships, imported textiles being no longer available, weavers went back to their looms to clothe the population.

It was under Sékou Touré, the first president of the Republic of Guinea (1958-1984) that indigo dyeing in the Fouta-Djallon became a substantial income generating activity in a myriad of towns and villages. Sékou Touré promoted centers for the training of women in cloth-dyeing, embroidery, sewing, etc. In addition to offering training, these centers were also designed to offer youth skills which had, under the old social stratification system, been the attribute of certain professional castes. The relative success of these centers incited many trained women to form their own cooperative or group. The government restrictions imposed on the import of textiles and the incitement to wear locally made clothes came in support of the expansion of the local indigo textile production.

Furthermore, the policy of the government to “dissolve” the caste system, combined with migration from rural areas to cities, contributed to the gradual disappearance of clothes attached to social castes. All Guineans aspired to wear fashionable clothes and own a good variety of models. Dressing up was particularly important for religious celebrations and social affairs even among the least well to-do. The trend amplified under President Lansana Conté (1986-2008) who practiced a policy of economic liberalism. He opened the country to imports, among them, the inexpensive China made basin which allowed the Fouta-Djallon indigo cottage industry to develop substantially and become a major source of employment.

Cloth-dyeing even raised interest among development agencies, NGOs and churches. They set up projects to provide technical assistance to improve quality and rationalize production. Indeed, as years passed more and more women and even men of all social and ethnic background got the appeal of indigo cloth-dyeing until 2006 when inexpensive Chinese counterfeit indigo-like wrappers appeared on Guinean markets. The accrued competition at a time of economic hardship...
in Guinea, combined with a trend for wearing trendy wax prints, provoked a major crisis in the cloth-dyeing cottage industry in the Fouta-Djallon.

A.1. Accounts of changes
The paragraphs here-after illustrate the various changes which have taken place in the Fouta-Djallon over the last one hundred and fifty years or so in the practices of indigo cloth-dyeing. They are to be taken as general trends as practices do vary from cloth-dyer to cloth-dyer, from place to place, and from woman to woman.

Indigo baths. Until the 1940’s or so, cloth-dyers relied on the leaves of *Lonchocarpus cyanescens*, an indigenous indigo plant, the decoction of a root of *Morinda geminata rubiaceae* (*wanda*) and, ashes of local plants harvested in the forested areas to prepare the indigo dye. The introduction of synthetic blue brought significant changes to the practices of indigo cloth-dyeing: there occurred a gradual substitution of natural products with man-made synthetic products imported from the Western world, hence bringing new skills to the know-how of the artisans and enabling them to produce faster larger numbers of wrappers.

Though some Fouta-Djallon cloth-dyers remain faithful to their ancestral recipes, most of them simply mix the old and the new recipes. Indeed, the customers deem essential for an indigo wrapper to carry the scent of indigo and to leave blue traces on one’s skin as indigo is believed to have therapeutic characteristics. As a result, indigo dye baths still contain a substantial amount of indigo leaves and *wanda* (mordant and scarlet red coloring).

Recycling. Another important change which has modified the practices of the craft is the substitution of local products with recycled imported products initially used for other purposes than cloth-dyeing: oil tanks have replaced clay pots as dye vats; plastic bags, rice bags and tire inner tubes have replaced raffia to make resists; metal containers are reshaped to be used as pots to melt candles over the fire (batik).

Textiles. Two very different types of textiles are used for the making of wrappers: the locally woven narrow strip known as *leppi*, the only textile used for wrappers until the Europeans started commercializing basin, a damask patterned with flowers or geometric motifs which add another layer to the décor. The preference of customers gradually switched from *leppi* to basin which allows for finer resists and decor.

Resists. In order to decorate the wrappers, the cloth-dyers/resist makers use different types of resists techniques, some centuries old (ties and hand-sewn resists), other more recent like batik or machine sewn resists introduced in the XX century. Flour paste resists (*Kossi*) have disappeared. Most of the motifs are ancient, the decor old or new.
While ties and sewn resists are rather abstract, batik resists are often figurative. The names of motifs and/or decors are often witness to their times, such as scissors, fans, Mig airplane, watch, Fatou Linsan, etc. Wolof and Soninko names designate abstract motifs which have been in existence for a long time.

**Finishes.** Once the wrapper has been dyed, it undergoes several steps before it can be put for sale: the removal of resists, the rinsing, the assembling of *leppi* strips or basin strips (checkerboard motif), the starching, the calendaring and, in some cases, the embroidering. The Arabic gum has been replaced by imported starch and embroideries are done by machine. However, most cloth are still beaten with wooden mallets to give them a stiff look.

**Production unit.** Cloth-dyeing used to be a seasonal family occupation among the Soninke and the Yalunka women who passed on their empirical and secret know-how to their daughters and nieces. The purpose was to meet basic family textile needs and social as well as religious obligations. Gradually, a taste for displaying a variety of clothes emerged outside the ruling classes, as part of a greater desire for an increased consumption. In order to buy additional goods and services, many women and a few men seized the opportunity to earn a living from indigo cloth-dyeing, including the Fula. The availability of imported textiles and dyes facilitated the emergence of this cottage industry. Indigo cloth-dyeing, part-time or full time, all year-round, brought “substantial” revenues for many artisans. The family production unit remained but cooperative or artisan groups, formed outside strict kinship relationships, soared under the political influence of the socialist state. The division of labor also appeared, particularly between cloth dyers and resist-makers. To this day, apprenticeship is mostly learned on the job though some associations organize training sessions with the aim of improving quality.

**Commerce.** Two commercial aspects are linked to the production of wrappers: the commerce of inputs to make the wrappers and the commerce of wrappers itself. Before a cloth-dyer can dip a wrapper into her indigo dye vat, she has to make purchases, most of them at the local market or shops whether they are plants locally harvested or imported products whereas in the past she might have collected all ingredients herself to meet her family needs. Most cloth dyers lack sufficient revolving funds to buy ingredients in bulk but some artisan groups manage to purchase larger quantities at better prices.

The commerce of Fouta-Djallon indigo wrappers initially moved from the family home to the village market dirt ground and then to the market stalls of the Fouta-Jallon major cities such as Labé, Kindia, Mamou. While part of the wrapper production is still for local consumption, the rest of it is either sold elsewhere in Guinea or abroad. The market of Gueckedou in Guinée Forestière is a meeting point for buyers from Côte d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Liberia. Many wrappers are of course sold in Conakry, the capital city of Guinea where prospective buyers will find them in the workshops of designers, on market stalls or piled up on the head of street.
peddlers. Others are sold directly from Labé to Senegal, Mali, Togo, Nigeria, etc. Many cloth-dyeing families or cooperatives have one sales person who travels by bus to distant cities. The Diaspora women are also very active informal sales persons in Europe and North America where they carry suitcases full of wrappers to be sold to their fellow citizens. On the more formal side, some wrappers find their ways to the ethnic shops and home linen shops of the Western world transformed into accessories and linen before being exported.

Unlike, neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, etc. which governments have had a strong policy for promoting their crafts at national and international fairs, Guinea has been lagging behind. The Fédération Nationale des Artisans de Guinée et la Fédération Préfectorale des Artisans de Labé have also been active in the textile sector but only have limited means. It is only in 2012 that the first national craft fair was held in Labé.

Identity and customs. In Guinea, in times prior to the adoption of multicolored textiles, indigo garments were made and worn by all ethnic groups, whereas now, the wearing and the making of the indigo wrapper and the indigo *boubou* are strongly identified with the Fouta-Djallon and with its inhabitants, particularly the dominating group the Fula as well as the Yalunka and the Soninko. However, over the years, the use of indigo wrappers in the Fouta-Djallon has evolved from being worn daily to being worn mostly on special occasions. Under the influence of global fashion, women who do wear indigo clothes have transformed the traditional indigo wrapper into a tailored long skirt worn with a coordinated blouse. This is more in accordance with urban and regional trends which set forth multicolor wax outfits for daily use. Second-hand Western clothes are also popular for they are the least expensive of all.

**B - The melhafa cottage industry in Kaédi, Gorgol, Mauritania**

The *melhafa* worn by the Moorish women of Mauritania is a rectangular piece of textile, approximately 4.40 m x 1.40 m composed of two strips in its width which are assembled with an overhead stitch. This traditional piece of clothing is worn by Moorish women at all times, no matter their social position or their occupation. It is draped in a way which covers the body from head to ankles leaving the face and the lower arms uncovered. In order to secure the position of the veil, a small pebble or something of a similar weight, is usually tied in the loose ends of the veil used to cover the hair and the upper arms.

Until a few decades ago, the *melhafa* was worn by itself. Nowadays, women wear some clothes underneath, lingerie and a wrapper for mature women, western style clothes such as a pair of jeans and a T-shirt for young urbanites. But accessories have always been significant. Unlike their ancestors who wore elaborate braided-hairdo decorated with silver, amber or glass beads and amulets, contemporary well to-do urban Moorish women match their shoes, pocket book, custom jewelry or gold jewelry and smart phone protective coat to their *melhafas*.
From consumer to producer.

Over times, the *melhafa* like the wrapper has been subject to various influences such as trade and fashion. What is particularly interesting in the story of the *melhafa*, is that the Moorish women, no matter the tribe, never wove or dyed their own cotton *melhafas* though they wove their woolen tents.

For centuries, the Moors, an Arabo-Berber nation composed of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, relied on barter to acquire cloth for their female veils and male robes (*draas*). Starting in the XVII century with the establishment of trading posts along the Senegal River, southern tribes like the Trarza, the Brakna, and the Darmankour traded Arabic gum much in demand at the time by the European clothing and pharmaceutical industries. In exchange, they received white or indigo “guinea cloth”, a supple cotton textile imported from India by the Europeans, and later from Rouen and Manchester when the French and British textiles mills started producing their own brand. At the time, indigo was the color of choice of the Moors, except for the princes easily identified with their white *draas*.

Beside guinea cloth, the Moors also used cotton narrow strips to clothe themselves. Both, narrow strips and guinea cloth were used well into the XX century as units of currency in the region, particularly along the Senegal River. Narrow strips produced by the Bamanan, the Haalpular and the Soninko agriculturalists and weavers were either exchanged as part of the caravan trade
commodities or against services such as the fertilizing of soils by herds during their yearly transhumance to the greener south of the country and beyond.

The contemporary *melhafas* came into being in the second half of the XX century. They are a vivid contrast with the plain indigo ones which Moorish women now wear on special occasions like a therapeutic indigo cure. Contemporary *melhafas* are full of colors, motifs and decors which are created on imported fabrics ranging from light to heavy weight. No two *melhafas* seem alike and women of all ages find their own innovating unique model. The change from a plain indigo *melhafa* to a bicolored or multicolored one decorated with intricate resists is a tremendous fashion statement which entices the Moorish woman to suggest her social status, display her taste, try out her seduction, be conservative or daring depending on the occasion, etc. Cloth-dyers do their best to meet their customers taste, expressing their creativity through their know-how, setting fashion trends, trends influenced often times by global fashion.

![Figure 6 - Moorish women at the market. Detail of a postcard from the turn of the XX century. The indigo melhafas are made of guinea cloth.](image)

![Figure 7 - Detail of a melhafa by Hawa Bokar Sy and her daughter Djenaba. Photographed by Gabrielle Birnholz.](image)

Long gone is the time when a woman only owned one *melhafa* and wore it until it was completely worn out. Nowadays, most women own several *melhafas* of various styles and fabric weight. Depending on the occasion, a woman will select to wear the one seemingly most appropriate for the occasion. The well-to-do may own more than a hundred including imported silk *melhafas* and wear each one only once. *Melahafas* are a prized gifts: husbands-to-be are expected to offer many *melhafas* to their in-laws. Out of style or worn out *melhafas* usually have a second life: they are either handed down to women of lower status, are used to decorate the
internal face of tent velums or are tied around the couscous pot to prevent the steam from escaping.

The contemporary melhafas first came into being in the early seventies when some women switched from indigo melhafas to melhafas made of imported printed and colorful synthetic or natural fiber fabrics. Then in the late seventies, the first locally hand dyed cotton melhafas started being produced in the two major cloth-dyeing centers in Mauritania, Kaédi, the capital city of the Gorgol Wilaya, less than 500 miles away as the crow flies from Labé (Guinea) and Nouakchott, the nation’s capital. It is said that cloth-dyers from Nouakchott came originally from the Senegal River Valley, Kaédi for the most part.

Surrounded by dry savanna, Kaédi is located on the Northern bank of the Senegal River and is populated mostly by Soninko and Haalpulaar. Kaédi is also the home of many Wolof and Moors. Kaédi has been well known for decades for its Soninko cloth-dyers later joined by the Haalpulaar women. But like in other cloth-dyeing towns and villages along the Senegal River from Kayes (Mali) to Saint-Louis (Senegal), cloth-dyeing in Kaédi underwent a major revolution during the second half of the XX century. Indeed, in the late 60s, early 70s and early 80s, the Sahel experienced important rainfall deficits. These successive draughts in the Senegal Valley decimated both indigo and cotton plants, hence accelerating the use of multicolor synthetic cloth-dyeing on imported cotton damask and light veils known as chigué. They also prompted the death of herds of cattle and the migration of the herding Moors towards cities in search of a new livelihood. Some Moorish women settled in Kaédi and joined Soninko, Haalpulaar and Wolof cloth-dyers to receive training in matters of resists and dye baths all inspired from the historical indigo cloth-dyeing styles of the Senegal River but adapted to a wide range of shades. Having learned the craft, many Moorish women subsequently started their own business or joined a cooperative at a time when cloth-dyeing with synthetic dyes was encountering much demand for wrappers, melhafas and male and female boubous.

Nowadays, the cloth-dyers of Kaédi sell their production all around Mauritania and Senegal. Some of the production even finds customers overseas like in Western countries and the Gulf States. Kaédi rivals with Bamako for its boubous and with Nouakchott as regards melhafas.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis of the Fouta-Djallon wrapper and the Gorgol melhafa, we conclude that the productions of these two pieces of clothing, strong identity markers of Muslim women in their respective cultures, have greatly evolved over time in terms of fabric, cloth dyeing techniques and overall decor though they have kept their basic shape.
Their respective productions trace back the current cloth-dyeing know-how to the indigo cloth-dyers of the Senegal River Valley, particularly the Soninko, the Wolof and the Haalpular. They have been subject to a number of common influences, positive and negative, mainly trade, cloth currency, technical changes, climate change, migrations, etc. Fashion and social changes have also been determinant factors in the evolution of their design.

Interestingly, the Fula and the Moors, two cultural groups that were not originally practicing cloth-dyeing, got involved for economic reasons. They acquired a know-how from neighboring cloth-dyers, developed their own style, taking further the art of decorating and cloth-dyeing the garments they wear. The Fula and the Moors are today, the largest users and the largest producers of their respective garments though other ethnic groups still participate in the production of wrappers and melhafis.

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