

MUDCLOTH

Source : Mali, West Africa,
Culture : Dogon.

Mudcloth is produced in several forms, The Dogon have adapted to the demands of the tourist market and use the traditional dying technique on commercially produced factory-made cloth using simple designs that are less time consuming than traditional Bogolanfini (Bogolan) which is the method described here. The characteristic white design is a form of symbolic language similar to Adinkra. Cheaply made screenprinted copies are also being made in India.

The Fibre

In the fringes of the Sahara (The Sahel), cotton can be found growing wild as well as in small cultivated fields near villages where it is grown as a cash crop.

Spinning

Cotton fibre is spun by hand using a simple whorl spindle consisting of a hardwood sliver about 20cm long with a stone or clay weight fixed towards the sharply pointed bottom end.

Weaving

Traditionally, the shepherds weave whilst attending their flocks in the scrub. They use a backstrap loom where one end of the loom is attached to two pegs set in the ground. The other end is held by a strap worn as a loose belt. To tension the warp thread they lean back against the strap. This form of loom is very portable and as the flock moves on through the scrub they will remove the pegs from the ground and move on with their animals.

Dying

The dying process is in three stages. First a dye is prepared from the leaf and the bark of a tree. This dye is acidic and produces a yellow green colour which is very impermanent, subject to fading in the sun.

The second process requires mud taken from one of five tributaries of the River Niger. These rivers flow through areas of ironstone rock and the mud generated is rich in iron and organic matter. The mud is kept in jars for one year. An anaerobic fermentation takes place as bacteria consume the organic material, this produces chemically active Iron compounds in an acid medium.

The mud is applied to the cloth while it is still wet from the initial dying process. The iron in the mud acts as a mordant, fixes itself chemically to the first dye and produces a deep chocolate brown colour. If the mud is diluted with water it produces various lighter shades of brown.

While the cloth is still wet from this process a paste is applied to produce the white designs. The paste is produced by burning the bones of animals they have eaten. The ash, which contains Calcium Oxide, is mixed with water to produce Calcium Hydroxide. Calcium Hydroxide is an alkali. Applying the paste to the fabric neutralises the acid dye process and strips the dye. The technical term for this last stage is Discharge.

History

It is believed that this process has been used since there were Pharaohs in Egypt



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