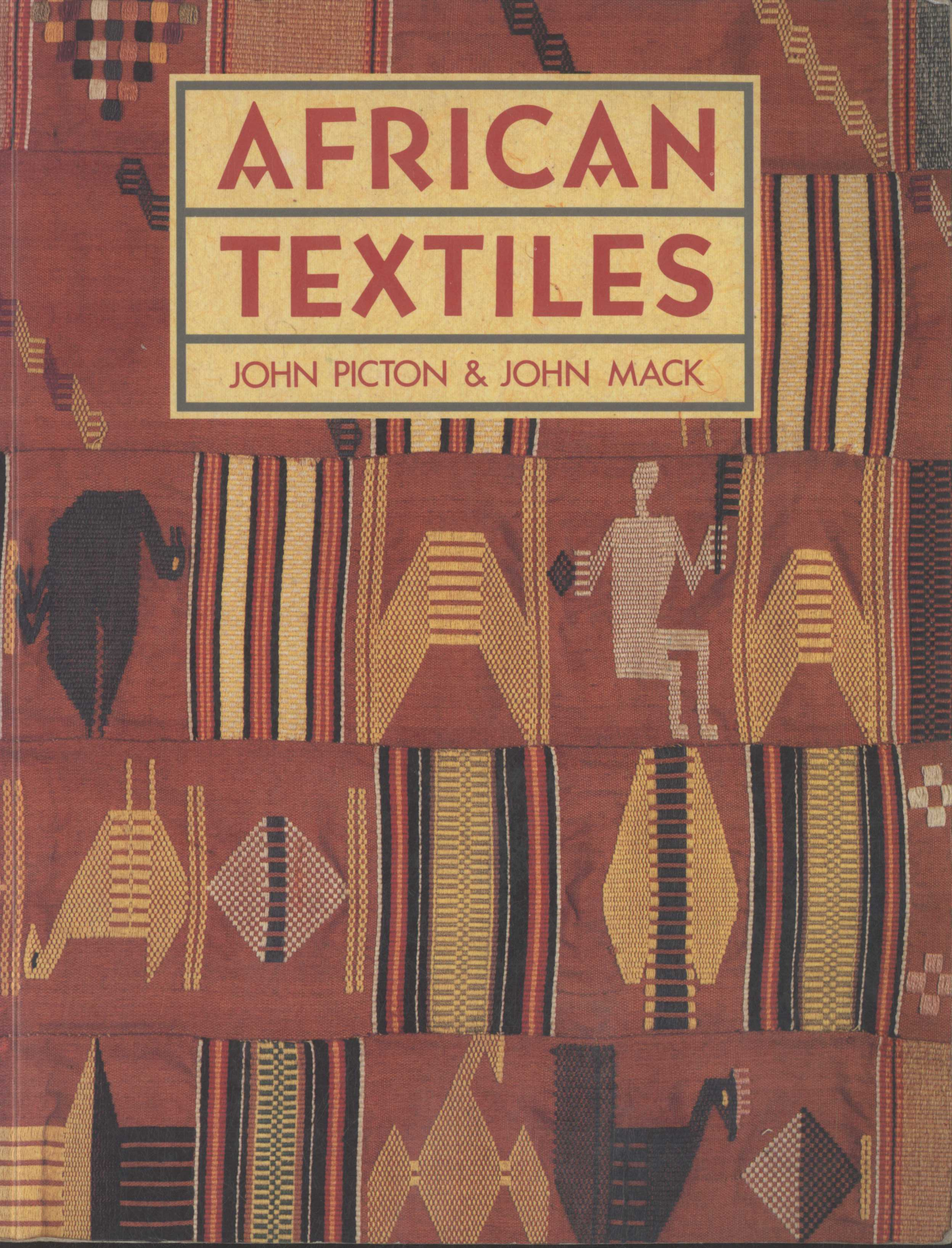
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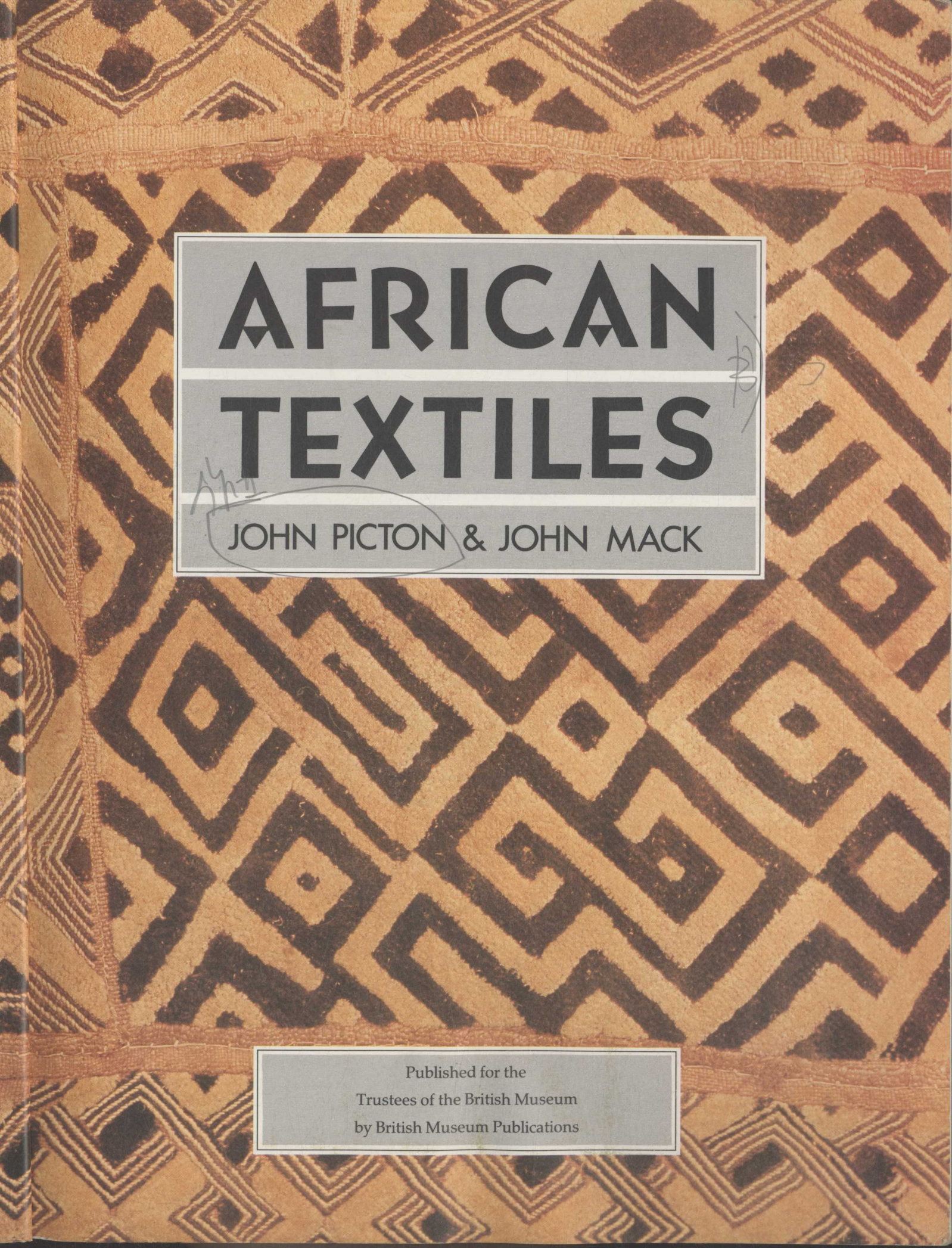

AFRICAN TEXTILES

JOHN PICTON & JOHN MACK

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Cover Detail of the patterning on a silk and cotton hammock, Ewe, Ghana. 1981. Af 13.1.

Page 1 Detail from resist-dyed cotton cloth, Igbo, Nigeria. See also p. 151.

Pages 2–3 Cut-pile raphia textile, Kuba, Zaire. See also p. 197.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Amodu Ihiovi of Opopocho village near Okene, Ebira, Nigeria, wearing his best gown of red, yellow and pale blue cotton with dark green silk embroidery.

When preparing the first edition of *African Textiles* ten years ago we had two audiences in mind. One was those people with established interests in textiles, yet who knew little about Africa and its weaving practice; the other was those with experience of Africa, but little knowledge of weaving. As we wrote, this audience more or less defined itself. We were then jointly responsible for the African collections of the British Museum's Department of Ethnography at the Museum of Mankind, and our most consistent inquiries about textiles came from these sources. The book was thus, to an extent, a response to public interest.

It is gratifying to realise that in the time since we first worked on this book it has continued to be in regular demand and to be widely cited by colleagues as a useful introduction. This is especially encouraging because a large exhibition that it originally accompanied has since closed, although nearly all of the material exhibited was drawn from the British Museum's extensive collection and remains accessible. The exhibition was shown at the Museum of Mankind between late 1979 and 1982 and subsequently transferred in 1983 for a six-month period to the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

In the years that have elapsed interest in the subject has grown steadily, and much further work has been published. Particularly important is the fact that a great deal of this has been based on original fieldwork which has extended our appreciation of the subject. In this second edition of *African Textiles* we intended, therefore, to try and take advantage of these developments where they suggest the need to extend or, in some cases, alter the content of the original book. Sometimes the new information that has become available is sufficiently innovative and comprehensive that, without greatly extending the text, we have been able to do little more than refer the reader to the new sources. To this end the major publications involved are listed in an expanded bibliography.

In addition, both of us have, in the interim, had the opportunity to carry out our own further field research (John Picton in Nigeria in 1981 and 1982), and John Mack on the island of Madagascar in 1984, 1985 and 1987). Although neither of us was working specifically and exclusively on the subject of textiles, the occasion none the less allowed us to pursue this interest and to gather further information which we have incorporated here. In the case of Madagascar no substantial study of its weaving technologies had been published in English when the first edition of this book was in preparation, and indeed very little was available in any other language either. One reviewer at the time found that our attempt to summarise in a separate chapter what

had already been published over-emphasised the distinctiveness of Malagasy weaving within African practice. With the benefit of fieldwork we now feel, even more strongly, that Madagascar deserves separate treatment and have revised this chapter in the light of our findings more thoroughly than any other.

As we read through our original text, a number of points struck us forcibly. We feel now, as we did before, that the subject of textiles would benefit from a major discussion of indigenous interpretation of pattern, of pattern names, and of the contexts within which different categories of cloth are used. As anthropologists this is also one of our own interests. It would, however, make this a quite different book if we were to seek to include detailed consideration of these subjects here. As historians of art we realise, too, just how little any of us knows about the creative and aesthetic motivations of the artists concerned, or about the historical processes that have shaped the textile traditions we see now.

For these reasons we are as reluctant as before to enter into debate on the history and diffusion of weaving technologies in Africa. While, at the simplest, the distribution of different technological refinements can readily be mapped, guessing at the circumstances which led to particular distributions can never be more than an interesting parlour game unless many other types of evidence are assembled in support. Knowledge of the functional and temporal relationships between the relevant variables (technology, weave structures, the economic bases, and so forth) is still not sufficient to permit anything more.

On the other hand, we found our original references to 'traditional' weaving practice in Africa and to the continent's 'traditional' textiles confusing. What we intended, of course, was to contrast local non-industrial production with the technologically sophisticated textile industries which some African countries have been able to develop, or the imported cloth that is widely marketed. It is all too easy, however, to imply as a result that tradition is a static and unchanging phenomenon, particularly when this technology is compared with the evolutions in industrial processes. In Nigeria, however, the dazzling effects of lurex have been extensively exploited in modern times by 'traditional' weavers; in Madagascar the loom used to weave a silk burial shroud also produces a thick blanket with a warp composed of stripped plastic and a weft of rags knotted together. These are but two instances in our own recent experience of contemporary developments of a kind that could equally be duplicated in historical times.

We could hardly reject Asante silk weaving, or the colonial imagery of some Yoruba *adire* cloths, on the grounds that they are not 'traditional'. The easy acceptance of the supposed category, 'traditional art', is in effect a denial of the temporal and creative dynamic embedded in particular traditions. Contemporary developments in local textile practices enable a salutary corrective. For these reasons we have endeavoured to clarify the sense of our original text; and we have, we hope, given due attention to lurex in the additional illustrations we have been able to include.

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Photographs by Keith Nicklin, John Picton and Susan Picton are reproduced by kind permission of Dr Ekpo Eyo, at the time of the first edition, Director-General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, to whom grateful thanks are also due for the opportunities to carry out field research in that country.

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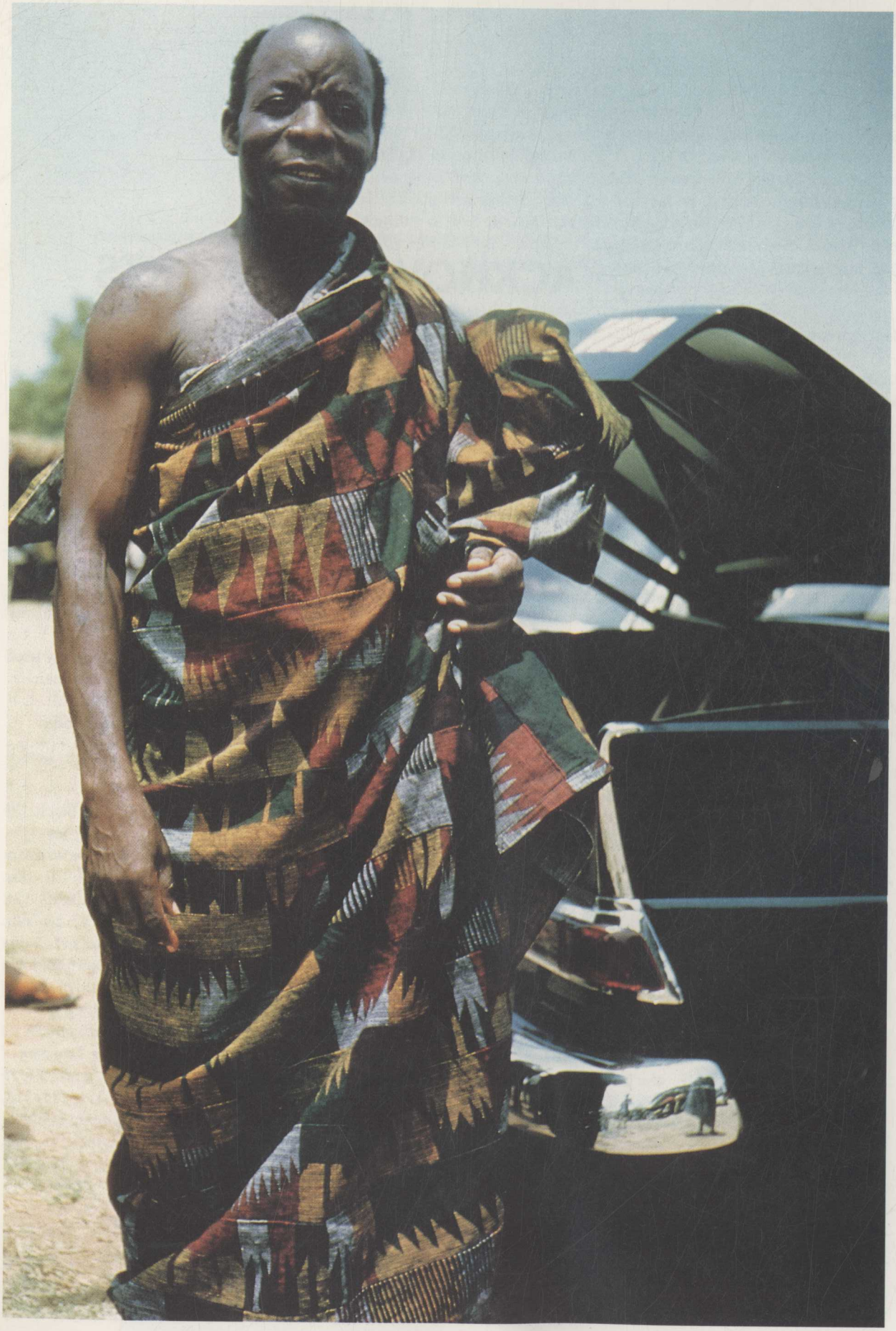


CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

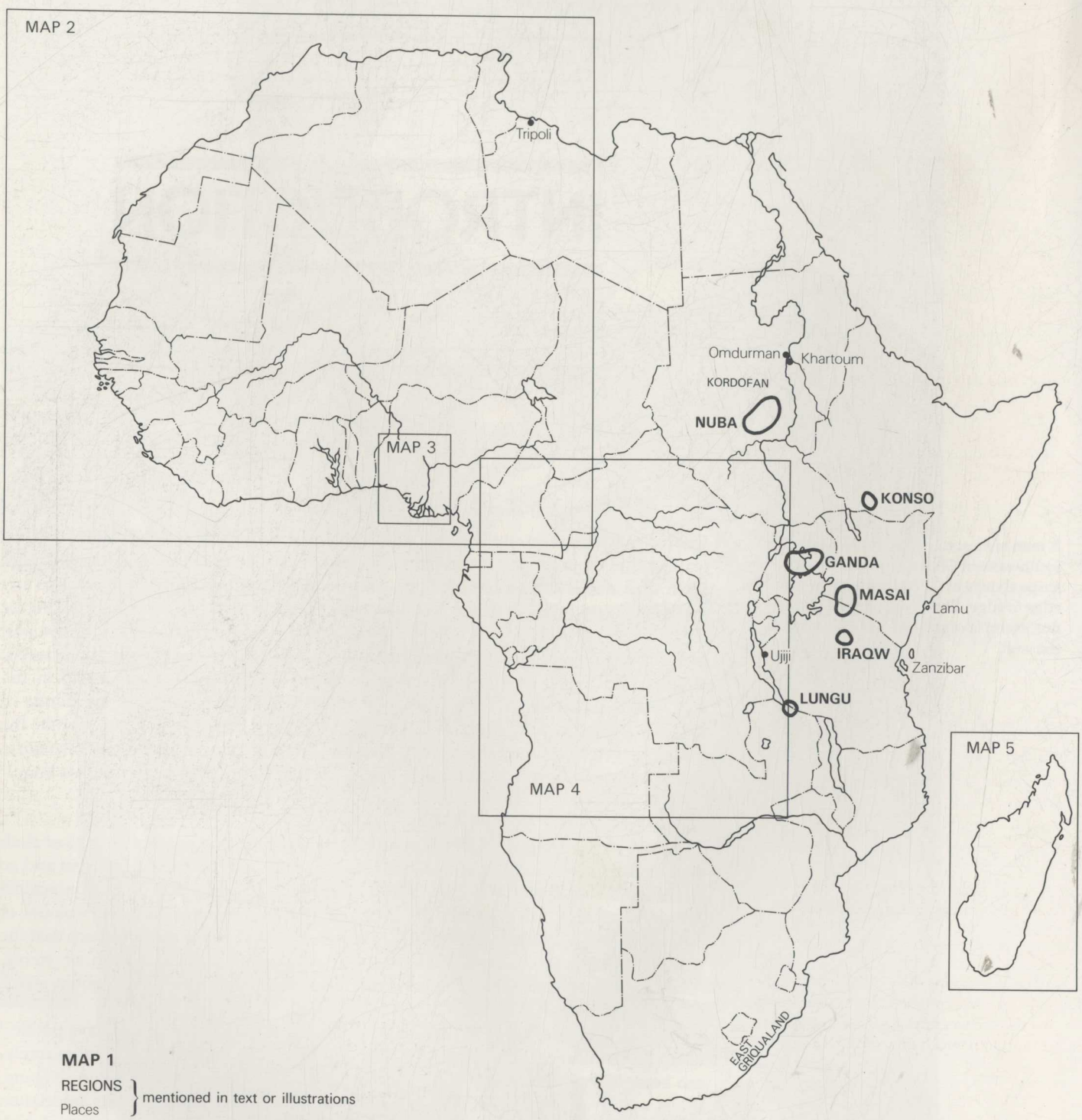
A man of importance of the Ewe people, south-eastern Ghana. The cloth is woven in strips about 4 in (10 cm) wide sewn together edge to edge. The design is an extremely fine example of pattern carried entirely in the weft.

One of the most obvious features of the material culture of Africa is cloth. Woven textiles, and other fabrics, are available in almost every part of the continent, and more often than not in substantial quantity. This is, of course, particularly apparent in any market in West or North Africa; but it is surely hardly less true of other regions. As far as the textiles are concerned, some of these fabrics will be imported from Europe and India, though by the present time the greater part is likely to be locally manufactured. Of this, much will be the product of industrial equipment and processes in the factories of post-colonial Africa; and yet much will have come from the hands of spinners, weavers and dyers still working, and very often flourishing, within the traditions of pre-colonial origin that continue to be of cultural and social relevance, with a secure indigenous patronage. These provide the subject matter of this book.

Textiles as a context of culture

The most obvious use of textiles is as articles of clothing. One or more lengths of cloth may be draped around the body, or tailored to make gowns, tunics, trousers and so on. Modesty, whatever that may mean to a particular people, and protection against the elements are, however, not the only purposes of clothing. Particular colours or decorative embellishments or shapes of garment may have cultural value such that the wearer is immediately associated with the possession of great wealth or status. Alternatively, an otherwise relatively poor man may possess one costly gown which he will wear only at important occasions.

Particular colours, kinds of decoration or shapes of garment may also have political or ritual significances. The tribal affiliation of a Moroccan Berber woman, for example, can be seen (coincidentally) in the pattern of stripes of her cloak. In Benin, Nigeria, chiefs wear red cloth as part of their ceremonial court dress; and red by its association with anger, blood, war and fire is regarded as threatening. By the wearing of such cloth a chief protects himself, and his king, from evil, that is to say from witchcraft and from the magical forces employed by their enemies (Paula Ben-Amos, 1977). In addition, however, some chiefs wear red cloth which is scalloped to produce a type of skirt known as 'pangolin skin'. The scales of the pangolin are widely used also as a protective charm against evil and the pangolin is regarded as the one animal the leopard (a metaphor of kingship) cannot kill. Wearing this costume can, in addition to giving protection from evil, be interpreted as referring to the potential opposition between the king and the Town Chiefs, the resolution of which is so important a part of the political tradition in Benin. In this particular case the red cloth used is of



MAP 1

REGIONS
Places
} mentioned in text or illustrations

PEOPLES mentioned in text or illustrations, i.e. those not shown on maps

—·—·— National boundaries

0 500 1000 miles
0 500 1000 1500 kilometres

Above A man wearing a raphia cloth bordered with raphia buttons. Bunda, Zaire.

Above right Skeins of indigo-dyed yarn for sale in an Akoko-Edo market, Nigeria. The women are wearing as skirts lengths of cotton cloth which they have woven.

Opposite Africa. For areas in rectangles see maps 2–5 on pages 51, 68, 87 and 133.

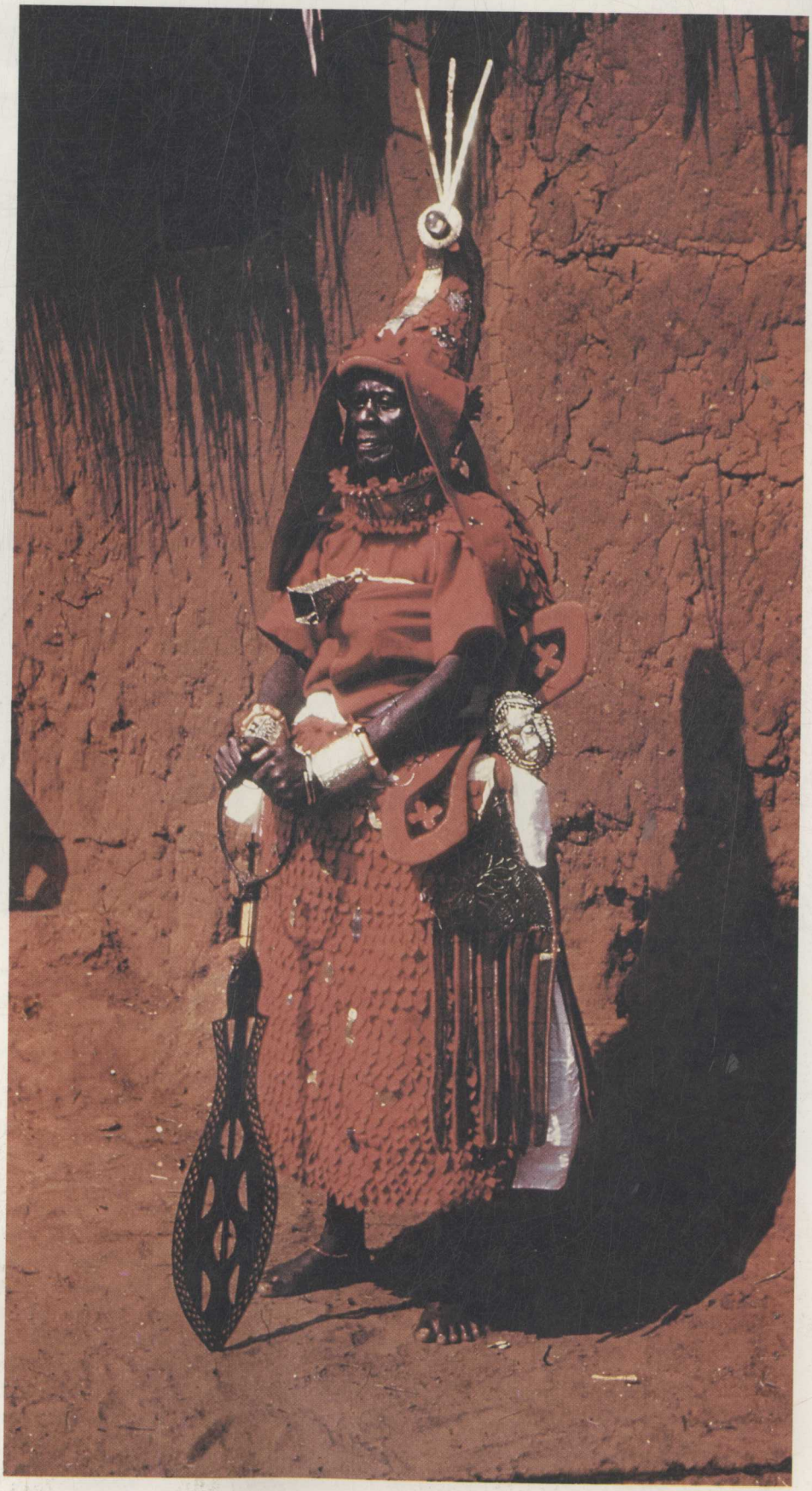
European manufacture although it has been imported into Benin since the late fifteenth century. (As we shall see, we cannot ignore the use of European products in textile design and manufacture in Africa.)

The basic colour spectrum of Africa, red, black and white, is, of course, rarely without some level of significance although the precise nature of this significance will vary from one people to another. Elsewhere in Nigeria, as among the Ebira for example, red is a colour associated not with danger and war but with success and achievement with which they overlap but do not coincide; and in Madagascar the term 'red', *mena*, is applied to burial cloths though with the sense of 'colourful' rather than because they are dominantly red in colour. The contrast is at least in part between the colourful shrouds of the dead and the white cloth worn by mourners.

Textiles are not only used to clothe the living, obviously, but also the dead (as in the above Malagasy example), as well as providing clothing for the manifestations of the world of the dead, or of some other mode of existence, in masquerade form. Here too colour is likely to be of significance and certain kinds of textile may be produced specifically for such purposes. Textiles may be used to dress neither person, corpse nor spirit, but a house, to mark an event of some significance, or, similarly, a shrine. Finally, gifts of textiles are a means by which social relationships are created and maintained.

In the absence of woven cloth people may use barkcloth or skins, and in a few places

Above A masquerader commemorating a deceased elder. Ebira, Nigeria. The costume is made up of Bunnu red burial cloth, imported for the purpose, together with locally woven shroud cloth. The costume also incorporates relics of the deceased man it commemorates. (The Ebira are close neighbours of the Bunnu.)



Right Chief Osuma, one of the town chiefs of Benin, Nigeria, in ceremonial court dress. He is wearing the red 'pangolin skin' skirt.

Far right Three young women of the Ayt Brahim, one of the tribes of the Ayt Hadiddu, eastern High Atlas, Morocco. They wear the cloak and headdress proper to women of their tribe.

A house dressed for a funeral in a Bunnu-Yoruba village, Nigeria. Inside, the corpse of an important man awaits burial. This is indicated by the distinctive red prestige burial cloths of the area displayed on the roof.

A puppet show in northern Nigeria. The puppeteer's booth is an embroidered, indigo-dyed Hausa gown of the usual wide-sleeved variety. The puppets are displayed through the neck of the gown.