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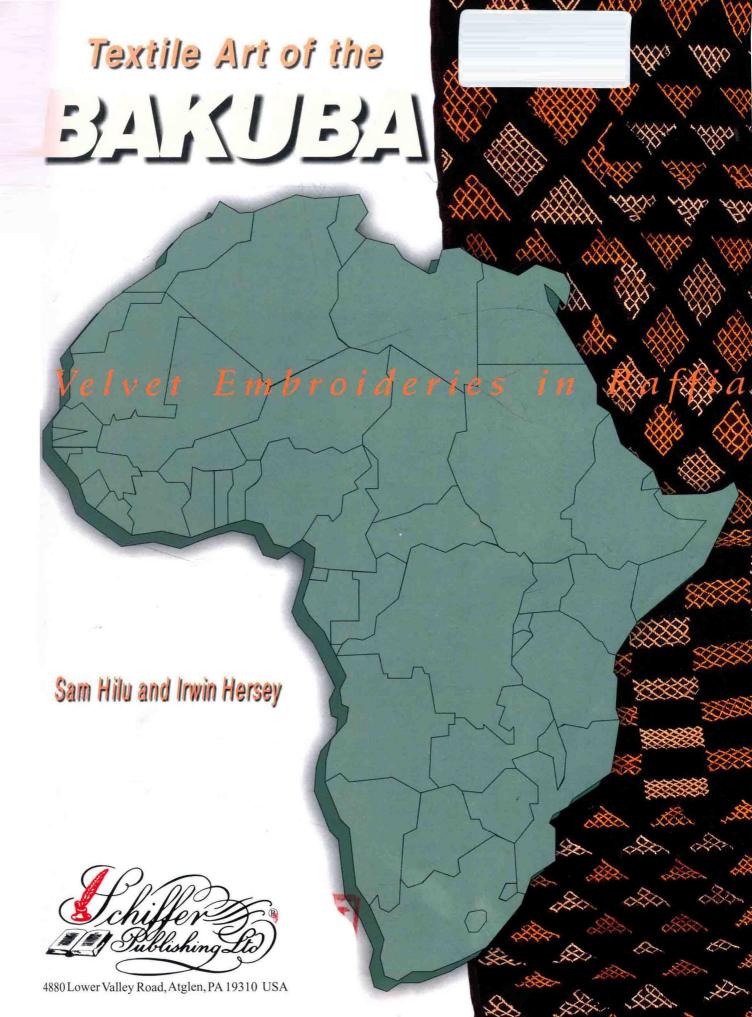
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## Dedication

To the anonymous artisans that made these magical textiles, this book is dedicated with the greatest degree of respect, admiration, and appreciation.

# Foreword

My first exposure to the fascinating hand-woven sisal-raffia textile weavings of the Bakuba Tribal Confederation was in 1965, at a sale of Tribal Arts held at the old Parke-Bernet auction house in New York City.

I attended this auction with my dear friend of forty years, Mr. Irwin Hersey, co-author of this book, and an internationally recognized authority on Tribal Arts. His vast knowledge and expertise has been of inestimable help to many collectors, museums, and myself in particular.

At this auction — in and among the various masks, statues, and other fascinating objects that were being offered for sale — I came across a group of six striking sisal-raffia weavings that had dazzling abstract "Op-Art" embroidered motifs covering their surface. Four of these had a somewhat velvety feeling to them and were approximately 25" x 23" in size. The remaining two were approximately fourteen feet long and two-feet wide. I looked them-up in the auction catalogue and they were described as raffia-sisal weavings of the Bakuba Tribal Confederation of the Congo, Central Africa. The four smaller pieces were described as *Velours de Kasai* (Kasai velvets). Their presale estimates were from \$500 to \$700. The two long ones had wonderful patch appliqués on them that had an incredible look of modern art; the presale estimates on them were \$1,500 to \$2,000. All of



Raffia mats are offered for sale in a bazaar in New York City.







these were from the estate of a Parisian artist who had acquired them from various art-dealers in Paris and Brussels after World War I. At the actual auction sale the smaller ones realized from \$700 to \$900 and the longer ones brought \$2,500 to \$3,000 each, and the bidding was spirited. Their great graphic qualities, along with the boldness of their abstract designs, and the use of a sisal-raffia fiber as an art medium fascinated me and I became a collector of them from that time onwards.

Afterwards I was on the lookout for these textiles. With the help of Irwin Hersey, I was able to acquire them, off and on, in Europe and from various dealers and auctions houses, paying on average \$150 to \$250 for the smaller ones; and from \$700 to \$900 for the longer ones. I judged them by their design impact; the craftsmanship involved in their stitching; their condition; their design symmetry and intricacy; and their age, while searching for the best possible price.

These textiles were not easily found until the Congo erupted in inter-tribal clashes in the 1960s, when tens of thousands refugees were displaced by the fighting. Thousands of these textiles — in all sizes and ranges of workmanship — soon found their way to Europe and the United States. African runners and traders funneled them to collectors and dealers. They could be found at flea-markets at any price, offered for negotiable prices ranging from \$50 to \$500 each for the smaller ones and \$500 to \$1,000 for the longer ones. I must have gone through ten-thousand or more during the past thirty-five years, to come-up with the ones in this book. If I were to put a value on the cloths displayed here, I would assign an average value of about \$400 to the smaller ones and \$1,500 for the larger-ones.

How does one evaluate these fascinating textiles? For myself, I judge them from a westernized point of view based entirely on their initial design impact. The fact that they are still available in all ranges of workmanship and value makes them wonderful, inexpensive, works of art that can be hung and admired by the owner, and appreciated by art collectors and designers everywhere.

Sam Hilu New York City

## Introduction

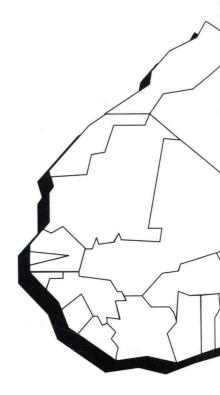
### Origins of the Cloth

There can be little question that, of all the textiles produced by the native peoples of Africa, the so-called "Kasai velvet" cut-pile cloths of the related Kuba tribes of the Kasai District of what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) in Central Africa are the most important. They have long been the most sought after, the most valued, the most studied, and the most collected.

Kuba mythology teaches that these well-known fabrics originated with one of their great ancestor figures, variously thought to be either King Shamba Bolongongo (1600-1620) or a king's son named Shaamweky. The earliest cloths of this kind to be found in European museums were acquired in Guinea and apparently originated in Angola, strongly suggesting a non-Kuba origin.

Emil Torday, the great early Kuba ethnographer who explored this part of Africa in the early 1900s, suggested that Shyaam (another name for Shamba Bolongongo), the ancestor king who the Kuba credit with creating civilization and formulating all Kuba culture, introduced raffia cloth from the Pende, another Congo tribe. Meanwhile, Kuba tradition tells us that the invention of polychrome or multi-colored textiles can be ascribed to the wife of Shyaam.

To say that these cloths are made by the Kuba is a misnomer, since "Kuba" happens to be a Luba word, and the Kuba peoples usually refer to themselves either as Bushoong or use another of their sixteen specific tribal names, which include, in addition to Bushoong, the Bieeng, Bokila, Buleng, Ilebo, Kaam, Kayuweeng, Kel, Kete, Maluk, Mbeengi, Ngeende, Ngomba, Ngongo, Pyaang and Shoowa. However, since textiles of this type have long been referred to and have become known as "Kuba cloths," we will continue to use this term here.





A raffia cloth in the Museum at Ulm, Germany, is perhaps the earliest such textile to reach Europe. It is mentioned in the Museum's Catalogue of 1659. Very shortly thereafter, between 1666 and 1674, the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen accessioned some twenty cut-pile textiles. Others, usually referred to as "Congolese," and also dating to the seventeenth century and probably originally part of the Danish collection, are today in the Swedish Royal Armory in Stockholm.

Georges Meurant, the Belgian artist-scholar who wrote a monumental and definitive study of Kuba textiles entitled *Shoowa Design* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1986), tells us that some watercolors painted in 1666 and now in the Oriental Library in Modena, Italy, show similar cut-pile textiles, which reportedly came from either Angola or the Congo.

European collectors of African objects began to amass collections of cut-pile textiles acquired in the Congo beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, although a few must have been included in Portuguese Cabinets of Curiosities perhaps as early as the sixteenth century.

Meurant notes that the nineteenth century examples were apparently produced using many of the same techniques as those employed in weaving the very oldest pieces, while others combine continuous as well as cut-pile embroidery. However, all have the same rectilinear geometric patterns as those found in seventeenth century examples.

As might be expected, Kuba textiles have long been admired in artistic circles, and several large collections were formed in the first half of the present century. In addition, there has been a major revival of interest in collecting Kuba cloths in recent years.

There has been considerable speculation down through the years over exactly how many Kuba cut-pile textiles have actually been produced in the last four centuries. A clue may be found in the fact that, early in the seventeenth century, it was reported by a visiting traveler that some 12,000 to 15,000 high-quality pieces and as many as 40,000 to 50,000 pieces of medium quality were being produced each year.

This probably represented the total number of cloths made in the region. These were quickly bought up by the Portuguese and brought to Loango, at that time the capital city of the Kongo Kingdom and a major trading center for export and exchange with Angola for slaves.

In 1670, the Dutch explorer Otto Dapper reported that Loango was exporting raffia textiles with geometric designs among other products. Dapper tells us that these fabrics were unknotted, very tightly woven embroideries, with tufts of fine hair threaded between the warp and weft to form complex rectilinear designs.

The Portuguese reached the mouth of the Congo River late in the fifteenth century, and from that point on built a colonial empire along the coast of Equatorial Africa by establishing relations with several of the Bantu Kingdoms in the areas both north and south of the river mouth and several hundred kilometers inland. At that time, the Kuba constituted one of these Bantu Kingdoms.

Meurant tells us that the coastal populations and the people of the Kongo Kingdom, another of the Bantu Kingdoms, used the embroidered textiles as a form of currency in their extensive trading activities.

Even in those days, such textiles were prestige cloths, used as garments as well as shrouds for the dead by the King and his family, the wellborn, and the wealthy. It also appears that, by the end of the seventeenth century, the many Catholic missionaries in the area were using the textiles as church vestments.

All this ended, however, with the collapse of the Kongo Kingdom at end of the seventeenth century, and today no

traces of cut-pile embroideries of any kind exist in the coastal areas of the former Kongo territories. In modern times, all such cloths seem to have originated among the Kuba peoples.

It would be remiss at this point not to mention another important kind of embroidered textile produced by the Kuba, the women's skirts usually known as Nchak. These long loincloths range in length from twelve to as much as thirty feet or more, and twenty to forty inches in width. They are often reserved for important women's ritual dances or other ceremonial purposes. Treasured by their owners, they are often kept for generations.

These skirts are made up of a large number of small rectangular panels, often without borders, which are covered with small embroidered pieces seemingly sewed on aimlessly but actually artistically arranged so as to form distinctive patterns against the background fabric.

The origins of these cloths are lost in antiquity, although it has often been suggested that the odd-shaped embroidered patches began as repairs made to treasured old skirts which had been ripped or torn, and only later began to be organized into distinctive patterns. In modern Nchak, the embroidered pieces are almost always arranged to form over-all patterns.

These two distinctive types of fabrics have exercised such a strong fascination over other native Africans that in the past the Kuba were actually often called "Bambala," which can be understood to mean "people of the cloth."

An old Dogon adage goes: "To be naked is to be silent." In a recent book Berenice Geoffrey-Schneiter, musing on this adage, noted that in cultures where writing has not developed, signs and symbols multiply. They show up everywhere — on sacred and secular objects, on the walls of ordinary houses and palaces, on human bodies, and, of course, on the fabrics that cover those bodies.

The Kuba Kingdom, created in the Kansai area in the seventeenth century, to this day produces cut-pile textiles and Nchak embroidered cloths, although in recent years they have declined considerably in workmanship as well as design, while fine old examples have become difficult to find and quite expensive.

Nevertheless, in this area even today the Kuba still reign supreme.

### Kasai Velvet Cut-Pile Cloths

In tracing the history of the Kasai Velvet cut-pile fabrics of the Kuba, Georges Meurant points out that among the various Kuba tribes, the Bieeng do not make cut-pile embroideries; the Ngombe and the Ngongo produce a punctiform cut-pile fabric with individual tufts resembling dots; and that it is actually the Shoowa who have produced the largest body of Kuba geometric design work. In addition, it is the Shoowa who developed dense cut-pile fabrics punctuated by continuous embroidery, a style that soon spread throughout the area.

Meurant indicates that a comparison of seventeenth century cut-pile fabrics with the mats, engravings, and tattoos from the former Kongo territories as well as from the Kuba reveals "a common geometric rectilinear imagery, using right angles or oblique angles, or filling horizontal or vertical partitions in the fabric with oblique compositions."

Although he regards the similarity between such designs and designs found in twelfth and thirteenth century European embroidered liturgical vestments or medieval heraldic patterns as being "too blatant for it to be merely coincidence," and believes the Kuba borrowed these designs, on this point at least the decision must be "not proven." Although such a similarity does indeed exist, there is nothing concrete from the art-historical standpoint to suggest that similar European and African designs were not arrived at independently.

The use of repetitive or discontinuous rectilinear designs arranged in cyclical patterns appears to go back as far as the Neolithic Era. With the passage of time, the rectilinear designs gradually turned into spirals, meanders, circles, and half-circles.

It must be remembered that luxury Kuba objects of all sorts have long been ornamented — many would say over-ornamented — with decorative patterns. Kuba expert Jan Vansina tells us in *Children of Woot* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1978) that two different types of motifs exist. One, used in scarification patterns on women, on ceremonial drinking horns, and on certain types of cloth like Nchak, consists of isolated motifs more or less juxtaposed according to the fancy of the artist. The other, used in decorating all other types of objects, consists of geometric motifs made up of either angular or flowing lines.

Vansina says that some two hundred patterns of this second type can be recognized (although this would appear to be an underestimate), and adds that this category is considerably more dynamic than the first. He also points out that throughout Kuba history it has been regarded as a considerable achievement to invent a new pattern.

Every Kuba king had to create a new pattern either at the beginning of his reign or, in the case of certain kings, on the occasion of the carving of the dynastic statue made to mark his reign. Some patterns are named after their inventors, and some inventors of new patterns are women.

In his discussion of how new patterns come about, Vansina recalls an old anecdote which relates that, when missionaries showed the then Kuba King the first motorcycle he ever saw in the 1920s, he exhibited little curiosity about the vehicle itself but instead was enthralled by the novel patterns it made in the sand. He later had the pattern copied and then gave the new pattern his name.

Not only did every pattern have a name, but many had more than one name because patterns were sometimes called different things in different parts of the country. Variant names occasionally referred to natural objects or beings, such as "the folds of the python," rather than the name of its inventor. Vansina notes that the evidence suggests considerable dynamics among textile patterns.

This is borne out in a study of Kuba artistic geometry, which suggests that artists achieved a very high percentage of all the possible permutations of simple patterns. Donald Crowe, who produced the study, believes that most patterns of the second type are taken from weaving patterns or perhaps from plaiting, as in basketry or mat making. He also suggests that decorations found on the rims of pottery may also have been a source of inspiration.

Among the patterns of the first kind are stylized human, animal, plant, and object shapes. Vansina tells us that he found one textile in which such patterns were used as a kind of puzzle or rebus — almost like the beginning of a pictographic script. However, he adds that this was almost unique in his experience.

He believes such patterns were not supposed to be either used or "read" in earlier times, although he adds that some meaning may well have been attached to this type of juxtaposition of different motifs in the fabric.

Fancy textiles have long differentiated social status and class among the Kuba. The first such cloths may well have been among the luxury imports to Kuba country from beyond the Kwilu River in the early seventeenth century. Vansina notes that "the appreciation shown for innovation in artistic matters is also best explained by linking it to social prestige."

He goes on to say that while, as far as we know, no special patterns were reserved for certain ranks, rank was unquestionably measured by the novelty of the patterns one wore, the skill in their execution, and particularly the amount of labor expended in making them. Thus, unusual new designs that required a considerable expenditure of labor made such textiles favored possessions of the upper classes.

Tracing the origins of these cut-pile fabrics is far from an easy matter. Throughout Kuba history, raffia cut-pile cloths have been highly regarded, often serving as part of the tribute paid to the king once a year by villages under his reign. As late as the 1950s, Vansina tells us, one village was asked for one raffia cloth for every adult male in the village. In addition, there was also special tribute from time to time when there was a need for special products like decorative mats at the palace.

It is believed that it was the Kete who were responsible for the cultivation of the raffia palm in Kuba country. The palm flourishes in the grassland environment in which the Kuba settled. Throughout their history, the Kuba used raffia squares (or Mbal) as a local currency, and Kuba cloths constituted a major Kuba trade item from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, with the "Mbal" term recognized over a large portion of the western half of the southern savanna.

While ivory was crucial to Kuba long-distance trade, luxury goods like velvet cloth, embroidered cloth, and clothing were the most important products traded to regional and local networks. Raffia squares served as the standard of value and often may have been used as currency.

Why were Kuba textiles so highly thought of and so sought after in other parts of Africa? The answer is that they were simply better than other African fabrics. Not only were they decorated with a multitude of different patterns, but the variety of the embroidery, the suppleness of the cloth, and the quality of the finish, especially that of the velvet-like cloth, was remarkable, and unknown elsewhere in Africa.

Interestingly enough, Vansina points out that Kuba cloth is not as tightly woven as the cloth of their neighbors, the Leele, for example, who make the tightest woven textiles in all of Central Africa. However, Kuba cloth is more supple and, because of its cut-pile finish, can be made to look more shiny. Among the Kuba, new cloth was soaked and beaten to give it a more silk-like finish much appreciated in the area.

Vansina agrees that, while the technical development of such cloth may have been entirely local, the creation of a velvety cloth characterized by raised and dyed geometrical patterns is not. Dyeing by staining thread or the whole cloth with red camwood powder is regarded as the oldest form of such textiles, but the use of black, yellow, and later a bluish color is due to the invention of a number of local techniques.

"The techniques for producing the pile, some embroidery techniques, and at least the idea for polychrome textiles,"

Vansina adds, "came from the Kwilu area, as tradition asserts by ascribing these inventions to Shyaam's wife."

Raffia textiles from Kongo were mentioned as early as 1508, which means that they were already being produced when the Portuguese arrived in this part of Africa. By 1583, Duarte Lopes tells us that they were being made in the lower Wamba-Kwango area.

This early area of production corresponds to the region of Okanga. Interestingly enough, Duarte Lopes tells us that one of the names for a variety of cloths was "Enzaka," which Vansina believes is probably the origin of the Bushoong word "Nchak," or women's skirt. He also believes that samples of this type of cloth may have reached the Kuba as far back as the time of Shyaam.

In any case, he is convinced that the techniques came from the Wamba-Kwango area and reached the Kuba as early as the seventeenth or possibly the early eighteenth century. He notes that the seventeenth century examples of raffia cloth now in museums in Ulm, Copenhagen, and London, which originated in the Wamba-Kwango region, are similar to Kuba velvet-type cloth in patterns of decoration. In addition, a 1971 study of Kongo cloth indicates that the techniques used to make them were almost identical, further bearing out the idea that Kuba cloth-making techniques originated in the Kongo region. Interestingly enough, when Torday was in Kuba country early in the last century he found embroidered cloth only among the Bushoong.

Kuba embroidered textiles do reflect a European technique called Richelieu embroidery, a favorite of the Italian clergy in the seventeenth century. Italian missionaries probably had vestments made using this technique in Kongo, and it is possible that the Kuba borrowed the technique for their own textiles. However, Vansina points out that the Kuba may very well have developed the technique independently, adding that "the linguistic evidence favors borrowing (the technique) because we know that the word 'Nchak' is a loan-word from the Kikongo language."

As noted earlier, the Kuba have long been renowned for vast amounts of decoration lavished on virtually everything they saw, utilized, or wore. Their buildings were decorated; their figural sculptures and masks were decorated; their beautifully made baskets, mats, boxes, and other household objects were decorated; and their own bodies and clothing were decorated, all in the same type of rectilinear geometric designs.

If ever a culture could be singled out for believing that more is better, that culture would have to be the Kuba, who have become notorious for their *horror vacui*. Almost every inch on every surface is decorated, often with designs so dense that the background surface is all but obliterated. As one commentator has observed, it is almost as though the absence of decoration indicated poverty.



Ceremonial objects illustrate the penchant the Kuba people enjoy for allover decoration. The crocodile figurines were used by shaman for predicting the future. The two vessels are adorned with patterns strikingly similar to those found on raffia embroidered mats.