



# JOHN GILLOW **african textiles**

Colour and Creativity Across a Continent

with 585 illustrations, 572 in colour



#### For Rosie and to the memory of my beloved mother, Yvonne

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Igarra stripwoven woman's wrap from Nigeria with warp-ikat details in some of the warp stripes.

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Embroidered woollen details on the corner of a Berber woman's haik, Anti-Atlas mountains.

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Bakhnug, Berber woman's everyday shawl from Gourmessa, south Tunisia, Woven of sheep's wool with supplementary cotton details, it has been dyed blue over red, while the ends have

Limbe hunter's shirt dyed with an infusion of tree roots and printed with a leaf and mud-based dye. This type of work is known as huronko.

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TOP LEFT Pokot woman's collar of vegetable fibre strung on stiff wire, north Kenya, воттом LEFT Tahendirt, woman's cloak, High Atlas, Morocco.

TOP RIGHT Bamileke elephant society mask adorned with beads and buttons. воттом RIGHT Ijogolo beaded apron of a married Ndebele woman with children. The imported seed beads are worked in herringbone stitch on a goatskin base.

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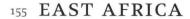
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African textiles have been the subject of much study over the last few decades. Some students have concentrated on the aesthetics of African design, some have taken an anthropological approach, many have naturally just responded to the visual stimulus and excitement of seeing patterns, designs and combinations of colours for the first time, while others have been fascinated by the particular techniques of making and decorating African cloth. There have been many studies in depth of particular regions, but, with a few honourable exceptions, no attempts to provide an illustrated general survey of the textiles of the whole African continent.

This book aims to do just that, to present, region by region, the handmade textiles of West, North, East, Central and Southern Africa and to outline the techniques used to make them, some of which – such as stripweaving and cut-pile raphia embroidery – are virtually unique to the continent. The trade links established and the accompanying cultural and religious implications and their profound influence on textile production are also examined.

Traditional textile techniques and uses have been maintained in many areas, while they have died out in others.

Strict job demarcation has been the norm. Usually men dominate commercial – and women domestic – production, but there have always been exceptions to this general rule. Indeed, in recent times, women in such countries as Egypt and Nigeria have become commercial weavers on looms hitherto the domain of men.

A visit to any African marketplace provides an assault on one's senses. Market women dressed in brightly coloured machine prints bustle through, carrying baskets of vegetables or bales of cloth. Villagers come to market wearing either the same colourful garb or more sober handwoven cloth, and very often a mixture of the two. It is these traditional, handcrafted, indigenous cloths that are the focus of this book.

Africa is a vast and varied continent that has long fascinated those born outside its bounds. Attracted by its wealth of minerals, animal products and manpower, traders and colonists, slavers and missionaries have, over the centuries, flocked to its shores by land and, especially, by sea. Traders had to overcome the difficult barriers of vast desert and dense forest that separated the populated areas.

Africa's peoples are of varied origin, from Arab and Berber descent in the north to Khoisan speakers and European colonists in the extreme south. There are Nilotic speakers in the north-east, but the vast majority of the population south of the Sahara belong to the Bantu language group.

All of Africa's population have the same basic clothing needs as the rest of humanity. They have to have some form of flexible material to protect themselves against the elements and usually a piece of fabric to cover the genitalia of both sexes and to ensure their modesty. Special garments are required for different stages of life, such as birth, circumcision, first menstruation, marriage, birth of a child, or death. Even those African cultures that do not mark any

## INTRODUCTION

The Diversity of African Textiles

of the other rites of passage with a special ceremony often provide a traditional shroud for a burial.

North Africa is part of the Mediterranean world. Though inhabited for millennia by Berbers, it has been influenced by invasions of the Maghreb by Arabs and Turks. Egypt, which has always been the gateway for Asian cultural and religious influences to enter the continent, has experienced the same invasions, but, due to geographical proximity, has adopted Levantine ways. The Maghreb has a great tradition of weaving, with the Berbers and Arabs using horizontal, ground and vertical looms. Abundant sheep's, goat's and camel's wool is woven into lengths of cloth that is designed for men's and women's clothing, either tailored or simply draped and pinned. Embroidery is used for decoration in those areas subject to Arab, Turkish or European immigration or influence.

Historically, North Africa was cut off from the inhabited regions to the south by the vast Sahara desert. Though it is inhospitable, it is nevertheless home to nomads like the Tuareg and some groups of Arab pastoralists. Crossed by caravan routes such as those linking Timbuktu in modern Mali to Gabes in Tunisia, North Africa experienced heavy trading in such highly saleable products as precious metals, spices, dyes, salt, leather, ivory, beads and, sadly, humanity, in the form of slaves.

Islam came to West and Central Africa, largely by these caravan routes. It was brought to East Africa, relatively close to Arabia, by sea, but trade was again the primary force. It was very much to the advantage of newly arrived Muslim merchants to convert the locals, who would be working with the same code of ethics, a fact that was not lost on later Christian missionaries.











## PAGE 8 LEFT TO RIGHT Textiles from: FIRST ROW Ghana, Mali, Mali, Mauritania. SECOND ROW Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia. THIRD ROW Ethiopia, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania. FOURTH ROW The Congo, the Congo, the Congo, Cameroon. FIFTH ROW South Africa, Zambia,

#### OPPOSITE

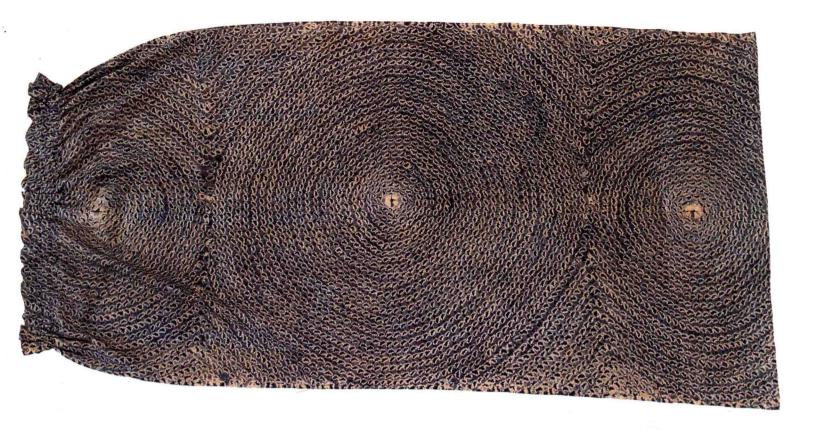
Madagascar, Madagascar.

TOP LEFT Warrior from Biskra, Algeria. TOP CENTRE Swahili family group, East African coast. The women are wearing machine-printed *kangas* in pairs. TOP RIGHT Warriors adorned with body paint parading before a battle, the Congo.

воттом Hizam bridal girdle, woven on drawlooms in Fez, using the highly complex lampas technique.

ABOVE Prestige cloth consisting of tripod-loom woven cotton strips made for a British official in Sierra Leone.

Conversion to Islam or Christianity had a profound effect on the clothing of sub-Saharan Africa. The Muslim faith has strict requirements of modesty for men and, especially, women. People whose clothing needs in a warm and humid climate had been minimal before the arrival of Islam - perhaps a breech-clout of bark cloth, often nothing at all - were, if converted, obliged to adopt clothing that covered the body in a modest fashion. Men who converted to the Islamic faith were often rich traders or political leaders within their own societies, and they in turn inspired imitation by others who may have not wished to adhere to the new religion, but who wanted to be associated with its prestige. So began the fashion for men of gown-like shirts, turbans and baggy trousers that can be seen in modern Nigeria, both in the Muslim north and in the predominantly Christian south. Conversion and the imitation of prestigious converts by others was a terrific stimulus to textile production. Weavers, dyers, tailors and embroiderers were now required.



The need for cloth to make this kind of clothing had increased manifold over traditional requirements and could not nearly be satisfied by expensive imports from North Africa, Asia or Europe. Neither bark cloth, nor skins nor furs were adequate for the job; woven cloth had to be provided. Locally made stripwoven cloth dating back to the 11th century has been found in the burial caves of the Tellem people in the Dogon area of Mali. Even though it is known that it was woven out of a local variety of cotton, the question of the exact type of loom used is still unanswered.

Though found to a very limited extent in other parts of the world, stripweaving as a method of manufacturing cloth is most characteristic of West Africa. Whole cloths are made up of very long and narrow strips that are cut into appropriate lengths and then sewn together, selvedge to selvedge.

Recent research indicates that the Mande weavers of the Sierra Leone area were probably the first to master the art of incorporating complex supplementary-weft patterning into strips. In the city of Kano, indigo-dyed veils made up of the narrowest strips are beaten to give a metallic sheen, and are so highly prized by Tuareg men that, weight for weight, they are some of the most expensive textiles in the world.

The influence of the Europeans trading on the west coast of Africa from the mid-15th century on was also of great importance in encouraging demand for textiles, which was partially satisfied by foreign imports. There was also a market for African woven cloth from a different region, which could be bought from the sea-borne traders. In many places this demand encouraged the weaving of 'country cloths' in the West African interior. They were taken up to the coast to sell to the Europeans, who would trade them along the coast.

The European traders bought slaves and gold in exchange for a range of European industrial products, such as alcohol and even dried fish. The Portuguese, Dutch, British and other northern Europeans built forts along the Gold Coast (modern Ghana). In the mid-18th century the Dutch recruited troops there to fight their colonial wars in Java, and on their return they are reputed to have introduced into West Africa a taste for Javanese wax-resist textiles. Modern-day Ghanaian women swathe themselves in brightly patterned wraps, usually wax-printed factory-made batiks of Dutch or local origin.

In Central Africa and parts of East Africa, bark cloth is still worn for prestigious ceremonial occasions both in