



AFRICAN COSTUMES AND TEXTILES

From the Berbers
to the Zulus



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to the Zulus

THE ZAIRA AND MARCEL MIS COLLECTION

Preface by
JOHN MACK

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Colour Separation
Pixel Studio, Milan

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Acknowledgements

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Zaira and Marcel Mis

Africa's Memory, Woven and Embroidered

Three decades of a shared passion have led Zaira and Marcel Mis to build a huge collection of textiles, clothes and ethnic headdresses from around the world. With this superb book, *Costumes and Textiles of Africa. From the Berbers to the Zulu*, the public at large is now also able to admire these treasures drawn from most of the great cultural areas of this fascinating continent.

His Near-Eastern origins, training as a textile engineer and his profession as a fashion designer explain Marcel Mis' keen interest in weaving techniques and dyeing in general, as well as the particular spell North African textiles have cast over him. His wife runs a contemporary art gallery and is more easily seduced by the graphic qualities typical of sub-Saharan fabrics.

In the rural Maghreb, Berber tradition dictates that wool weaving is done mainly by women. In contrast, craftsmen in the towns have been able to exploit the innovations introduced by the Arab and Turkish invaders, and weave silk and cotton which they then embroider with silk, gold and silver thread.

The earliest textiles of Black Africa, preserved in the dry caves in the Bandiagara Cliffs in Mali, date from the eleventh century. During this period, the elite of the Sahel empires would exchange their gold for the elaborate cloths that found their way to Africa from the lands of the setting sun and Egypt. The caravan routes stretching east fostered the rapid expansion of Islam, which then imposed its codes of modesty, thus further boosting the art of weaving in West Africa.

More isolated and therefore also more dependent on their environment, the nomadic or semi-nomadic populations of lands further east in Africa fashion their clothes out of skins decorated with brightly coloured beads. The tradition of manufacturing barkcloth has been maintained in Central Africa, but it is for their woven and embroidered raffia cloths that the Kuba in the Congo are famous.

Whether working wool, cotton, silk or even raffia or bark, these craftsmen prefer abstract geometric designs, but certain textiles are decorated with figurative, often highly stylized motifs. These designs are principally allusions to historical or mythical tales and thus become a "narrative thread" for the Dogon, or the memory of a people.

Just like the ornaments and headdresses, textiles are also part of a symbolic language. They are badges of identity and also proclaim the different stages reached in life, of which birth, puberty, marriage, motherhood, widowhood and death are the most clearly distinguishable. Depending on the local tradition, one or other of these events is certain to be celebrated with due pomp and accompanied by a display of wealth in the form of cloths and ornaments. Almost everywhere in Africa, funerals are an occasion for a riot of textiles, whether draped in the funeral chamber, wrapped around the deceased or accompanying him to his final resting place. In the hierarchical societies of the Cameroon savanna and the Congo basin, certain attributes are the prerogative of the sovereign and the members of his court, thus identifying them unequivocally. In the same way, warriors and hunters, as well as religious figures and diviners, are distinguished by the specific costume or accessories they wear.

This book is meant as a tribute to the creativeness of the peoples of Africa, particularly its weavers. Aside from the aesthetic pleasure it provides through its 280 superb photos, the book also bears witness to the variety of techniques these skilled craftsmen employ. The various authors take pains to put the textiles discussed in their historical context and to highlight the symbolic richness of this heritage.

Anne van Cutsem

Designs for living

The distinctive characteristic of the collection brought together in this book—the collection of Zaira and Marcel Mis—is that it seeks to be comprehensive. It covers all regions of the continent and has the kind of geographical and cultural range of collections otherwise only found in museums with an established commitment to collecting widely and seeking to create “representative” holdings. Together with the last volume of the Mis’ Asian collections—*Asian Costumes and Textiles* (2001)—the published record of this collection now takes the reader from Cape Town to Fujiyama. Yet, for all that, it is not essentially an “ethnographic” collection in the sense that it is narrowly focused on technological achievements at the expense of the aesthetic. It combines woven textiles with other kinds of surface that might be used for display—beadwork, animal hide, hats and headgear—to give a more complete picture, whereas most museums have masks and textiles as separate objects. In the Mis collection, for instance, an example from Cameroon brings them together to give the total effect (see page 165). So too the collections of beadwork put together in these illustrations are also seen together in context; those from South Africa and from the southern Sudan stand out. The result is an opportunity to explore an aspect of African aesthetics that is often obscured by a focus on three-dimensional art works. It incorporates an emphasis on design, on that amalgam of technical exactness and transparent virtuosity, what others have called the “agency” that informs aesthetic appreciation. It represents, perhaps, the same kind of combination of characteristics and interest that the collectors themselves share in their professional lives: the concerns of Directors of a fashion design company and a contemporary art gallery.

Collections of African textiles are generally just that—collections of textiles, and not much else. The exemplary collection made by Alastair and Venice Lamb and now in the National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., is of that sort. Its primary emphasis is on technology and the elaboration of different decorative techniques applied to woven fabric. That was also the focus of the exhibition and book (*African Textiles*) which I and John Picton originally did for the British Museum (Museum of Mankind) in 1979, and subsequently at the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Such collections are usually limited only to certain parts (as is the case with the Lambs’ which is entirely West African in content). The collection here is less narrowly defined. The range of hats from Central Africa shows some of the fascinating adaptations of headgear that are possible, turning the head itself into a site of display, notably those from the Democratic Republic of Congo where the pagoda-style example from the Ekonda is especially notable. Embroidered design is everywhere evident, from the subtleties of Egyptian tunics and colourful cloaks from Siwa oasis, to Hausa gowns and beaded crowns from Nigeria. European collections often focus on the predominantly yellow and black so-called plush textiles from the Shoowa group of the Kuba. Here, however, we can see the complexity of design still evident in the embroidered and appliqué raffia of the Bushoong group.

The inspiration of African sculpture for artists such as Picasso and Derain in France or, later, Henry Moore in Britain, is thoroughly documented. Less well-known—but equally direct—is the influence of the design of Kuba textiles from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo on artists as diverse as Henri

Matisse in France and Roger Fry and the members of his Omega workshop in Britain. Matisse and Fry both had access to collections of African textiles (and, in Matisse's case, he collected both Kuba cloth and also *tapa* cloth from the Pacific, the one of raffia, the other of barkcloth). The Pygmy barkcloths or the flaps from the Mangbetu of north-eastern Congo, not known then but illustrated here, are equally intriguing today. Photographs of a number of artists' studios show such textiles prominently displayed on the walls. No doubt part of the inspiration came from conscious and studious attention to their detail. But much else must have been a matter of collateral absorption. They knew the design format of the textiles because they lived with them. So too Zaira and Marcel Mis, the collectors of the textiles and costumes in this volume, see them every day, and in this publication share that opportunity with others.

But, of course, African artists live with such textiles—after all, they also wear them. The inspiration of textiles and costume is neither a phenomenon of the early twentieth century, nor limited to European artists. For instance, the pattern of woven textiles and the way they hang when worn has been a significant influence on El Anatsui, arguably the foremost contemporary artist working in West Africa today. His series of hanging structures made from recycled tin cans replicates the feel and aesthetic of West African gowns as worn, especially the narrow-strip *kente* cloth, which remains a prestigious fabric in his native Ghana. The hang of cloth is also emphasised in the photographs in this volume. And the fact that his raw materials are discarded trash reminds us that so many of the startling and imaginative designs reproduced in this book are not the self-conscious product of gleaming design studios but derive from simple looms set up in domestic huts or in ateliers alongside dusty streets.

John Mack

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From Fibres to Yarns through the Maghreb

FRIEDA SORBER

From the Pharaonic costumes of the third millennium BC preserved in Egyptian tombs to regional contemporary fashions produced in all the countries of the Maghreb, the costumes and textiles in North Africa reflect a wide variety of indigenous and foreign influences.

At the root of many traditions surviving today are probably the populations that have been known since antiquity as Berbers, a derogatory Greek name, related to the word barbarian, that has been retained in many European languages. Imazighen, as they prefer to call themselves, still inhabit most of North Africa. Much of the region belonged to the Roman Empire and many Imazighen converted to Christianity. When the Arabs invaded North Africa they converted the Berbers to Islam and imported a new Islamic culture that pervaded urban life but hardly influenced the inaccessible mountain ranges and deserts that comprise the larger part of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania, which even today share common Berber roots. Many Berber communities maintained lifestyles reminiscent of those in antiquity. Garments consisting of rectangles, draped around the body and fastened with pins (*fibulae*) and belts disappeared in Egypt in the nineteenth century but remained in use as women's costumes in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco well into the twentieth century. In parallel with the costumes, women perpetuated ancestral spinning and weaving traditions.

As in antiquity, spinning and weaving are a metaphor of life. Women transform wool into living threads using supported or drop spindles, much as spinners did in ancient Greece and Rome. They weave the threads into specific items of clothing on vertical looms, which come to life every time they are assembled from a random collection of sticks and cords. Looms are fed not only with the threads that are interlaced to shape a garment, but also with symbolic food like salt and herbs. When the finished item, never yardage but always a specific woven-to-shape object, is cut from the loom, the loom dies. Looms are simple constructions, but in the hands of experienced weavers they provide the framework for all the "textile" needs of Berber communities, ranging from heavy blankets and rugs to the transparent wool and silk *djellabas* and hooded cloaks still in use in Morocco. The hands and minds of the weavers add intricate patterns in a variety of weaving techniques, ranging from multicoloured tapestry to inlays of monochrome or coloured wefts and the addition of sequins and tufts of wool, silk or cotton. Technical comparisons with the many textiles from the early Christian era excavated in Egypt are tempting, but a relationship between them has so far been impossible to prove conclusively. This is because archaeological evidence from later periods is sadly lacking, except for a few fragments of textiles that travelled across the trade routes of the Sahara to the Bandiagara caves of West Africa in the Middle Ages.

Looking at traditional clothing styles today there is a marked distinction between urban styles, which were heavily influenced by the Ottoman empire that ruled over most of the Eastern Maghreb and large stretches of the Mediterranean coasts, and an indigenous Berber culture that dominates the deserts, mountain ranges and plateaus of the hinterland. Urban styles are marked by tailored costumes, often in

the shape of caftans, vests and wide trousers embellished with woven and braided galloons, and embroidery with applied, twisted cords. This style, once common to Islamic countries from Central Europe to South-East Asia, still survives in tailors' workshops in Libya, Tunisia and Morocco. In the last years of the twentieth century it was transformed into a contemporary idiom by Moroccan fashion designers who cater to markets far beyond North Africa. Urban populations preferred silk and imported fabrics from Europe. The Berbers used mainly wool from their own sheep or dromedaries, or cotton, which grows in many parts of North Africa. Their costume was composed of draped rectangular or semi-circular cloths, woven in the desired shape on simple looms. Garments draped around the body were held in place by pins or *fibulae* and woven or braided belts. The exact shape, colour and decoration of the garments were powerful markers of tribal identity. Even within relatively small areas, the diversity of costumes worn by different groups and subgroups could be subtly or markedly apparent. Well into the twentieth century the mountainous areas of Morocco kept their isolation and their traditions intact. Nevertheless the textiles and costumes avidly collected by Westerners towards the end of the twentieth century are reminiscent of a lifestyle that has virtually disappeared.

Few public or private collections have focused on North African costumes and textiles. The complexity of the area, which lies at the junction between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa and reflects cultures ranging from ancient indigenous populations, Greek, Roman and Jewish incursions, and early Islamic and Ottoman domination, and an uneasy history of attraction and rejection of European influences has left today's researcher with the ragged remnants of a multilayered tapestry, of which many threads have disintegrated beyond recall. Most collections, formed in the latter half of the twentieth century, concentrated on countries that have been easily accessible to Westerners and, within those, on the items that a burgeoning international market has deemed spectacular enough to attract Western and local buyers, who concentrate on individual items, thus separating them from their cultural context. Within this context Libya, Algeria and Mauritania remain virtually unknown.

Egypt

When the Arabs who brought Islam invaded Egypt, the country had a rich multicultural heritage combining indigenous African, Greek, Roman and Middle-Eastern elements. The desert climate and the burial practices left a rich heritage of textiles and costumes buried in the sand. Textiles became a focus of Western archaeologists towards the end of the nineteenth century, when all textiles excavated from the first millennium were labelled "Coptic". Today's researchers prefer the term Eastern Mediterranean for the thousands of textiles, some of which were exported from other parts of the Roman empire or further afield, to be ultimately buried in the sands of Egypt. The country itself had a thriving textile industry, to which many ancient documents testify. Urban industries working with wool, cotton and silk continued in Islamic times but rural Berber and Bedouin traditions are almost impossible to document. In the nineteenth century travellers like Edward Lane, who wrote on the manners of the Egyptians in the 1830s, made passing reference to the dress of the local Bedouin, but until the last decades of the twentieth century no serious attempts were made to document weaving and embroidery traditions or to collect costumes. And even then only the most extravagant costumes, like the tunics and veils adorned with bright embroidery and mother of pearl buttons worn by the women of Siwa oasis, were deemed worthy to enter Western collections. The embroidered costumes of the Sinai Bedouin, related to the ones worn in neighbouring Palestine, are often overlooked. Egypt's male population adopted the *gallabeya*, a caftan-like garment introduced with Islam centuries ago.

The only item of clothing that briefly attracted Westerners was the Assiut shawl. Little is known about the introduction of machine-made net into the town of Assiut in the nineteenth century. But a thriving local industry soon transformed the heavy cotton net, used as curtain material in Europe, into sparkling veils with geometrical and figurative designs of metal strips embedded in the fabric. Towards the end of the nineteenth century these shawls had already entered the wardrobes of European performing artists

with a bent towards the exotic. In the wake of the discovery of Tutankhamon's tomb, they briefly conquered the Western fashion market in the late 1920s. Much more enduring was their use by women from Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, who adopted them in various regional clothing styles.

Weaving traditions in Egypt have hardly attracted any attention. Male weavers in small oasis villages use pit looms to produce the silk (or rayon) veils and scarves used by the local population, which sometimes find their way to foreign tourists. In Cairo striped silk and cotton are still woven by hand. They are the preferred material for vests used by men throughout North Africa. Commercial activities during the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca are a vital link between fabric sellers in the souks of Fez and other cities, and the weavers from Cairo. A simple drawloom, used to make cotton bed-coverings, survives in the textile town of Achmim.

Tunisia

Tunisia, with its islands and many harbour towns along the Mediterranean coast, has a strong urban weaving and embroidery tradition. Silk weavers of Tunis, Sfax, Mahdia, Souss, Hammamet and other towns created a wide variety of silk fabrics. Complex, striped and chequered twill weaves in coloured silk and gold thread are still being made in Tunis, Djerba and Mahdia. Figured silks woven on drawlooms, the ancestors of the European jacquard looms, were used for specific veil fabrics. Workshops with drawlooms have all but disappeared. Only a small drawloom used for the ribbons decorating the Mahdia wedding tunic maintains a limited production. The silks are used both by urban and Berber groups.

Festive women's outfits are still being used today, mainly for weddings. Many Tunisians will rent traditional outfits, but shops also provide new and used costumes and accessories for the many styles used by coastal communities. The costumes often represent very specific adaptations of Ottoman and local Berber styles, incorporating embroidery in which flowers and fish, both symbols of fertility, abound. Like many other urban communities in North Africa, Tunisians have for a long time adopted European silks and wool fabrics, and from the nineteenth century machine-made net and lace, which are transformed into uniquely Tunisian garments decorated with lavish embroidery in gold, silk, cotton and even wool. Urban Tunisian men still wear traditional silk or wool garments produced by local tailors, and draped wool outer garments for special occasions.

Berber communities in the southern desert of Tunisia have remained closer to a strictly Berber culture. The women weave elaborate clothing in wool and cotton. The distinguishing features of the *bahnuq*, a long rectangular garment, are geometrical patterns in white cotton on a plain wool background. The designs only show after the completed piece has been dyed red or blue. The synthetic dye used colours only the wool, and the cotton which does not take the dye remains white. Women from southern Tunisia also used wool veils with tie-dye designs in many colours and belts braided in the sprang technique, equally decorated with tie-dye spots.

Morocco

Within North Africa, only Morocco, in the western corner of the Maghreb, has remained unoccupied by foreign powers throughout most of its history. The Roman Empire only dominated the northern part of the territory. When the first waves of Islam swept the country, they left intact a strong Berber identity. In the Middle Ages Berber dynasties, which had adopted Islam, strongly influenced Islamic Spain. After the defeat of the last Islamic ruler in Spain (in Granada in 1492), Morocco absorbed the Islamic and Jewish refugees from Andalusia. After the sixteenth century outside influences were restricted to the input of European and black African slaves, and to the products that urban Moroccans acquired through the looting of captured European ships or bona fide trade. Women in the cities developed uniquely Moroccan