

Making Haute Couture Out of Mud, *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine*, April – June 1999, Vol 10(2), pp 52 – 55

By: Joan Baxter

They lust after it in Paris, New York, Tokyo. African superstars—Angelique Kidjo, Wes, Oumou Sangaré, Salif Keita—drape themselves in it. It lends a touch of Africa to CD covers and music videos shot in Europe or North America. It struts its colours on the world's most exclusive fashion ramps, fetches outrageous sums in some of the world's most glamorous boutiques. In fact, it's become a must for anyone seeking a look that says: Africa.

It's called bogolan and despite all the hoopla it's been creating abroad, back home in its native Mali this cloth has stuck close to its humble and earthy roots. 'Bogo' in the Bamanan language means mud; 'lan' means 'traces of', and to the people of Mali, their mud cloth is about as new as the hills. The Bamanan people have been making it for many hundreds of years, perhaps as far back as the twelfth century AD.

'Today the people who are modelling bogolan in Paris are wearing a style, showing off a look,' says Harouna Niang, of Mali's Ministry of Industry, Trade and Handcrafts. 'That's fine. But here in Mali, people wear it as a culture. You could say the cloth actually speaks.'

Racine Keita, of Mali's national handicrafts centre, says that traditionally bogolan was part of a young bride's trousseau. It was made by mothers and grandmothers, who would spend months painting motifs on a single piece of cloth. They used combs to apply each stroke of the mud and leaf dyes that give bogolan its down-to-earth colours. Keita says that each cloth carried a motherly message. 'Each symbol painted on the cloth gives advice to a young bride—how to handle a jealous husband, how to keep peace with co-wives, how to cope with a demanding mother-in-law, all the things any wife has to learn.'

Over the centuries, of course, much has changed. Men also started to wear bogolan—particularly hunters' societies for whom the muted shades of green, yellow, ochre, brown and black were perfect camouflage in the bush. Then along came the French colonists, with their European ideas of style—and their prejudices. Suddenly people in urban areas such as the capital, Bamako, began to view bogolan as 'backward'. Made from locally grown and woven cotton, and hand-painted with natural dyes, it was seen as 'peasant' attire.

But Malians are stridently proud of their past and have never been quick to reject outright their glorious history or their traditions. Bogolan endured, particularly in rural areas. There, second-hand clothing from the West didn't swamp markets and the bazin boubous made from imported damask but dyed and waxed locally—now *the* dress of choice in cities—were generally beyond the reach of villagers.

So how did this 'peasant' cloth make the quantum leap from rural Mali to European fashion shows and top-ten music videos? 'That we owe to the late Malian fashion designer, Chris Seydou,' says Founémouso Sakiliba Ndiaye, president of the association of widows and orphans, and their bogolan workshop in Bamako. 'In the 1980s, Chris took our bogolan to Paris and dressed top models in it. The world saw it, loved it and suddenly there was a big demand for quality bogolan. In the West people like natural and handmade products. So that's why we produce it. It employs a lot of people. Our farmers grow the cotton, fishermen collect the mud from the river, villagers bring us the *ngalama* and *ciangara* leaves that give us the greenish or khaki dyes, and the bark from the toro tree that gives the reddish shades. Then we weave the cotton strips and do the intricate painting on the cloth.'

Alas, bogolan's international success and natural beauty may contain the very seeds of its destruction. Vendors of bogolan in Bamako say that because of the huge demand for the cloth, quality is suffering. Too many craftsmen with no expertise are trying to get in on the action. Even worse, they say, is the threat from powerful foreign textile companies—in Europe, North America and Asia—which have copied bogolan motifs and are mass-producing 'fake' bogolan prints for global markets.

Niang says impoverished Mali can hardly fight that trend. But he is optimistic that Mali can keep the production—and market—for authentic, high-quality bogolan cornered. Malian designers are cataloguing bogolan motifs on computer, and using them on dresses, hats, scarves, vests, pillowcases, drapes, bedspreads, anything the world market will gobble up. True bogolan needs dyes extracted from Malian soil and Malian trees that are painted meticulously and lovingly onto Malian cotton. That, Niang says, can never be copied elsewhere. He maintains that Malian bogolan will always appeal to the up-scale market, to people who want the real item and can afford to make the ultimate fashion statement: Made *(Only)* in Mali.