

Gala: The Importance of Indigo in Malian Culture

by Janet Goldner

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Hello. My name is Janet Goldner. Thanks for inviting me. I'm glad to participate in the conference. I'm an artist who makes steel sculptures and installations that also include photography and video. My artwork explores culture, identity, migration, and social justice. Since my Fulbright Research Fellowship in 1995, I've traveled to Mali every year for projects, research, inspiration and friendship.

The image is of indigo preparation in a Dogon compound. All of the photographs presented are my own.



The cultivation and weaving of cotton dates back more than a thousand years in Mali, as do the techniques for processing and dyeing with indigo which grows wild and is also cultivated.

Archeological excavations at the Bandiagara Escarpment in the 1960's unearthed remnants of indigo dyed cloth dating from the 10th to 12th centuries whose manufacture and motifs are similar to those found today.

In Mali, the word "indigo" refers to the plants, the dyes made from them and the cloth dyed with indigo. The importance of indigo is underscored by the fact that in common parlance, the word indigo is also used for any dyed cloth no matter the color or if the dye was natural or synthetic.

This image is of a group of Dogon musicians and dancers in Bandiagara in 2002.



The Dogon and Sarakole peoples are renowned for dyed indigo textiles. Dying is a complex process that can take weeks and requires a high degree of expertise. Techniques were passed from mother to daughter or father to son. Because there is mystery surrounding the production of the dye, the color indigo was associated with prestige, wealth, and power. It is used to express religious beliefs, patriotism, proverbs, or pride in traditional society.



In 2005, I interviewed artist, Kandioura Coulibaly for an article in the book, *Contemporary African Fashion*. The following quotes from that interview illustrate the importance of indigo in Sarakole, (also called Soninke,) culture.

Kandioura, Kletigui Dembele, the Groupe Bogolan Kasobane and friends paid homage to Malian heritage and the grandeur of West Africa through the costumes for horses and jockeys you see here. As well as for films, music videos, and fashion shoots.



Kandioua said: “When I was a child, indigo was too important for children. If we wanted to give a really big present, it was dyed in indigo. I participated in the work of dyeing and the cultivation of my mother’s indigo fields. I participated in all the ceremonies. To always have indigo clothes near is good for me. “



“My mother had a vase of indigo in the house. My father had a small field of cotton, not for sale but for the clothes of the family. When the first rain fell, we planted the field of cotton that was uniquely for clothing for the family. This was my first understanding that indigo was as important as the fields of millet. “

“I left the village to attend school around 11 years old. I had a grand boubou in indigo that my mother had made. An aunt put it into an indigo dye bath again. I always wore that grand boubou in indigo made by my mother. Blue-indigo is for me the Soninke, Sarakole culture.”



“In the past, we saw the grandeur of people by their beautifully embroidered indigo boubous because it took a long time to embroider a boubou, one year, two years. We keep the old boubous so that they stayed in the archives of the culture.

This embroidery of Djenne, Timbuktu, Nioro, Naimina, Sokoto in Nigeria, one part of Cameroon. All that is the Peulh of Sokoto, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Gao. It is from the same epoch, the same kingdoms that circulated between them. They gave each other presents.”

“Maliens had their way of ironing, by tapping the cloth. They had indigo dye. Bogolan was here. There was weaving. We had our way to embroider. We were independent. We had an elegance. I don’t know where it came from. It was in the origins. We had the wealth of the earth.”