WEST AFRICAN TEXTILES
BARROW HALL GALLERY
March 4—April 3
9 a.m.—5 p.m.
WEST AFRICAN TEXTILES

Exhibit curated by José Blanco and Jennifer Regan with assistance from Dr. Patricia Hunt-Hurst, Raúl Vázquez-López, and students from TXMI 4580: World Textiles (Jessica Baker, Allie Bashuk, Lauren Fylstra, Sara Idacavage, Rachel Jack, Ashley Scruggs, Kim Stober, Danielle Walsh).
This female outfit represents the colorful and flamboyant prints of modern African fashion which contrast the hand woven designs of traditional African dress. It is interesting to note that the modern print of the ensemble is not a traditional African design and resembles the art deco style of the early twentieth century. The pattern is created by a wax-printing process that has been copied by the Europeans. Interestingly, English wax-printed fabrics have become prestigious items in Nigeria costing more than the local outputs of the region. The fabric is inscribed with the words “Guaranteed English Wax” therefore verifying the quality of the print. The second interesting feature of this ensemble is the colorfully embroidered collar around the neckline of the caftan that appears to be industrially made. The decorative elements of the ensemble indicate that it is probably intended for special occasions.
This piece is similar to Kampala textiles created in Uganda. The material is likely a damask weave created with a synthetic fiber. The eyelet design is characteristic of African textiles and the piece was probably created with a wax print. Clear yellow, orange and green are preferred colors in Eastern areas of Nigeria. This type of textile is often used for woman’s “wrapper,” which is a cloth tied around the bottom half of a woman resembling a skirt or as a head wrap. Due to Nigeria’s richness in languages, the name used for head wrap is different in each language, but many people choose to use the Yoruba term “gele.”
This is a boy top and bottom worn in Nigeria decorated with a wax-printed technique. In the late eighteenth century, European manufacturers located in South Africa realized that their African customers were rejecting the European styled clothing they were producing. This led the manufacturers to start producing clothing that would be suitable for sale in Africa. Towards the end of the 19th century, a Belgian printer named J.B. Previnanare developed the African wax-cloth. He adapted a French-note printing machine that applied resin to the surface of cotton cloth. Even though this technique is called wax-print, the actual substance put on the cotton fabric is actually a type of resin (not wax). During the wax-printing process, the resin cracks which gives the textile its cracked look. This cracked look was an essential feature for the African consumer. Once this kind of garment was being produced in West Africa for sale, the designs were adapted to meet the specific needs for particular African colonies, including Nigeria.
This textile is known as a kampala, which is a type of patterned fabric from Nigeria. The term “kampala” actually derives its name from the capital city of Uganda. To make kampala, the background design is first woven onto the textile. The textile is then dyed, and the design is screen printed or stenciled (as in this case) on top. The fabric is then a “print on a print.” The small cross shape motif shown here is known as a kusimo. The fabric was possibly made to be used for a garment as the design on the fold (similar to a neckline) indicates.
The mud cloth is a traditional West African fabric dyed with fermented mud. The abstract design is painted on with a darker shade of fermented mud. Added decoration includes tassels trimming the bottom of the garment and a functional pocket. Mudcloths, just as Kente cloth, have been widely used outside Africa as a symbol of African heritage and incorporated into modern African designs.
One of the most striking of all daubed textiles are the bogolanfini, which translates as “mud cloth,” of Mali. These are decorated with white geometric patterns set on a dark background. River mud is applied with a bamboo splint or metal spatula to the fabric and the fabric is then bleached with a solution of caustic soda, peanuts, and millet resulting in a white pattern. Originated by the women of Mali’s Bamana culture centuries ago, bogolanfini has always been an essential component in the marking of major life transitions and rites of passage, such as birth, marriage, and death. Bogolanfini is a living art form with techniques and motifs passed down from generations of mothers to daughters; each piece of mudcloth tells a story. No two pieces are alike and each pattern and color combination has a meaning. The symbols, arrangements, color as well as shape of the mudcloth reveal secrets. The mudcloth is also used to define a person’s social status, character or occupation. Bogolanfini is ultimately an expression of Malian national identity.
The caftan is a traditional pullover dress from West Africa often known as a boubou. The male version of the garment is also known as a dashiki. The caftan has different styles for different occasions including simple draped cuts for everyday wear and more tailored pieces for formal wear. The fabric used to create the garment also determines how formal the caftan will be. Because of its simple design and plain cotton fabric, it is likely to be worn during informal occasions. Hand weaving traditions are important to the people of Burkina Faso, although this navy and white caftan appears to be industrially woven with machine embroidered patterns. The embroidered patterns resemble an insect, possibly a spider, although it is not clear if this is intentional.
In West Africa indigo usually represents wealth, abundance, and fertility. Indigo cloth panels are used for ritual purposes to express tribal identity and to show status. They have intricate designs and patterns are prized possessions created by a complex process which includes repeatedly dipping the textile and exposing it to air so the dye can oxidized.

Indigo used in West Africa is normally obtained from the Indigofera plant. Indigo is considered to be the oldest dyestuff known to man and has been in use since 2500 BC. The indigo plant is valued for it’s deep blue colored dye and was once the most widely used dye in the world before the advent of aniline dyes, or chemical dyes. Depending on how long the garment is dipped in the dye and exposed to the air, different shades of indigo can be obtained—light blue, navy blue, light black, and deep blue black colors can all be achieved. Today most indigo created is synthetic and since indigo is a hard dye to work with, new dying techniques have been developed.
The technique used for this textile is known as adire eleko. “Adire” is the Yoruba word for resist dyeing using indigo and “eleko” designates the use of a resist paste that is painted or stenciled onto the fabric. The design is applied onto one side of the cloth using a starch paste that is pressed into a zinc stencil using a metal spatula. The cloth is then dyed with indigo numerous times. The paste is scraped off the cloth before it is hung to dry. The starch acts as a resist substance so that when the dye is removed, the fabric is dark where there was no starch and light blue where the starch was applied. The word “agbada” is the Yoruba word for a man’s wide-sleeved gown, characterized by its long length and long arms (the arms of the garment are bunched together when worn). The v-neck is typical of agbadas and features an embroidered appliqué at the neck and down the center. Of the many designs featured in this textile, the popular “tree of life” motif can be seen, as well as the depiction of utensils, which may be related to the importance of owning these everyday objects as well as serving to indicate a particular level of prestige.
Adinkra cloth is a hand-printed fabric made in Ghana that is stamped and patterned with traditional Ashanti symbols by using a black or dark brown dye made of iron slag and a bark called Adinkera aduru. Using the dye, they draw lines on the cloth to divide it into squares. Next, they carve symbols into calabash gourds, press the gourds into the dye, and stamp the symbols onto the fabric. Adinkra cloths were traditionally made for royalty to wear at religious ceremonies and special occasions such as funerals. Through the years, people have also decorated the cloths to tell a story or to express their thoughts or feelings. The large red cloth with black print seen in this exhibit features some traditional Ashanti symbols. Osrane Ne Nsoroma, or moon and star, is a symbol of faithfulness and benevolence. It is sometimes used as a symbol of femininity or the interdependence and cooperation between people in successful relationships. Dwennimmen, or ram’s horn, is a symbol of humility, strength, wisdom, excellence and learning. Gye nyame, meaning only god, symbolizes the greatness and power of God. Ese ne tekrema, the teeth and the tongue, shows the need for friendliness, interdependence, and the complementary nature of humanity.
When most people think of tie-dye, they think of the 1960s but tie-dye has actually been around for about 5,000 years. There are many different techniques involving tie-dye and they vary by country. Tie-dye in India is called “Bandhani” and results in dots, squares, waves and strips. “Shibori” is the Japanese technique of tie-dye, and it involves putting a stitch in the fabric, dying the fabric, and then removing the stitches to reveal a pattern.

This textile is an example of African tie-dye. Dyes used in Africa are often all natural so the yellow in this pattern could have been obtained from the roots of a shrub. A tie-dyed textile may be used in several ways in Africa such as covering food, as a clothing wrap or just for decoration.
This is a two-piece suit worn by the Yoruba women of Nigeria. The top can be referred to as a “buba,” a loose blouse, usually with long sleeves and long enough to go a little past the waist. The constructed skirt replaces the “iro,” a rectangular piece that would traditionally be wrapped around the waist, and folded to stay in place. The buba is made from a wax print where it was immersed in a blue dye bath and other colors were added through color blocking with the image then etched for emphasis.

The fabric was bought in Nigeria but the garment was made in Tanzania and is an example of fashionable two-piece coordinating sets.
This rich purple fabric demonstrates the resist dying process known as tritik. The pattern is created by sewing threads onto the cloth that create tight folds in the fabric and resist the dye. In this case the stitching was probably done by machine. After the dye is applied, the threads are removed and the pattern is revealed. The piece appears to have been stitched by machine and then dyed by hand. Traditionally, the color purple has been reserved for the wealthy because of the difficulty of obtaining the pigment naturally, but the dye used for this fabric is probably synthetic. This fabric is from Ipele, a town in southwestern Nigeria. The end purpose for the piece is unknown, although it is probably made for a decorative women’s garment. The term “Ankara” refers to African prints that have recently gained popularity in Nigerian fashion.
Kente strips are traditionally found in Ghana. There are two main groups of weavers in Ghana - the Ashanti and the Ewe. The Ashanti weavers create traditional cloth for the royal courts and ruling classes. The Ewe, who are also farmers and laborers, weave for commercial reasons. An Ewe kente strip is distinguished by the use of more somber and cool colors, such as black, brown, green and dark blue, with less formal decoration. An Ashanti kente cloth on the other hand is distinguished by its use of bright colors and complex patterns. The cloth is usually produced by sewing narrow strips of woven cloth together lengthways. Usually twenty-three strips are needed to create a Ghanaian man’s robe.
Kente cloth has become a national symbol of Ghana. The term dates back to the 17th century in reference to the elaborate cloth made by Ashanti and Ewe weavers. The grades of cloth, the patterns, and the colors of a kente strip carry great social meaning, as they are major signifiers of one’s wealth and social standing. Patterns are most often regionally linked. Native Ghanaians can tell where a person is from and who he or she associates with by looking at the kente worn.

The main color of this strip is blue, which symbolizes spiritual sanctity, good fortune, harmony, and peacefulness. Other prominent colors include: red for spiritual and political readiness, green symbolizing growth, fertility, prosperity, vitality, yellow as spiritual purity, royalty, preciousness, wealth, and black for spiritual maturity, antiquity, ancestral connection.
This textile is the result of discharge dyeing, a technique in which the cloth is dyed and the pattern is removed by releasing (or discharging) the dye from the dark fabric using a bleaching agent. As in this case, the cloth is dyed with indigo, rinsed, and then using a scoop or spatula the design is drawn onto the fabric using a bleaching agent. When the cloth is rinsed again, the design shows up light against the dark background. Simplified geometric shapes and zigzags such as those seen here are common motifs used for discharge dyed fabrics.
This textile consists of pieces of printed factory cloth sewn together and may have been used as a baby wrap or skirt. Cotton factory cloth was imported into Africa until the 1970s, when it began to be manufactured by factories in East and West Africa. The cloth is available printed with a variety of regional motifs. Among the many motifs featured in this textile, the umbrella symbolizes royalty, as Ghanaian chiefs are seen with elaborately decorated umbrellas held over their heads by others. The motif of leaves and flowers on a vine are said to represent the idea that “one tree doesn’t blow good air” (located towards the bottom). The letters of the alphabet may be related to the desire to demonstrate literacy through depicting letters of the alphabet (as is often seen with Ghanaian adinkra stamps).
This caftan is an example of the traditional women's pullover dress. Depending on the occasion, the caftan's significance varies, this purple frock was probably used for an informal occasion. Purple is symbolic in African culture as wealth and/or royalty. The intricate embroidery with metallic thread around the neckline was created by machine and indicates recent changes in fashionable styles. This caftan is made of damask, a figured woven design, made of synthetic fabric. This outfit was more than likely designed for a traditional formal event.
This textile is an example of strip-weave where these 14 strips were woven separately and then sewn together to create one large textile. The strip-weave technique is also used to make Kente cloth in Ghana by the Ashanti and Ewe tribes. This textile is from Burkina Faso, a West African country located south of Mali, which gained independence from France in 1960. The textile’s border may represent the French flag while the middle of the fabric incorporates different embroidered motifs. This textile combines a couple of different techniques to create one cohesive piece of cloth. Textiles similar to this are usually handmade by men. Due to the large size of the piece, it was probably created as a wall hanging.
The Lega live in Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Bwami, whose main goal is to instruct “wisdom and moral excellence”, is an association that creates a link between all Lega. Bwami (for men) is divided into 5 levels. The hats shown, Mukuba wa bifungo, are for Bwami members of the highest grade (lutumbo Iwa kindi).

Animals are important in Bwami symbolism. A hat with a hornbill beak is given to a man who has high ambitions, but is unaware of the cost of attaining them. The elephant is quiet and has potentially destructive strength, which is why hats for Iutumbo Iwa kindi include an elephant tail.
The Aso Oke Hat, also known as fila, is a round fitted cap that is slid on the head. This hand woven cap, made of velvet, or damask cotton, is worn by Nigerian men in the Yoruba tribe. It typically rests above the wearer's ear, and slouches to one side of the head. Men in this tribe are rarely seen without the fila on their head. This cap is worn during every day occasions, but is essential for formal occasions. Although these hats originated in Nigeria, they can still be seen worn by men all over Africa.
Damask fabrics originally came to Nigeria from England and became very popular in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Damask weaves were used to make a “gele;” which is a headdress worn by women in Nigeria for the sole purpose of self-ornamentation. Damask is a stiff fabric with elaborate designs, normally used in curtains and decorative interior textiles, that lends itself for use in this type of headdress. Damask is also used in caps worn by men such as this one. The hat was created with small pieces of woven fabric.
This is a round-cap worn by Nigerian men, particularly by the Yoruba tribe and is called a “fila”. This particular fila is an men’s hat worn in public and is essential for formal occasions. There are variations of the fila which can indicate different levels of respect or superiority. The fila is worn on the “ori” (head) and represents inner and outer personal destiny. Hats such as this are said to protect Yoruba men from polluting effects from the interactions with society.
The hat often serves to complete traditional men outfits called Boubou. The Boubou, or Grand Boubou, has North African Islamic roots and dates back to the 8th century. When semi-nomadic Islamic groups migrated to West Africa, the garment became popular there as well. The Boubou is now most popular in West African nations whose people are mostly followers of Christianity. It is used as formal attire for important religious and ceremonial occasions. These hats are woven from cotton and synthetic fibers made to resemble silk, which was originally used. The fabric used for one of the hats is most likely cotton brocade. Men’s headdresses are often elaborately decorated with precious metal or jewels (for royalty) or heavily embroidered with gold or silver threads, as the hats shown here. Along with clear yellow, orange and green are preferred colors in Eastern areas of Nigeria.
These ashetu (prestige hats) are worn by Cameroon chiefs (fon) at secret society meetings and celebrations. They are inspired by a common hair-style which consists of cornrowing and hair threading. The Ashetu on display here are examples of prestigious headdress from the Bamileke group. The crocheted cotton cap features rows of burls which are usually crocheted around short wooden pegs, but in this examples the pegs are missing. The use of the ashetu for ceremonial purposes is not limited to the Bamileke group. Similar versions from Bamum and parted examples from Bali called Bali caps also exist.
This wrapper is worn on really festive occasions and was probably created by a man on a double heddle loom. The colors are green, yellow, black, and red which became popular in the late 1950’s and early 1960 when the first president of Nigeria was known as a leading figure in the Pan-Africanist movement. The colors of this wrapper are significant. Yellow represents sanctity, preciousness, royalty, wealth, spirituality, vitality, and fertility. Red symbolizes heightened spiritual outlook and political attitude, sacrifice, and struggle. Black symbolizes intensified spiritual energy, communion with ancestral spirits, antiquity, spiritual maturity, and potency. Green is associated with nature and denotes growth, vitality, fertility, prosperity, fruitfulness, abundant wealth, and spiritual rejuvenation.
In African culture, white is symbolic for traditional occasions. The male version of the caftan is referred to as a “dashiki.” There are different types of dashikis based on shape and color. This piece was created with factory cloth and represents an example of garments often offered as a gift to visiting scholars. This is actually a ceremonial outfit worn for his a wedding; the design is influenced by Arabic traditions.
This garment is known as an agbada, which is a Yoruba man’s wide-sleeved gown that is floor length with long arms, which are worn bunched together. The technique used is known as “adire alabere”, which refers to an indigo resist-dyeing technique using stitching. The cloth is either gathered up in rows or pleated in order to allow for a symmetrical design, as well as reduce the work load. The cloth is then either hand or machine stitched (as done here). Raphia thread is usually used for its strength, so that the stitches do not break when the cloth is pulled tight. The fabric is then dyed with indigo and the stitches are removed with a sharp blade, creating a pattern where the dye was not absorbed. This garment also features an embroidered appliqué collar with metallic thread in both the front and back. Appliqué is an embroidered cut out design that is sewn, ironed, or bonded to a piece of material, and is used to embellish textiles around the globe.
Nigerian clothing varies from area to area in multi-ethnic country. Several textile construction and surface patterning techniques are used in Nigeria including tie-dye, lace, jacquard weaves, Adire or indigo dyes. This outfit was made for a young girl. The top in this piece is most likely a buba, which is a loose blouse that falls down below the waist. The skirt is sewn together and flares at the bottom, it may be a variation of the traditional wrap-around skirts or iro. This outfit is likely worn for special occasions and can be matched to a similar design worn by the mother.
This white cotton shirt is called a sacrifice shirt and it must be worn at least once a week in certain areas of the country. There are very specific requirements for the appearance of the shirt; the strip with stripes; for instance, must be in the middle and is actually comprised of seven strips. This shirt was likely hand woven using indigenous cotton.

The shape of the shirt actually resembles a Caftan, which is a rectangular shaped garment worn by men or women and usually made from silk or cotton. It is believed that the caftan originated in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and in other African countries around 600 B.C. Though the shirt shown here is waist-length, it is more common to see them as long knee, or ankle length garments. Caftans can be seen with short (elbow length) or long sleeves, and can be worn with a belt or sash.
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