

Art and Survival: A Look at Textiles in The Gambia

Stephanie Bonifant

In the western world where a manufacturer's label on an article of clothing is almost more important than the clothing itself, and the closest thing to a display of a decorative textile is a pretty tablecloth, it is difficult to uphold the appreciation for textile art. The fashion industry has completely altered our attitudes towards textiles and has made the awareness of this form of art minimal. In The Gambia, however, the textile industry is a prevalent form of artistic expression as well as a profitable trade. Walking down the street it is rare to find a shop without some amazingly beautiful, tie-dyed fabric and handmade batik cloths. Most of the people you pass on the street are adorned with brightly colored clothing that is elaborate and intricately designed. I have never before seen such brilliant colored clothing as I did while in Gambia.

I am a double major with art and human studies, and my interest in The Gambia began as a way to incorporate these two fields. It appealed to me because it gave me a chance to be immersed in a culture that is totally different, and to explore a style of art which is notably separated from the western concept. When I was thinking about a possible project, I was thinking more along the lines of sculpture or painting, or even masks. Eventually I decided to focus my attention upon fabric-dyeing techniques, including tie-dye and batik, and examine how they were important in a practical sense while looking at their artistic value. I was not aware of the number of people that were involved with textiles. Going into the trip I was even worried that there would not be enough information for a project, and I would have to include other areas of art. As soon as we went to town for the first time, I knew that the question would not be how to find someone who knew anything about textiles, but whom to contact.

Methodology

I began to gather my information by walking through town, stopping at the various shops and talking to the artists. At each shop I would see a different array of fabrics which I was told were made by methods of

tie-dye and batik. Of course, I had no prior knowledge of batik, and very little experience with tie-dye, and didn't really know how to evaluate them just yet. Tie-dye I had done before, like most people, but there was much more to be learned.

Every shop I went to I asked who made the batiks, and who dyed the fabrics, and if the person I spoke to was the one who did these things, then I would ask how they learned the techniques and who taught them. I soon found that there was a great distinction between men and women in this area, and it was very rare that I found a woman who did batik painting. Women did, however, dye their own fabric, but again tailors were usually men. Finally, I was set up with two well-known artists in the area, Baboukar Faal, and Amie Krubally. They were the source of most of the information I obtained.

Textiles in West Africa

First of all, making and decorating cloth has evolved a great deal to become the techniques of textile design used today. The first forms of creative textile art were seen in the making of bark cloth. Bark cloth is made from stripping the inner bark of a tree, or the bast, and pounding the fibers to form a small soft cloth. The piece of cloth is then painted or scratched with designs as decoration (Sieber 1972).

Weaving is also an early technique for making cloth. Thread spun from locally grown cotton is normally used, and it is done on a loom that has two sets of strings. The strings are moved up and down on a double-heddle loom (a set of parallel wires or lines used to guide the threads), passing another spool of thread through the center each time. The woven fabric has evolved quite a bit with the introduction of manufactured threads. Instead of the plain white cloth that sometimes had indigo threads or was dyed with mud, there is a multitude of colors to choose from, and even gold thread has now become popular.

Mud cloth is another long established tradition among African peoples, and is closely related to the techniques used in textile making today. The



Mud cloth is a traditional dye technique found in many West African countries.

production of mud cloth involves a unique and lengthy procedure. Plain white cotton cloth is woven by men in narrow strips on the double-heddle loom, and those strips of cloth are first sewn up into whatever pieces or garments the customer requires. The cloth is then washed in water and allowed to dry so that it can shrink to its final size. It is then soaked in a brown solution made from the pounded leaves of trees. Although the main leaves used are widely known among those who practice this trade, every specialist has his own precise technique to give the best results. Once the cloth has been soaked in the mixture, it takes on a deep even yellow color which fades only slightly when spread out on the ground to dry in the sun. Once dry, it is ready for the application of mud dye. The mud used is collected from ponds and left to ferment in a covered pot for about a year, during which time it becomes black.

Small pieces of bamboo or flat metal spatulas of various widths are used to draw the design outlines onto the cloth, using the mud solution. When all the outlines have been drawn, the artist then uses another wider implement to fill in the mud dye over the spaces left between. One of the unique features of high quality mud cloth is that it is the background, not the designs themselves, that is painted onto the cloth, thus leaving the design in the remaining undyed areas. It can take several days of slow and painstaking work before the whole cloth is covered. The cloth is washed with water to remove any excess mud, leaving a black background from which the yellow designs stand out. The whole process of dipping the cloth in the leaf solution and outlining the designs with a layer of black mud dye is

then repeated, giving the cloth a second coating of dye. The final stage is to apply a solution of caustic soda and water to the yellow areas so that they are bleached to the desired white. It may seem strange to begin with a white cloth, dye it yellow, then finish up by treating the yellow areas so they become white again. The reason for this apparently lies in the chemical processes at work in the dyeing procedure. The active ingredient in the mud dye is evidently converted by the leaf solution into a fast dye, which holds the color to the fabric. The yellow stage is therefore essential although as a color it is not present on the finished cloth.

Within the tradition of mud cloth making, it does not appear that artists were usually expected to produce innovative designs.

Rather, the mark of a successful design was the clear reproduction of existing designs, or perhaps in some novel but appropriate combination. Many of the individual motifs applied to sections of the cloth, or combinations of these motifs, have names. Some of these names are based on the appearance of the pattern, such as fish bones, little stars, or squares.

This repetition of pattern can be seen in the tie dye tradition as well. Certain patterns and shapes are repeated time and time again until they are perfected. There are many different techniques of “tie and dye.” Some techniques, although referred to as tie-dye, are actually styles of folding. Some of the styles of dyeing include the traditional way of dyeing that most Western people know, and another technique of dyeing fabric is batik dyeing which uses wax to resist the color.



The abstract geometric designs used by many artisans making mud cloth means it can be used for clothing, as home decoration, or accessories (bags, backpacks).

Learning Batik and Tie-dye

There are many different techniques of “tie and dye”. Some techniques, although referred to as tie-dye, are actually styles of folding. Some of the styles of dyeing include the traditional way of dyeing that most Western people know, where you simply tie circles into the fabric to make a pattern of large rings. Another method is to tie a string around a little rock, creating a pattern of small rings in the fabric. You can also use a needle and thread to stitch a pattern, shape, or line in the fabric, pulling the stitches as tight as possible so that those areas will resist the dye. Then there are various types of folding techniques, either in straight lines or in sporadic bunches that are used in the dye process.

In earlier methods of tie dyeing, fabric was dyed with either the color from Kola nuts, which is a deep orange or reddish color, or with indigo that produces a deep blue color. Kola nuts are indigenous to Africa and grow on trees. They are in the chocolate family, contain caffeine, and are chewed as stimulants. The dyeing of fabric with the juices from these nuts is not as common as it used to be, and now it is only used in specific rituals such as circumcision (Sieber 1972). Indigo, a sub-tropical plant brought to Africa from India, is still used quite frequently, as I observed. It is an accessible dye that can be cultivated in many areas of Africa, and is cheap to use. Innovations have also made it possible to fix the dye so that the blue does not run and fade or stain your skin by placing the fabric in a fixer, or by treating the cloth in the boiling water used for batik.

Batik dyeing was first influenced by the Chinese who used a simple form of dyeing with the use of stamps and dripping. Large pieces of fabric were stamped with a shape that was dipped in wax, and then the color was applied, leaving the stamped areas white. Batik becomes more difficult when a second or third color is added, and the pattern of stamps is varied. Another technique commonly used is a form of dripping where you take a paint brush and dip it in the hot wax, then let the wax drip on the cloth to make a pattern of dots. You can dip the cloth in many different colors, creating a beautiful effect. And lastly you can coat the entire cloth in wax and then roll and crack the wax, creating wavy lines throughout the fabric. The type of batik dyeing which is so popular in The Gambia today is more of a painting technique than a dyeing technique such as those described above. This form of batik was only introduced in the early 1970s.

To make a batik you start out with a white cloth,



The first step is to outline your figures in crayon, as shown here.

thin fabric that is 100% cotton (this makes it easier for the wax to penetrate the cloth). Then you take a crayon and draw on a design or picture that you want on the fabric. Next, you must heat the wax, and the wax needs to be very hot in order for it to penetrate the material. If you are using very thin material, it is possible to double the fabric, or even triple it (this all depends on the thickness, and the wax should be able to penetrate through all the layers of fabric). Then you determine what areas of the composition you want to be white, what colors you are going to use, and whether or not you want a border. Using a paintbrush, you apply the wax over the areas of white in the composition. Areas that you want to remain white must be covered twice with wax; if they are only covered once, then some of the color will seep through, creating a lighter effect



Next, dip the cloth with its design into the wax, as shown here.



The waxed cloth is dried before the artist continues to work on its designs.

(which can also be intentional). Then, determining the first color, you can dip the entire piece of cloth in the dye. The order of colors is determined by the outcome you are trying to achieve. The colors must be either cool or warm, however, or you will get a muddy brown color if you mix them. Sometimes the color can be applied with a sponge and then covered with wax so that you don't end up mixing the wrong colors. The cloth must be soaked in water before it is put in color so that the color can penetrate well. The dyes come in little bags of powdered pigments and are mixed (in water) with a combination of hydro-sulfite and caustic soda. Here is where the perfection of technique comes in, for if the ratio of hydro-sulfite



Baboukar Faal, master batik artist, adds to the design on one of his many creative batiks.

powder and caustic soda powder is not right, then the color will not stay, and within the first few washings you will have a faded piece of material. When done correctly, however, you can wash the fabric with detergent, and the color will stay.

Once you have dipped the fabric in the first color, you let it dry again, then apply wax to every area that you want to stay that color. You repeat the process, and dye the fabric a second color. This goes on until you have done every necessary color. The final color, usually a black or indigo, is applied last. If you want to do cracking in the picture, which creates an effect of wavy textured lines, then you simply crack the wax every time you go to put the fabric in color, and recover it when the color dries. Finally comes the last step in the batik process. Once the last color has been added, and the fabric is relatively dry, you boil a pot of water and rinse the wax off the fabric by dipping it into the water. After the water cools, the melted wax settles in the bottom of the pan and can be reused.



Stephanie observes as Baboukar continues to refine the design on one of his contemporary creations.

Making a batik picture of simple shapes and colors is not too difficult, but when the artist tries to create a composition full of irregular shapes, patterns and textures, his or her real artistic intention surfaces.

Batik Artists in The Gambia

The artist I was fortunate enough to work with, Baboukar Faal, created many works of art using these techniques and manages to make a fairly good living off his craft. His interest in art started when he was a boy. While his mother sold food on a street corner,



Finished batiks drying. Once completed, these will be sold to tourists at one of the outlets found throughout the Greater Banjul Area.

he would often sit along the road making drawings. Many of his drawings of different clothing fashions would end up in the tailor shops for people to refer to when requesting a certain outfit. Although his mother did not like his drawing and often tore up his artwork, he would go somewhere she could not find him and continue to draw more. Finally, someone noticed his sketches, and since he was not attending school, offered him the opportunity to go to a school and learn batik. He attended a small school started by Amie Krubally in cooperation with the Peace Corps and there learned batik along with many other young Gambians.

He stayed with the school for two years and then began to practice on his own. He got the opportunity to go to Dakar in 1980 where he studied painting with



Stephanie and Rita look over Baboukar's portfolio while he works. Note the pot of hot wax next to the charcoal at his feet.

other Senegalese artists. He experimented with oil paints, watercolors, sand painting, and even a little clay sculpture. Enjoying painting a great deal, he tried to achieve this quality of style in his batiks.

Many opportunities eventually came his way as he developed his talent and style. In 1982, he had his first show in Norway. In 1988, a friend he met from Sweden made arrangements there for him to have a show of his artwork. Then in 1992, he participated in a show of all Gambian artists and was awarded a certificate for his outstanding artwork. Later, in 1999, he did another show of his works in Sweden. Now, about 20 years after he started to sell his artwork, he has become successful and has become widely known in the region. In addition to these periodic shows, he also participates in a show that takes place about twice a year at the Gambian-Franco Alliance cultural center.

Baboukar is very grateful for the gift of artistic talent and holds a lot of gratitude to the people who taught him. Amie Krubally, who started the batik school, and two Peace Corps volunteers, Jim Weaver and Carol Haye, were especially helpful in his journey to become a successful artist.

Amie Krubally started the batik school where Baboukar learned the techniques. The batik painting style we see today was introduced in The Gambia only in the early 1970s. Amie's first encounter with this technique was with a German woman whom she had met. She learned batik as a way to support her family and made a living from selling her batik pictures to tourists. This is where she got the idea for the batik school. She saw that her batiks could support her family and had hopes that others could learn the same trade and, in turn, be able to support their families.

The school was first developed in association with the Peace Corps as Gambian Artisans Marketing Cooperative Art Alliance (GAMCO), and then worked with IBAS or the Indigenous Business Advisory Service. Shortly after the school was started, Jim Weaver, a PCV (Peace Corps Volunteer) took over running the school and was able to find funding for supplies and other materials. The school provided a way for artists to work together and learn from each other, eventually make a living from their experience and talent.

Amie has become extremely successful, and has also had shows around the world. She stayed with the school for 10 years, then decided to branch out and pursue her own career as an artist. Her many shows included one at the Arch 22 in Banjul, in the Galerie Francaise, and even an exhibit in Washington



Stephanie seated with Baboukar in his workshop. Stephanie became an apprentice to Baboukar for a short time to learn more about his life and the techniques of his art.

D.C. Although the school Amie founded eventually closed, the art of batik painting has expanded. Many of her former students traveled to Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and other neighboring countries where they have become fairly successful themselves. Like Amie and Baboukar they sell their artwork to tourists or participate in shows of their own.

Future Trends

You can see the positive effect that this school has had on The Gambia and how it has helped change the way art is seen. Art in many ways has always been about survival, but in my opinion, and the opinion of most artists, art always comes first. There is a constant tension between commercialization of art and what some would call art in its true form. Many people in the western world struggle with this as well, and “form painting” as it is called, where an artist simply repeats the same composition and style over and over again for the purpose of selling his art, is sometimes frowned upon. In The Gambia, however, form painting is a way of survival. Tourist season (November through April) being the busiest time of year, it is necessary for the artist to produce dozens and dozens of batiks in order to make the necessary sales to support them throughout the year. There is even a batik factory in Bakau where four artists work together making batiks and selling them in large quantities and all sizes to tourists throughout the year. People increasingly know about the factory and go there to find a variety of different batiks.

More recently, a school has opened for girls no

longer in primary or secondary school, where they can learn batik and tie dye techniques (among other trades) as a way of supporting themselves. This practical dimension requiring marketable skills reflects the intent of the school Amie Krubally started back in the 1970s. Amie now has a workshop where she holds classes for tourists. She gives them lessons in batik and teaches them the basic skills. Her shop is known throughout many of the high-priced tourist hotels and is often highly recommended.

These are just a few examples of how artists are surviving on the sales of their artwork. There is also an enormous market for wooden sculptures, paintings, silver work, sand painting, and many other crafts. It has been quite an experience to stay in a country where art is so alive, surrounding you wherever you go. It is quite different from the United States where art is appreciated but not as widely regarded. The transcendence of the artist in Africa has been a journey from ritualized artistic expression to a more personal temperament, and the role of art in the economy as well as the culture as a whole proves to be an integral part of life.



Batik and oil paintings are common mediums for artistic expression in Dakar, Senegal. This is an exhibition of work we saw on Gorée Island.

Works Cited

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Stephanie stands with Baboukar and a local vendor outside his workshop in Bakau Old Town.



A small tourist stand in Bakau Old Town. This table offers tourists who visit Katchikally crocodile pond an assortment of carvings and necklaces as souvenirs of their African experience.

