

AFRICA IMPORTS TEXTILES AND FASHION

All You
Need to
Know



I

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WHAT IS MUDCLOTH?



Mudcloth is a traditional African fabric that was first made in Mali, West Africa. It's typically characterized by white geometric designs on a black, brown, mustard, red or green background (although other colors are sometimes found). Although Mudcloth is relatively new to the US, having only been commonly seen here since the 1990's, Mudcloth in Africa dates as far back as the 12th century AD.

Mudcloth actually does contain mud due to the process used to make it, which involves among other things using fermented mud as well as a liquid that is concocted from the leaves of native trees. Mud cloth is often soaked in this liquid several times before the cloth is actually finished. The term Mudcloth is actually a direct translation of an African word – bogolanfini.

Traditional Mudcloth is made in the old-fashioned manner of weaving cotton into strips on looms and then binding these strips together.

The Mudcloth is then washed, allowed to shrink, dried in the sun, and then adorned with designs. Interestingly enough designs are applied to Mudcloth almost as if it was a negative of a photograph. The white designs are where the dyes have not been applied.

To find a genuine piece of Mudcloth today you don't need to look far. There are many establishments like Africa Imports, that sell Mudcloth imported from Africa. Mudcloth is also available on the open market; however, you may see a big difference in the quality and textures.

Because it is hand-made, it's fairly easy to distinguish authentic Mali Mudcloth from its modern counterparts. The authentic Mudcloth will have an uneven look to the weave, because it is made by hand. Additionally, some of the dye will rub off before it has been washed. The textures of Mudcloth varies from a medium to smooth texture, and will not be sold off of a bolt, which is how we commonly buy our modern fabrics in the US. Often, Mudcloth is folded and sold in sections.

Black Mudcloth is the most common and is typically used when relaying proverbs or telling stories. Symbols will actually be "built" into the designs.



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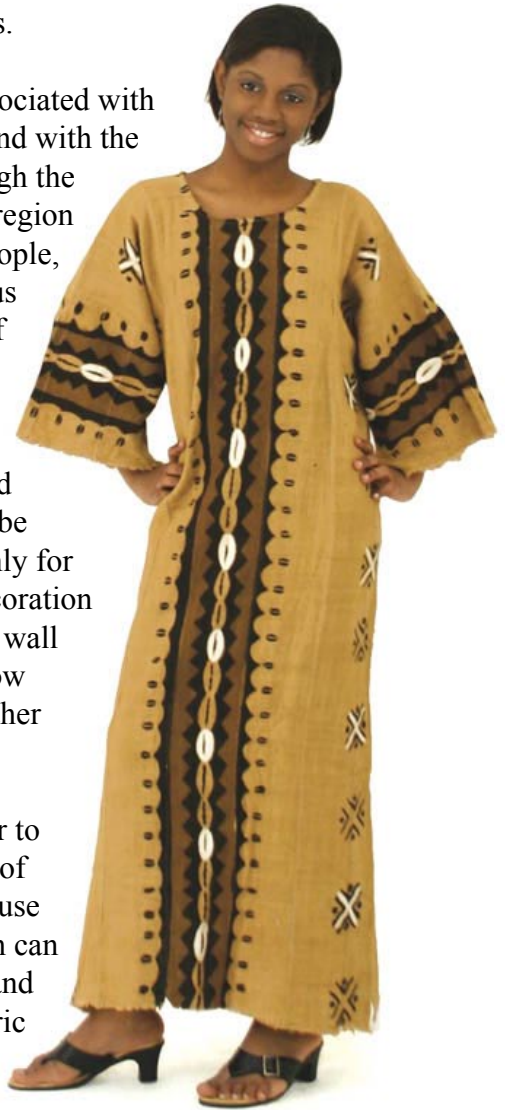


White Mudcloth is the rarest and is often used in special ceremonies.

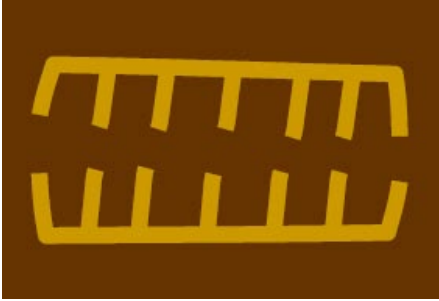
Red Mudcloth is often associated with the Fulani tribes' people and with the activity of hunting, although the meanings may vary from region to region and people to people, since Africa is so enormous encompassing hundreds of tribes.

Mudcloth is a wonderful fabric with an amazing and interesting history. It can be purchased and used not only for clothing, but for home decoration including drapery, covers, wall hangings, upholstery, pillow covers, crafts and many other uses.

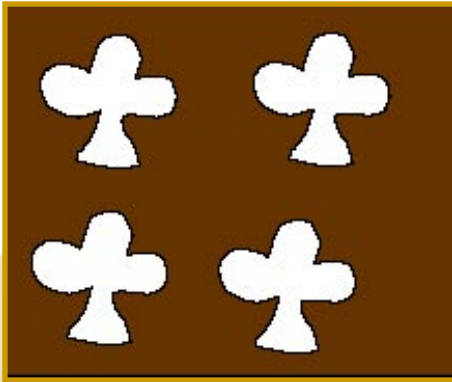
One need not look very far to find a wonderful example of Mudcloth to admire. Because of its popularity, Mudcloth can be found in many homes and is a wonderful natural fabric that harkens back to a simpler time, one rich with traditions.



WHAT DO THESE MUDCLOTH DESIGNS MEAN?



Bones of a Snake. This pattern has an often disputed meaning, but the most common interpretation is that of bravery, because it refers to the bones of a snake, so it would identify a warrior killing a snake or showing bravery in some way.

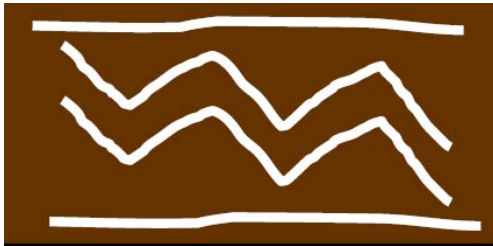
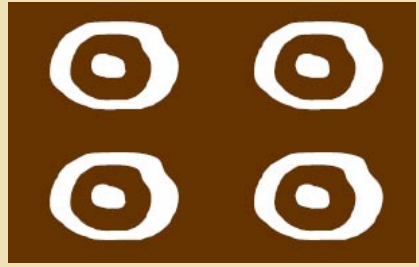


The Calabash. This pattern represents the flower that is given off of the calabash plant native to the region, which is known as the calabash gourd. These gourds grow on vines and are often used in crafts. To be harvested for crafts, they are often hollowed out and dried.

These calabashes might find new lives as instruments, such as koras, or they might even become resonators in a balafon.

Family and Community.

This pattern reflects the love of family and community. The circle represents the house of the family and the dot in the middle is the family itself. It also represents family unity.

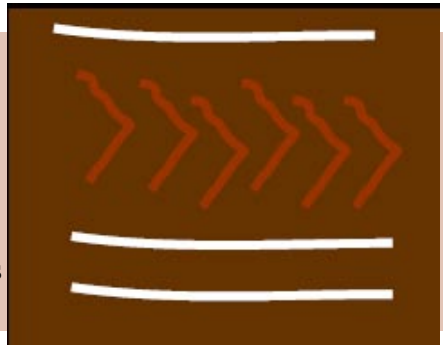


The Iguanas Elbow.

This design represents good fortune because the iguana is famous for leading a hunter to water.

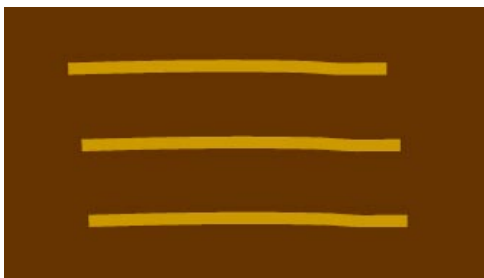
The Sickle and the Blade.

This pattern tells a story about a farmer that did an exceptional job. Approximately 80% of the workforce in Africa consists of small farmers, and agriculture accounts for 40% of the region's gross domestic product.



The Talking Drum.

This is one of the more common mud cloth symbols. The talking drum, which is used to call warriors to battle as well as to frighten animals while hunting.

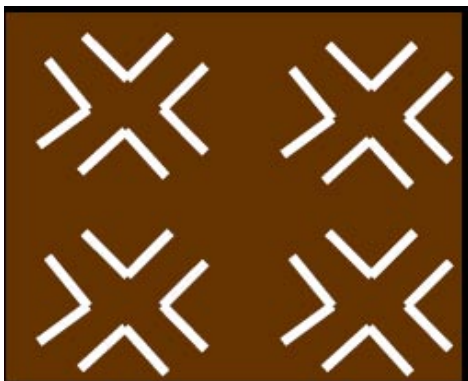


The Spindle.

This pattern represents the spindle used in weaving cloth fabrics. It is very old and traditional and probably the most commonly used mudcloth design.

Cushions.

This pattern depicts wealth and luxury. It is said to represent the cushions of wealthy women from the Mauritania area. These women don't have to work, just put their heads on pillows.



NIGERIAN ASOKE FABRIC AND ITS UNIQUE HISTORY

Asoke cloth is another important African textile that is wonderfully colorful and crafted in a time honored fashion by the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Created using a variety of patterns and color schemes, this lovely fabric dates far back into history — having been woven for hundreds of years as part of the traditional way of life for the Yoruba people. Looms discovered on various archaeological digs have confirmed the extended history of this cloth and the looms on which they were created.



Asoke fabric is appreciated for its durability and long life. Its weave is very strong and the cloth itself serves many purposes but is the most commonly used fabric for sacred rites, such as religious ceremonies, funerals, and for use during very formal occasions, such as weddings.

During weddings, a groom would wear an outfit called an agbada, which is a tunic or robe fashioned out of asoke fabric.

Asoke textiles have been traditionally the product of male weavers although over the years women have started to become part of the weaving community for asoke fabrics as well.

To make the textile, the fabric is woven in strips and then the individual strips are bound together to create a unique design. Each strip of fabric has a hand woven feel to it with an uneven type of weave. The weaving artist will bring together a multitude of strips to create a one-of-a-kind design.



It's not uncommon for artists to run out of one type of strip and to utilize something that is totally different from the rest of the piece. This is part of their artistry as well as their utilitarian nature. Some pieces come hemmed, partially hemmed or totally unhemmed. It is quite up to the artist how the work is finished. The asoke textile is judged on a variety of characteristics, such as its open work, embroidery, shine, design, textures, and color.

Some people are true fans of this fabric, which they find to be quite impressive and representative of African artistry.

Many years ago, asoke was created in deep indigo, a natural beige silk, or an imported magenta silk weave; however, today the fabric incorporates many other types of material (cotton, polyester, rayon, silk, lurex, and acrylic) which are woven together into thin strips which will create long narrow pieces of fabric for all to enjoy.

THE DASHIKI: A SYMBOL OF AFRICA

What is a dashiki? A dashiki is a loose fitting colorful garment that resembles a shirt, although it might cover up as much as half of the body. It often is adorned with patterns and colors that are closely associated with African cultures.

The dashiki was closely associated with the Black cultural and political movements of the 1960s. With its brightly colored patterns and loose fit that hung down instead of being tucked into pants, the dashiki was just one way



that people expressed their dissatisfaction with what was conceived as acceptable men's fashions of that time and as a way to protest against social, economic and political conditions that plagued the African-American population here in the United States. Occasionally, it would be worn as a sign of protest, but most times, its appearance was a sign of African pride.

Over time, the dashiki became synonymous with *black is beautiful*. For the wearer it was a way to show a deep seated interest and love for one's African roots, as well as a way to weigh in and express one's position for full rights in American society.

Although the militancy of the 1960s is long gone, what the dashiki represents has not been forgotten. It is still worn by thousands as a symbol of one's love for his/her African roots and everything African including that within the American culture. This is especially true during holidays such as Kwanzaa and Black History Month.



This traditional African garment, is very popular in many countries, such as Nigeria. In America, it holds a unique place as a garment that carries its own message of pride, fortitude and hope.

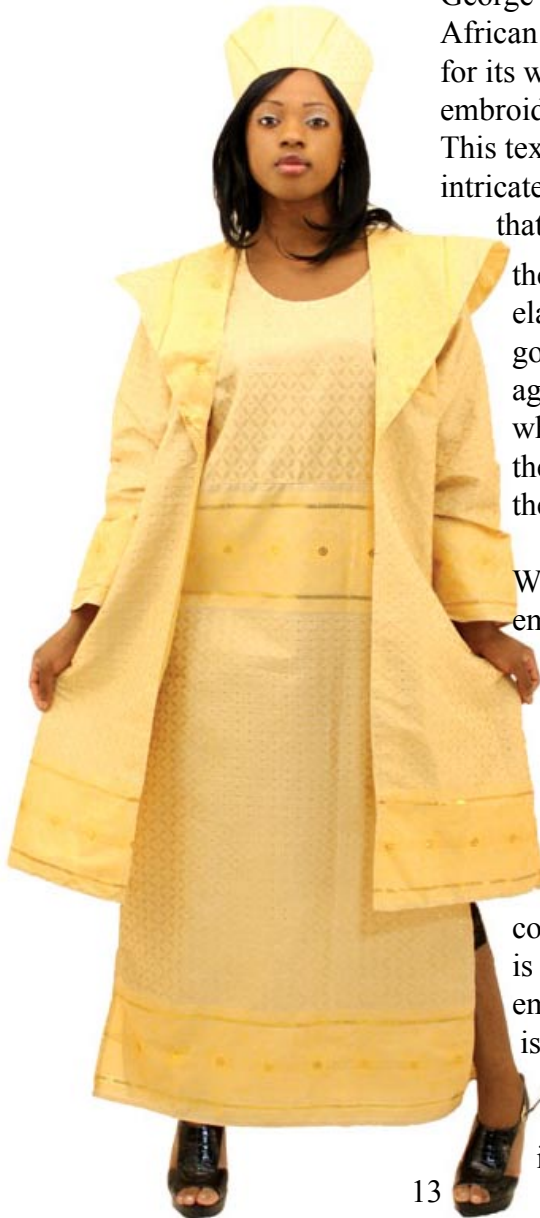
WHAT IS GEORGE FABRIC?

George fabric is a very popular African textile that is admired for its wonderful gold embroidery work on fine fabric. This textile involves a very intricate embroidery design that is repeated throughout

the garment to give it a very elaborate appearance. The gold embroidery often is used against a very stunning color which really accentuates both the color of the garment and the richness of the gold thread.

With george fabric gold embroidery is used strategically to accentuate the ends of sleeves, the hemline, the neckline and on various other coordinating hats, wraps, and skirts, etc.

George fabric is a fine cotton or viscose material that is adorned with hand embroidered designs. Viscose is a type of natural cellulose material which is derived from plants and reshaped into threads.



What makes George so popular?

George fabric is admired for its fine design and luxurious look. Sales of George fabric are especially high during Black History Month because the gold designs are so popular. Throughout Africa's history it was very popular for African royalty to adorn themselves with gold – an ample resource at that time.

Still today, for many people worldwide, gold symbolizes good fortune and happiness.

George fabric is frequently used in many styles of clothing, most often, for special occasions, such as weddings, graduations, and other important events.



WAX PRINT FABRICS

Wax prints fabrics are an example of a material that initially came to Africa from Indonesia via trade, and became part of the African way of life and tradition through the adaptation by Africans through the customization of its designs, colors and symbols. It's now an integral part of West and Central African society, with most of today's production centered in Ghana or Mali.



In Africa, clothes are not just things you cover your body with; they represent the wearer and reflect a history, tradition and style, all of which are often passed from generation to generation.

Colors and design are extremely important in African textiles. For example, colors have significance. Purple in some regions often symbolizes royalty or prosperity.



Color and design can also denote a person's standing in a community, their age, tribal association, and marital status. The symbols are often associated with songs, religious rites, and/or famous people that they admire. Even historical moments can be represented on cloth. Ideas are often relayed in the forms of metaphors and proverbs.

Because African textiles are so representative of the people themselves, this is a thriving art form which is alive and well today in many parts of Africa. And because of the number of individual artists who are involved in this craft, it's really hard to interpret the significance of each garment's symbols in one particular way since interpretation can vary from tribe to tribe, region to region, and artist to artist.

KENTE CLOTH

In the realm of African textiles, Kente cloth holds great significance. With origins in Ghana, it is known as the “king of cloths.” With a vibrant palette of colors, this fabric really represents the energy of Africa’s people and is closely associated with the spirit.

Kente cloth is characterized by its use of a multitude of vibrant colors and rich, interesting designs utilizing geometric shapes. Colors in Kente cloth represent various things or stages of life.

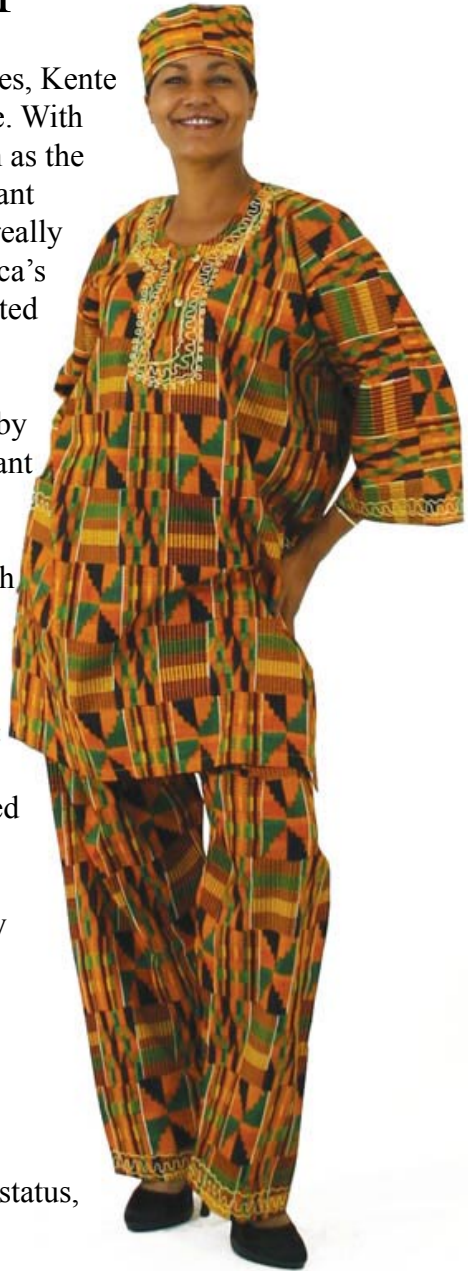
Colors and their meanings:

Black: Maturation, intensified spiritual energy

Blue: Peacefulness, harmony and love

Green: Vegetation, planting, harvesting, growth, spiritual renewal

Gold: Royalty, wealth, high status, glory, spiritual purity



Grey: Healing and cleansing rituals; associated with ash

Maroon: Mother earth; associated with healing

Pink: Feminine aspects of life; a mild, gentle aspect of red

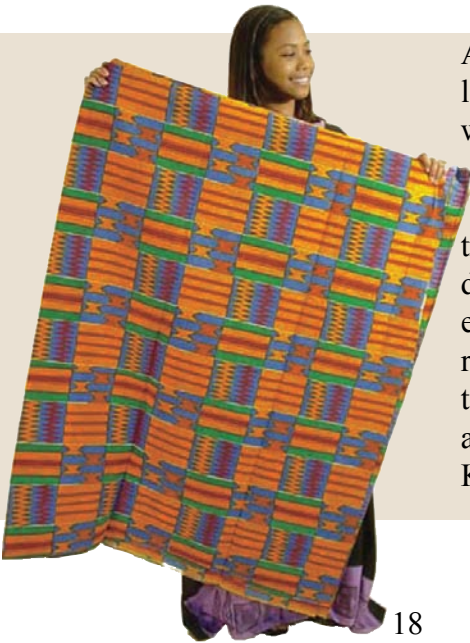
Purple: Feminine aspects of life; usually worn by women

Red: Political and spiritual moods; bloodshed, sacrificial rites and death

Silver: Serenity, purity, joy; associated with the moon

White: Purification, sanctification rites and festive occasions

Yellow: Preciousness, royalty, wealth, and fertility



According to an African legend Kente cloth originated when two hunters, who were friends, spotted a spider spinning a web on their travels and watched it for 2 days straight until they returned home. When they returned home, they decided to replicate the spider's work and the resulting product was Kente cloth



THE AFRICAN KAFTAN

If you're unfamiliar with African clothing, you might find it easier to remember the name of this garment if you remember that it somewhat resembles a longer version of a dashiki, found earlier in these pages.

Like the dashiki, the kaftan became a symbol of black pride in the United States during the upheaval of the 60's.

Worn for many types of occasions, these loose-fitting modest garments, are long (almost touching the floor) and are brightly colored and decorated. They're convenient because of their form, as they are easy to put on and take off, but they are also easy to purchase since they are not form-fitting, and accommodate a myriad of body types all with a single one size fits all.

While they are comfortable, their elaborate designs give the wearer versatility, with kaftans often worn to more formal occasions, like weddings and graduations, in addition to being suitable to more casual affairs.

In West Africa, this garment for women is referred to as a 'boubou.' It is often worn accompanied by a colorful head wrap known as a gele to the Yoruba people. There is also a version of the 'boubou' outfit for men, which consists of pants, a shirt, and a cap referred to as a 'kufi.'

Kaftans in Weddings

In West Africa, Kaftans are frequently worn in weddings. The Kaftan of the bride almost always matches the clothes of the groom with the most popular and traditional color being white.

Other non-traditional colors for weddings include: lavender or other shades of purple (which is associated with African royalty) and blue (the African color that represents love).

Many African women wear black with red Kaftans to funerals.

AN OVERVIEW OF VARIOUS FABRICS

African textiles will bring a wonderful and vibrant energy to any house's décor or anyone's closet. Admired by millions of people the world over for their vibrant color schemes, bold geometric designs, and natural treatments, these fabrics offer versatility along with creativity and symbolic meaning.

Four Types of Textiles

African textiles can basically be broken down into four main categories:



- **Woven cloth**

Weaving is one of the oldest ways of making fabric, not only in Africa, but in other parts of the world as well. It's a trade that was often passed down through families from parent to child.

How well a cloth is woven from the quality of the weave, thread, color and pattern is how a particular textile is valued.

Examples are: Mudcloth, Asoke cloth, Kuba cloth, Kente cloth, and country cloth.

- Tie dyes

Examples are indigo cloth or tie-dyed cottons.

- Batiks

These are created by taking cotton material and creating a design on the fabric using a wax technique.

- Industrial prints

These are textiles that are manufactured elsewhere, as in Europe.



Children in Africa wearing traditional fabrics

Interesting Cloth Facts

Asoke Cloth: Characterized by three types of designs: etu (composed of indigo dyed cloth), sanyan (a beige silken cloth derived from the Anaphe moth) and alaari (a silk cloth obtained from the Saharah via Tripoli).

Kente: Most well-known for its designs of gold, yellow, red, black, green and blue designs. Each design typically holds significance with relation to a historical or cultural ideas or ideals, and was typically worn by visible, authority-type figures of the Ashanti tribe.

A store in
West
Africa
selling
hand-made
fabrics and
cloth



AFRICAN JEWELRY

African Jewelry and Its Meaning

Just like many other cultures, Africans wear jewelry on a casual basis as well as for special occasions. Often though, what is worn on an every day basis and on a special occasion will be quite different.

Important symbols also vary from culture to culture, and in Africa bone and cowry shells are both highly valued for what they represent.

Bone Bead
Jewelry



Bone jewelry, often obtained from cows, represents wealth in many African cultures since having cows in itself often meant that you had a better income than those who did not have cows. Cows were also considered sacred among certain tribes of people which also lent to the importance of bone as jewelry, even if it was an imitation form.

Many cultures around the world, including Native Americans, carved bone for jewelry, although it's believed that this began centuries ago in Africa.

Sometimes, the bones will be carved into the shapes of tiny balls or beads and colored with black and white dye for effect.

Cowry shells are still very popular today and represent prosperity and fertility. Found in the islands of the Indian Ocean, the cowrie shell soon gained popularity throughout much of ancient Africa. Its influence, however, also spread to China, where it was used as a form of currency to such an extent that the Chinese used its shape to form their pictograph for money!

Spiritually, according to African legend, if you are attracted to cowrie shells you could be family to an ocean spirit of wealth and earth. It also represents Goddess protection which is very powerful and connected with the strength of the ocean. Throughout Africa, and South and North America, the cowrie symbolized the power of destiny and prosperity. Thought of as the mouth of Orsisas, it also is believed to have taught stories of humility and respect.



MASSAI BEADWORK



The Massai are one of the most well-known groups of people in Africa. They have origins in the region which borders both Tanzania and Kenya and are recognized by their brightly colored blue and red garments and white circular collars as well as their jewelry and body modification, such as elongated ear lobes.

They are a semi-nomadic people who are very resourceful, often creating their homes out of native plants and trees. They are a tightly bonded group, engaging in many group activities and social behaviors. Women will often sit together on a regular basis when not busy with daily chores, such as child rearing, milking, and building huts.

Not only do the Massai women love to wear jewelry but they love to make beaded forms of jewelry as well. Jewelry is an important aspect of dress, and they carefully consider what they wear especially for special events and rites.

Jewelry has significance beyond just beauty among the Massai. Just by looking at a woman's necklace for example, another Massai woman would be able to tell many things about that woman, including her marital status, age, and whether or not she has children.

What the Colors Mean

Red: danger, ferocity, bravery, strength, unity

Blue: life

Green: health.

Orange: hospitality

Yellow: hospitality

White: purity, health

Black: hardship



TUAREG SILVER



Tuareg silver is named as such because it is created by the Tuareg nomad artisans of North Africa who had a deep seated fear of gold based in superstition.

This silver is known as one of the best pieces of craftsmanship in Africa filled with lots of symbolism. The Tuareg artisans craft each piece of silver jewelry by hand and sometimes tint it to appear with a golden coppery hue; however, much of the time, the jewelry appears in a rich silver tone, which can be adorned with jewels.

Although Tuareg silver is not pure silver per se but an alloy of silver and copper, it is highly valued among the Tuareg and other people because of its beauty. Many Tuareg families have pieces that are passed down from generation to generation

Some pieces have great symbolic meaning for the Tuareg. Many pieces have stories behind them and involve the use of symbols – some of the meanings of which have been forgotten over many years.

Traditionally, pendants were created as tributes to the sultan and his palace, with the pendant representing the palace. The jewels of the pendant (such as pearls) would represent the various tribes, and the gem would be deciphered as the sultan.

