



# The Meaning of Mudcloth



Each piece of mudcloth has a story to tell. The symbols, and the way in which they are arranged, as well as the color and shape of the mudcloth reveal a variety of different secrets. Social status, a persons character or occupation, are all things which a piece of mudcloth can present. There are many African proverbs and other items of historical significance which are commonly portrayed in mudcloth as well. Even now, many people in Africa are very careful about what they wear, as each fabric, color, and dress has its own meaning.

Even without these meanings being well known, mudcloth has become tremendously popular lately in the western world. An extraordinarily beautiful fabric; the unique and exotic colors are hand woven into a rich and elegant textile. Knowing more of the meaning and mind-set behind this art form can only add to your satisfaction and appreciation for a truly beautiful African art form.

## Patterns of Mudcloth

Mudcloth is not only exceptionally beautiful, but is also meant to be interpreted as well. Many times there are long discussions on how the patterns should be put together. These are just a sampling of some of the more common patterns and their meanings. Many times there is no symbolic meaning: the colors and patterns are simply created for their inherent beauty.

There are many symbols not shown here which you may find in your mudcloth; the patterns and varieties are endless. Also, many meanings differ depending on the region, ethnic group, or individual.

## The Making of Mudcloth

The making of mudcloth is a time-consuming process, normally taking four days to a week to complete depending on the weather. Each piece is made of 100% cotton, and is completely and totally hand made. Normally mudcloth is made totally from scratch. The men start the process by weaving cotton thread on a loom. The loom is normally hand-held and makes a strip of cloth five to six inches wide. For a normal sized (6' X 45") piece they will weave nine panels.



This represents a bed of bamboo and millet leaves. It is said that the pattern is used by a woman who wishes to show her superiority to a co-wife. However, the pattern is extremely popular, so a woman wearing it is not always making that assumption.



This design represents the spindle. A very old and traditional design.



"The Brave Mans Belt" This pattern is worn to signify that the wearer is brave and fearless. It is a representation of a belt that warriors used to wear before going out to battle.



"Wosoko" ~ This pattern has a unique story behind it. A farmer had a sickle he particularly liked. It worked well for him and he thought it deserved its own pattern. This pattern is named the back of the sickles blade.



Iguana's elbow. A very common pattern. This may represent good fortune as an iguana can lead a hunter to water. The iguana is also symbolic of African born people in warfare with foreign powers.



This is another very popular pattern that represents the flower of the calabash.



This pattern means wealth and luxury. It is supposed to represent the cushions of rich women from the Mauritania area. These women are considered very wealthy: they don't have to work, just put their heads on pillows.



This design represents a crocodiles fingers. A very popular design.



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There are many other patterns that have meaning. It is difficult to find precise meanings as different people have different meanings that they will give to the same pattern or color combination. The more knowledge that a person gains about this art form, however, the greater and deeper your appreciation will be.



## kuba cloth



Kuba cloth is now becoming more and more popular in the United States. Using the leaf of the raffia plant, the Kuba people of the Congo first hand cut, and then weave the strips of leaf to make pieces of fabric, often called raffia cloth.



### Making of Kuba Cloth

The process of making Kuba cloth is extremely time consuming and may take several days to form a simple placemat sized piece. The men first gather the leaves of the raffia tree and then dye them using mud, indigo or substances from the camwood tree. They then rub the raffia fibers in their hands to soften them and make it easier for weaving. After they've completed the base cloth, the women will embroider it. They do this by running a needle with a few raffia fibers through the cloth until the fibers show up on the opposite end. They then take a knife and cut off the top of the fibers, leaving only a little bit showing. Doing this hundreds of times forms a design. The designs are seldom planned out ahead of time, and most of the embroidery is done by memory. The Kuba people, who invented this and many other fabrics were very resistant to using European cloth; and for many years seldom used machine made fabrics. When researching this and other textiles that the Kuba people developed, it is not hard to understand why they resisted the change so much. Each fabric, each pattern, and each design in traditional Kuba fabrics has great meaning. Social status, age, marital status, and a persons character are just a few of the things a piece of cloth symbolizes to these people. Own a piece of this fabric today; not only will you be sharing in the culture of these ingenious people, but you will experience the true art of the kuba people as well.



## Indigo



Indigo fabric is one of the most popular fabrics of Africa. Symbolic of wealth and prosperity, this fabric is admired by many different cultures in Africa. The Tuareg have been called the "purple nomads" because of their extensive use of this cloth.

### Making of Indigo

The indigo process is long and complex. The cotton fabric is first hand-woven on looms and then dyed using fresh green leaves from the indigo plant. The leaves are beat out into a pulp, rolled into balls, and then left to dry in the sun for two to three days. They are then mixed in an ash and water solution that has been fermented for two to three days to form a fixative for the indigo dye. The fabric is then dyed using the tie dye or plain print method, excess dye is removed by hammering the fabric with rubber mallets. Indigo dye is known for rubbing off on the skin. Do not be surprised if, when handling this fabric, your skin is dyed the rich blue color of indigo. This popular African fabric is sure to make a striking statement of African beauty and culture however it is used.