

THE MEANING OF MUDCLOTH

Each piece of mudcloth has a story to tell. The symbols and the way in which they are arranged reveal a variety of different secrets! Social status, a person's character or occupation, the history of a village can all be portrayed in a piece of mudcloth. Some pieces of mudcloth portray African proverbs or histories of African communities. Even now, in Africa many people are careful with what they wear as they believe that each color and symbol has a meaning.



HOW MUDCLOTH IS MADE

Traditionally, men in Africa are responsible for hand-weaving narrow strips of plain fabric that are then pieced together into a larger rectangular cloth. Women often dye the cloth.

1. The cloth is first dyed in a bath of mashed and boiled leaves and branches of trees (this dye acts as a mordant).
2. The now-yellow cloth is sun-dried and patterns are painted with a special mud, which has been collected from ponds during the previous seasons and left to ferment.
3. As the cloth dries, the dark black mud turns gray and the cloth is washed to remove excess mud. This process is repeated numerous times and with each application, the mud painted area of the cloth becomes darker. The yellow areas are painted with a bleach, which turns them brown.
4. The cloth is left to dry in the sun for a week. When the bleach solution is washed off with water, what remains is the characteristic white pattern on a dark background.

INTERPRETING THE SYMBOLS



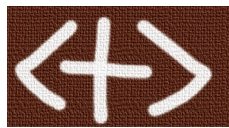
This popular symbol represents the flower of the calabash



This design represents the bones of a snake. It is often used as a symbol of bravery.



This pattern represents the pillows that wealthy women lay their heads on. It's considered a sign of wealth and luxury.



This design represents a bed of bamboo and millet leaves. However, this is a very popular pattern and a woman wearing it does not always mean she is trying to do that.



This design represents the spindle. It is probably the most common mudcloth design.



This symbol represents the "brave man's belt". It signifies the belt that warriors would wear before going to battle and is a sign of courage.



This design represents the family and community. The dot is the family while the circle is the house and community.



This symbol is considered the Iguana's elbow. It may represent good fortune as an iguana can lead a hunter to water. The iguana is also a symbol of African-born people in warfare with foreign powers.