



Bògòlanfini Mud Cloth

Bògòlanfini or *mud cloth* comes from Mali in land-locked West Africa and is a hand-made cotton fabric traditionally dyed with fermented mud. In the Bambara language of Mali, the word "bògòlanfini" is made up of *bogo*, meaning "earth" or "mud"; *lan*, meaning "with" or "by means of" and *fini*, meaning "cloth".

In traditional bògòlanfini production, men weave the cloth and women dye it. On narrow looms, strips of cotton fabric about 15 centimetres wide are woven and then stitched into cloths about 1 metre wide by 1.5 metres long.

The dyeing begins with a step invisible in the finished product: The cloth is soaked in a dye bath made from the mashed, boiled, or soaked leaves of the n'gallama tree. When yellow, the cloth is sun-dried and then painted with traditional designs using a piece of metal or wood. The paint, which is carefully and repeatedly applied to outline the motifs, is made from a special mud collected from riverbeds and fermented for up to a year in a clay jar. Due to a chemical reaction between the mud and the dyed cloth, the brown colour remains after the mud is washed off. Finally, the yellow n'gallama dye is removed from the unpainted parts of the cloth by applying soap or bleach to make them white.

After long use, the very dark brown colour turns a variety of rich tones of brown, while the unpainted underside of the fabric retains a pale russet colour.

In traditional Malian culture, bògòlanfini is worn by hunters, serving as camouflage, as ritual protection and as a badge of status. Women are wrapped in bògòlanfini after their initiation into adulthood and immediately after childbirth, as the cloth is believed to have the power to absorb the dangerous forces released under such circumstances.

Traditional Bògòlanfini patterns are rich in cultural significance, many of them referring to historical events (such as a famous battle between a Malian warrior and the French), crocodiles (significant in Bambara mythology) cultural objects, mythological concepts or proverbs. This particular piece of Bògòlanfini has a simple, yet distinctive pattern.

Since about 1980, Bògòlanfini has become a symbol of Malian cultural identity and is being promoted as such by the Malian government.

