

# Measure of Earth



## TEXTILES AND TERRITORY IN WEST AFRICA

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## Measure of Earth

Several years ago, while sitting by the ocean in Cape Coast, Ghana, I observed the fishing boats sailing back to shore. Their patchwork sails full of wind, each displaying their graphic patterns and sun bleached colors, immediately brought to mind the quilts I had slept under during all the winters growing up in North Carolina. The sails and those quilts, like the textiles and objects in *Measure of Earth*, utilize geometry as a making process as well as an aesthetic element in their creation.

During numerous trips throughout Africa I could not help but notice the incredibly close relationship many African cultures have with the earth, the land. From its lush rainforests to the endless sands of the Sahara desert, the earth itself creates geometry in many forms, such as concentric circles in water into which a pebble has been dropped, or diamond patterns in sand along the beach as the tide rolls out. The earth is also a source of physical nourishment through food supply. It is a source of spiritual nourishment through traditional religious practices. And it is a source of creative nourishment through narrative, materials, color, motifs, tools and patterns.

The patterns created in nature through tessellations and fractals, whether in the symmetrical patterns of a palm frond, the wings of a bird or a sea urchin's shell, provide an endless source of inspiration, as do the fractals created by the parched earth during a time of drought or the golden ratio of a nautilus shell. The ocean waves rolling into shore and the stars in the night sky create rhythmic patterns through their movements and arrangements. Natural occurrences observed from everyday interactions and experiences are often abstracted or stylized when they are translated into patterns and motifs on cloth.

Cloth holds great value in most African societies. It was once used as currency in various forms on the African continent. It is still a symbol of status. Kente, perhaps Africa's most well known cloth, was originally worn exclusively by royalty. Cloth also plays a significant role in rites of passage, including birth, puberty, marriage and death.

Traveling through Ghana I noticed large groups of people wearing red and/or black cloth on the weekends. This is because funeral celebrations are generally three-day events from Friday until Sunday and red or black Adinkra is the cloth of choice for these occasions. Adinkra cloth is printed with a stamp carved from a gourd. A comb-like tool is used to draw a grid onto the cloth and then it is stamped with ink made from boiling the bark of the Badi tree. These stamped motifs known as Adinkra symbols have proverbial meanings. For example, the symbol called *Asase Ye Duru* translates as "the earth has weight" and signifies the divinity of Mother Earth.

Many African cloths have geometric motifs that could easily be interpreted as stylized maps or directional swatches of earth. Kuba cloth from the Democratic Republic of Congo and *bogolanfini* "mud cloth" from Mali could easily fit into these categories. Their patterns and motifs carry messages known only to their makers and those within the society but they also incorporate the earth through colors achieved with dyes derived from nature. The Malian cloth references the earth in its name, *bogo* means *earth* or *mud*, *lan* means *with* and *fini* means *cloth*. In the case of Kuba cloth, the earth is also the source of the materials used to construct the cloth; raffia palm fibers are used in weaving its base textile and for embroidering the surface.

Barkcloth made by Mbuti Pygmies in the Congo is even more clearly representative of their relationship to the earth. A forest people who consider their dense surroundings a sacred place, the barkcloth they make for various rituals reflects their environment and how they navigate their surroundings in daily life. Within the stylized imagery and patterns of the barkcloth it is easy to imagine running rivers, animal skin patterns and the dense foliage encountered in the forest.

*Measure of Earth* explores the intricate relationships and meanings behind the patterns and imagery of West African textiles, suggesting how important the earth and its natural gifts—natural dyes, fibers for weaving and embellishing, tools for construction—as well as its patterns and narratives, are to the creation of African textiles. The collection of works in this exhibition is as varied, interesting and beautiful as the African landscape itself, but the true riches lie in the sometimes hidden but nevertheless very real connections between the earth and the African artifacts displayed here.

—PRECIOUS LOVELL, Assistant Professor, Keimyung University, South Korea