TRACES FROM THE OTHER SIDE

A Journey to Northern Ghana to Research the Process and History of Traditional Batik Dyeing in West Africa

Cover photograph was taken on trip

Acknowledgement

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Crossing White Volta

Traditional Dye Pit, Daboya

Tamale, Northern Ghana

Mole National Park, Northern Ghana

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my late brother Alfred Agbleze and all unsung heroes of fabric art.

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Background Information

I travelled to the Northern region of Ghana to carry out a study into traditional batik dyeing in West Africa. Traditional dyeing which has been practised in West Africa for centuries still exists in this region of Ghana, though practised by a few artisans in relation to the population and size of the region. The traditional dye pits used in this practise are also few in number now and are getting fewer by the day due to availability of convenient modern dyes and coloured threads. In West Africa, only a few traditional dye pits can still be found in Nigeria, Senegal, Mali and Ghana. In the past, traditional pits were a major source of dyeing fabrics using resist dyeing techniques.

Resist-dye is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as to print a fabric by repeatedly putting a resist on different parts of the pattern and placing the fabric in successive dye baths. In West Africa, some resist dye methods included the use of cassava paste, rice paste, mud, threads/yarns and the fabrics later dyed in traditional/natural dyes (1). This had been the practise before the popular use of wax by contemporary African artisans. I have learnt from this trip that tree sap was also used as a resist here in the past.

There are different types of batiks/fabrics originating from the West Coast of Africa, for instance, Indigo cloths (Adire cloth- Nigeria, Fugu cloth- Ghana), Bogolan/Mud cloth- Mali, Adinkra cloth- Ghana, Korhogo cloth- Cote d'Ivoire (1). In present-day West Africa, most artisans do batiks which involve ready-made (synthetic) dyes, ready-made cloth, Caustic Soda, Hydro-sulphite and wax. These make batik making less laborious as compared to the earlier ones, but they still incorporate some earlier African elements as large motifs, vibrant colours, traditional images/symbols and patterns in selected designs.

This first research project examined the traditional pit dyeing method used for indigo cloths specifically "Adire cloths" and Fugu cloth which are both done traditionally with the same indigo dyeing method. Northern tribes in Ghana are the main producers of Fugu cloth. In times past, they also used to do indigo cloths just like the Adire cloths from Nigeria on the same scale. As I mentioned earlier, only a few traditional dye pits still exist in Northern Ghana, Kano-Nigeria (Kofar Mata) among others. This project was carried out in Northern Ghana, mostly in Daboya and Tamale. Daboya, a rural community in Northern Ghana which is the only place in Ghana one can still find traditional indigo dyeing method in practise. Though few traditional dye pits can also be found in other parts of the Northern region, they are no longer operational. Fugu cloths from Northern Ghana are popular in Ghana but aside from the ones produced in Daboya, all others produced from other parts of Northern Ghana are no longer done with traditional dyeing methods. The respondents that served as key informants of this research included traditional indigo dyers, weavers, custodians of tradition, traders in the field, community elders and chiefs. The case study is based on traditional indigo dyed cloths from this region of Ghana. I therefore looked at;

(i) The history of traditional indigo dyeing in northern Ghana.
(ii) The process of this traditional indigo dyeing method.
(iii) Possible ways of integrating traditional indigo dyeing with contemporary batik making techniques.


Fig 1.Fugu cloth


2. Mud cloth


3. Korhogo cloth


4. Indigo cloth


5.Adinkra Cloth

<u>History of Traditional Indigo Dyeing in Northern Ghana, West Africa</u>

Traditional dyeing dates back centuries in West Africa with first written evidence appearing in the 16th century and examples in Mali dating back to the 11th century (1). Coincidentally a country that hosted Timbuktu and also where the founder of the dynasty of Gonja in Northern Ghana migrated from. Sumaila Ndewura Jakpa was this early 1600 Mande warrior king who settled in Northern Ghana with his tribe by conquering existing tribes on the settlement (3).

They came along with their craft of dyeing and weaving, according to the oral tradition of surviving generation. Present day indigenes of Daboya are Gonja by tribe therefore also descendants. These people were accustomed to the type of dyeing done in an earthen pot (pot dyeing) but were later introduced to pit dyeing by Hausas from Nigeria, West Africa who came to trade.

In the past, due to strong Islamic and traditional influences in these parts the craft of pit dyeing and weaving were strictly profession of men since both sexes were segregated for work and worship. What women mostly did was to pluck the cotton from cotton trees and spin the cotton fibres into threads on spindles as can be seen in figure 7 below. These threads were later hand-woven into cloth by men (fig. 9). Aside from cotton work, women here also designed cloth with simple tools and then dye in pots in their homes (pot dyeing) since pit dyeing was reserved for men. Strip weaving of cloth as well was reserved for the men. Now the trend here has changed but only a few women join in weaving and often withdraw when in the midst of men during work hours since it is still a male-dominated profession. A level of spirituality was attached to making this cloth in the past, for instance, it was considered a taboo to engage in the craft during night time. Though these were not crimes punishable by physical laws, they were spiritual codes people at the time were conscious of and took seriously. An old craftsman I spoke to who still

lives by these tenets believes the source of some problems fellow colleagues face stems out of their disregard of these old ways. However, others believe it to be just superstition. I have observed during my stay that there are some rural communities in the Northern region of Ghana that maintain present-day developments and still keep part of their old traditions alive till date, though on a relatively smaller scale.

Fig 6. Farmhouse made of thatch and clay by a present-day building 7. Old woman spinning cotton to thread 8. Span threads/yarns

Fig.9 and 10 Threads hand-woven to cloth 11. Larabanga Mosque 1421, Northern Ghana 12. Present-day Mosque in Northern Ghana

There are two types of indigo dyed cloths that were used in these parts.
One which is the usual indigo cloth just as the Adire cloth, Tie-dyes from Nigeria and the other Fugu cloth. The Adire type was made in the past by first weaving span threads from cotton into natural cloth and then stitching or sewing patterns/symbols with threads on the cloth to resist dyes in those parts. After that, the cloth is dyed in traditional indigo dye bath. Other resist methods of folding, pleating and binding were also used to create beautiful patterns on the cloth. The artisans also used substances such as sap of trees to block the surface of hand-printed patterns before dyeing them into indigo colours. Other hand-printed version of this cloth involved one dipping finger or tool in an indigo dye to draw patterns or designs on the cloth. These indigo fabrics were the popular cloth used by all category of people here in the past but are now rarely produced by older women. When I inquired why, some claimed they are outdated, no longer patronized and have been replaced by contemporary hand-made batiks and machine printed African wax prints. They also said these cloths are more difficult to produce rendering them unprofitable, citing this as one of the main reason they are no longer produced on large scale. I would like to mention that types of this indigo cloth are still popular in Nigeria and Burkina Faso. In present times weaving of cloth for this production is no longer necessary due to available ready-made calico.

The other type of indigo cloth which is the indigo dyed fugu cloth is still being produced on large scale in Northern Ghana, Daboya and well patronized as well as more expensive compared to other fabrics on the market. This type is done in reverse, by rather dyeing the yarns/threads to be

woven into cloth first in the indigo dye solution. Parts of the threads are then blocked before dyeing, (refer to figure 13) a technique used to create patterns on the threads to be used for weaving the fugu cloth. In present day they use inner rubber tubes from lorry/motor tyres to tie around areas to be blocked, preventing dye there. This rubber then serve as a resist to the indigo dye. Just as the aforementioned indigo cloth, threads and tree sap were also used to serve as a resist to dye for this type as well in times past. As can be seen in figure 15 below, one can also choose to add other supporting colours which have to also be blocked first before dyeing in indigo solution, in order to be visible. This results in a variety of colours aside indigo in the cloth, though indigo colours remain dominant. One of my respondents who also serves as the custodian of dyeing and weaving in this community inherited the practice from his father who had also inherited from his father. Traditional dye pits here were owned by families but are now generally owned by the community due to intermarriages. This Fugu cloth used to be worn by people of high social standing like kings, princes, council members, wealthy individuals and family heads. It used to be associated with prestige and royalty. Perhaps this might be the reason why this type survived here, since old customs and traditions no longer restrict its access there is high demand for the perceived prestige. Not to mention its distinct appearance and texture which clearly sets it apart from the other fabrics on the market. The icing on the cake for some is that fugu cloth/Ghanaian smock was worn by Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana's first President) on the declaration of independence.

Northern Ghana as a whole has a proud tradition of weaving fugu cloth (Ghanaian smock) and can boast of generations of weavers who transfer craft to the next generation. This is due to the fact that there were also Moshies who originated from Burkina Faso, West Africa and settled in this region. They also came with their art of weaving and the word "Fugu" itself is a moshie language meaning cloth (2).

14. Indigo cloth

15. blocking colors before dyeing

*16.*multicolored fugu cloth

fig.13 rubber tube serving as resist

Process of Traditional Indigo Dyeing

Traditional indigo dyeing is done here with an indigo plant (*Lonchocarpus Cyanescens*) that grows wild (refer to figure 17). This plant serves as a source of dark blue, light blue, blue and black colours which are dominant colours of indigo cloths. There are other colours used at times to support the indigo colours of indigo fabrics. Some other tribes in West Africa prefer other

colours mainly for their ceremonial clothes for instance the Adinkra cloth by Akans, but the colours used undergo a different traditional process of dyeing which are subjects for another day.

To begin the indigo dyeing process one has to get fresh leaves from the indigo plant which are then pounded and moulded into a handful ball. This is then left to dry. After, water is poured on it which should be left for a minimum of one day, it is then transferred into a basket so the water can sieve out totally. Then you have your processed indigo leaves to be used for dyeing as can be seen in figure 20. This processed indigo leaves can be bought at the market in Northern Ghana from traders who specialise in its preparation. The next thing the dyer needs to prepare is the special ash, which is known here as zatar (fig 23). It is prepared here by burning dried indigo leaves and sticks till you get ash. Not any type of wood is used for the burning but particular ones, for instance one commonly used here is the Dawadawa wood (*Parkia biglobosa*). I have been informed the wood ash contains properties which also helps the zatar serve as mordant in the indigo dye solution. This zatar is normally reused after the indigo dyeing process. It forms a muddy residue at the bottom of the indigo solution in the pit. This is collected and moulded into balls (fig. 21) with the leftover dye solution. For the next dyeing session, they are left to dry and burnt overnight (fig 22) with Dawadawa wood for the ash.

Fig.17 Seyram by an Indigo plant

18. Indigo Plant

19. Indigo leaves

20. Processed Indigo leaves

21. Moulded Zatar

22. Burnt Overnight

23. Zatar (Special ash)

After the processed indigo leaves and zatar are in place, the dyers proceed to the dyeing pit. Traditional dye pits in Daboya can be found ranging in depths of 12 to 14 feet. They begin the dyeing process by filling the pit with fresh water to about three-fourths (¾). Then add buckets of zatar to the water in the pit, measuring the number of buckets to the depth of pit in feet. That is to say, 14 buckets of zatar (special ash) should go in a 14 feet pit. As they pour the ash into the water, they pound concurrently with a stick to mash any solid residue so to have a uniform solution in the pit. Thereafter a half sack of processed indigo leaves is poured into the solution and pounding repeated. They then stir and leave indigo solution overnight. The next day, they add half sack of raw dried indigo leaves (unprocessed) to the overnight solution and leave it for another day. The following day, the remainder of indigo leaves suspending on solution is mashed with hands and left for a minimum of 3 days to begin dyeing. I have been informed the leaves can also be left for weeks to ferment in pit before dyeing begins.

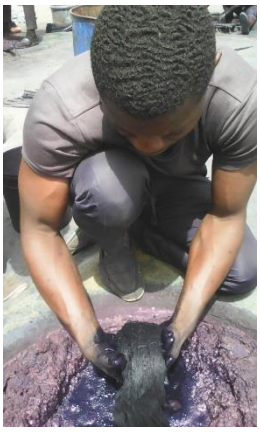
Before dyeing begins the fabric is first soaked in water as seen in figure 25. This is done to relax the texture of fabric and to make it heavy so it does not suspend on top of the indigo solution. After soaked well enough in water it is taken out, stretched and water squeezed out (fig. 26). The moist fabric is then dipped into the indigo solution. Please note that dyer at this point has already blocked parts of the fabric/yarns to resist dye at those portions, in turn creating patterns of their own preference. Whiles in the solution for about five minutes, the dyer lifts the cloth (fig 28) out of the solution for air(oxygen) and sunshine in the atmosphere which helps bring out the desired shade of colour. This is the reason why traditional dye pits found here in West Africa are without roofs. When first lifted out of the solution the fabric appears greenish but after oxidizes to indigo. After repeating the dyeing process for some time (30mins and above) based on dyer's preference of colour, the dyer takes out fabric, squeezes (fig.29) and then dry. Second dyeing is then done to complete the process. The dyers can do as many dyeing as they choose to in order to get the desired shade of colour but in case they want a light blue shade (fig. 31), after first dyeing they have to wash the fabric in water. The indigo dye solution is considered nontoxic, dyers use bare hands and can be easily identified here with their indigo-stained hands. The remaining dye solution after dyeing fabrics lasts up to a month before losing potency to dye (expires).

Fig 24. Traditional Dye Pit in Northern Ghana, Daboya

Fig 25 Soak in water

26. Squeeze out water

27. Dip in dye



28. Lift for oxygen and sunshine

29. Indigo dyeing

30. After first dyeing

31. Some different shades of Indigo

32. After second dyeing

<u>Integrating Traditional Dyeing with Contemporary Batik making Techniques</u>

During the research, I observed possible ways of bringing this old form of fabric making together with modern batik making. By looking at how both schools (old and new) can benefit from each other. I would first like to look at this in respect to the Adire type of indigo cloth here, so it can be preserved here too as in other West African countries.

This can be done by adopting the common practice Akans use in making Adinkra Fabrics in the Ashanti region. The technique involves transferring or drawing patterns/designs “that would have been stitched or hand-printed on cloth” to a medium block. In the past they used calabash, this medium block can be wooden or foam (fig 35) as is now popular with contemporary batik

artisans in West Africa, immersing this blocks in wax to fix patterns on cloth. I believe this technique would help reduce the stress and time involved in sewing or hand printing designs as resist done in the past. The design stamped cloths can thereafter be dyed in the traditional dye pits to produce desired cloths. This can help revive a dying breed of indigo cloth here. I proposed this to the dyers because of the reason they gave as mentioned earlier why they no longer produce the Adire type of indigo cloth on large scale. The Tie dye versions which require folding and tying do not require this technique since they are relatively simpler to do and do not require sewing designs with thread.

The artisans I spoke with showed a keen interest in reviving this particular line of indigo cloth since they understand it is also part of their culture as much as the other (fugu cloth) and should not be abandoned.

On the other hand, contemporary batik artists can also benefit from traditional indigo dyeing by using simpler methods that would not involve the process of preparing the dye in the pit and traditional mordant (zatar). They can start by just preparing the indigo solution with a simple method of soaking fresh indigo leaves in water overnight, sieving and mixing dyed solution with a mordant (5). They can also prepare the indigo leaves as it is done above (*refer to the 2nd paragraph of Process of Traditional Indigo dyeing*). In some parts of West Africa, it is even possible to find processed indigo leaves from the market. These processed leaves can then be immersed in water and the overnight solution mixed with a natural or inorganic mordant to get a good dye. One can also process the cloth in mordant before dyeing in an indigo dye bath, mordants such as salt, vinegar, alum among others can be used this way (4), for more details please refer to 4th reference. There is a method used in Thailand that involves adding lime to the indigo solution and beating it for some minutes to get indigo dye paste. Ash water and sugar are later added for dyeing (5), for more details please refer to the 5th reference. With this process, the indigo solution is also prepared by just pouring water on fresh indigo leaves and leaving overnight to ferment into the dye. Traditional indigo solution is a good source of rich dark blue, blue and black shade which should not be overlooked. I am not implying that contemporary fabric artists should abandon modern synthetic dyes and go all natural in dyeing, that would be quite impossible in our new and fast world. For batik artists interested, it would be possible to do so on a select line of production/artwork that could cater to a green market. Just recently an artist from Cote d'Ivoire experimented with cocoa powder and coffee as dyes for his work and got really successful at it. Natural dyes have a way of resonating with some artwork. When it comes to fabrics, traditional indigo dyed fabrics are usually unique in colour and do not fade easily, even for the mere reason they are natural gives them a good placement.



Fig 33. Contemporary wax batik in Africa


34. Voice of God (Burning Bush) Batik Art


35. Designs on foam (Stamps)

Fig 37. Indigo-dyed Cloths (Fugu Cloths)

Conclusion

I came to Northern Ghana to observe a dying craft, but have found a craft very much alive. When I spoke to a 54-year-old native who still does traditional indigo dyeing, I asked him if he thinks modern synthetic dyes and coloured threads might finally replace their traditional indigo dyes too.

Fig 38 Daboya dye pit

39. Fugu weaving

40. With Custodian and Assemblyman in their indigo dyed fugu 41. Fugu/Smock Market, Tamale

His response was no because to him indigo dyeing is an integral part of their culture and has always been their main identity. He went on further to say his father did the craft and his forefathers before him. Now he too does the same craft and has taught his children and

grandchildren. He believes their children after them would also inherit it and the cycle would continue. I had the opportunity to also speak with his 16-year-old grandson who is an apprentice at the same time a student. Many people in the rural community of Daboya Northern Ghana, have other occupations but still dye and weave indigo cloths alongside.

To these people, it is more than just a means to an end. It is a way of life, part of who they are. A sacred tradition they intend to keep alive.

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