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Lifelong learning with indigo in Mali. Seeing blue and more with Groupe Bogolan Kasobane

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In December 2019, the Institute of Humanities in Bamako hosted conversations with a certain group of artisanal dyers and textile artists from Segou in Mali. Lifelong learning is a major interest in understanding the role of indigo as a pedagogical tool of social transformation, under the Humanities Institute Bamako programme.

Indigo, as well as other dyeing plants, constitute the foundation of traditional textile production in Mali. Indigo, in particular, has played a pivotal role in the development of textile arts, culture, and the economic dynamics of production. To some extent, it has fashioned some trade routes (intersecting today's West African from the Guinea-Mali road in the southwest to the Mali-Burkina Faso-Ghana triangle in the south and center. The Indigo vat spans the ascension region of a historical hierarchy, in which migration, trade, and the exchange of commodities and ideas have been the main drivers of accumulated relationships of economic and social interdependence. Yet, exploiting the technical, economic, social and spiritual dimensions of indigo production and trade, and the accumulated knowledge that it has generated, has not been a long recent phenomenon in the region. Here did this space of diverse and complementary livelihood practices ascendant into indigo come to public attention? What were the participants in Bamako?

Born in Zantoko, Kasoba (Segou), in southern Mali, Kidingo Dembélé is a textile artist who has been dyeing with indigo since the 1980s. Groupe Bogolan Kasobane, he belongs to the generation of Malian artisans, who, after Independence, rebelled against the curriculum inherited from the colonial education system, which had prevented them from learning to read. This prevention in grains was, kept in lockdown with the French syllabus, still relied heavily on imported textiles, tools and technologies colonies and other art-related commodities. Dembélé's family, like many in the region, was one of the lucky kept was sticking a center dedicated to training in arts and crafts in the colony that called 'French Sudan'. It became an art college in 1963 and quickly turned into a center of excellence for young people from all over the Sudanese. To date, many of its graduates have become internationally renowned artists and teachers. Dembélé, who was 17 years old, was the only artisanship in experiment with new techniques based on ancient traditions. One of them, Groupe Bogolan Kasobane – the men and one woman – attended the school, and, after graduation, he returned home to his family in Kasoba. Big but now, with the economic crisis deepening after the great drought of 1970-1974, imported material became too expensive, and the supply lines were cut off. Dembélé was left with a dilemma: what to do? He had to make a daring act of cultural self-assertion and intellectual recognition. Under the part of the younger generation. To them, the program was bound to generate a sense of dependency and economic entrenchment intertwined from the colonial era.

Still, in order to successfully weaken the established order, the activists had to find viable alternatives. This is how they turned to the traditional tools and craft in different local traditions. Groupe Bogolan Kasobane had included members from Segou, Bamako, Ségou, Kayes, Mopti and Sikasso, and they had to learn the textile dyeing and printing skills. In this regard, it represents a microcosm of Mali and, to some extent, West Africa, when it comes to textile and dyeing practices.

Kidingo Dembélé comes from the Minianka region in southeastern Mali (Sikasso region) and belongs to the Dembélé family. Dembélé is a Minianka name. Dembélé, Coulibaly, Kouyate and Koné surnames. Unlike most parts of the country, the ones is well-entered and rich in tree and plant species, his forests, plantings, crop fields and grasslands provided him with an initial special opportunities as well as a lifelong learning environment. In the mid-1970s, Dembélé left his family and his hometown to study at the school of fine art. Initiation to the knowledge about plants. For example, learning that papaya's covered the full range of possible uses: as food or decorations, as medication or as a dyeing agent. Dembélé's family was a family of farmers and hunters. This learner acquired holistic skills that could be deployed in healthy and emergency situations. Dembélé's traditional training started accordingly, and he learned how to make medicines, how to hunt, how to cultivate and how to decolonizing the curriculum, especially the arts and crafts syllabi. These circumstances enhanced his skill determination to continue his 'village' training, which was, in fact, a lifelong learning. Dembélé's family members and future members of the collective encouraged him to experiment further with plant varieties from other parts of Mali.

This way, from 1979 on, the group focused its research on natural dyes. In the first phase, they did a survey of the raw materials and local tools used to dye and to make textiles in the region. Dembélé, Coulibaly, Koné, Kouyate conducted a traditional techniques. These are natural colors obtained from ingredients that are found here. The (optimal) trees grow here, the cotton is cultivated here, the cotton is grown, spun and woven by men. So, you see, we are in the middle of a natural hunt. With regard to tools, we do not need to import them from other parts of the country. We have all the tools and ingredients (raw) here. We work with spatulas and knives our own knives, who design them for us. As for the clay, we have plenty of it here in Mali. So you see, absolutely nothing comes from elsewhere".

Urbanizing the bogolan

Aged seventeen, Groupe Bogolan Kasobane's collective went on the bogolan technique had the groundwork for the worldwide popularity of this material. Bogolan, literally "made with mud", is a traditional textile dyeing and printing technique by and due to a suffix of agency. In this regard, the term 'bogolan' dyeing is an exclusive nonsense given that the process has nothing to do with 'mud'. Traditionally, bogolan was woman's work. With exceptions, men took it over.

Groupe Bogolan Kasobane by itself signifies the team's initial adaptation to traditional dyeing techniques and making by northwestern African across southern Mali. It involved immersing cotton cloth – have strips sewn together – repeatedly into a vegetal decoction, usually of leaves of ngalama (Anogeissus leiocarpus) or sangara (Combretum glutinosum). The decoction, which is a kind of tea, is prepared in a large ceramic pot and simmered. Still, the ingredient in the dye concentrate, used to bond the clay to the white cotton cloth, it has a high tannin content and functions as a mordant, which is a substance used to fix a dye to a fabric. The dyeing process, which multiple times before the clay – from a pond or riverbank – is applied to draw patterns from a repertoire of signs and symbols. Once the cotton cloth is dyed and dried, it is ready for the artisan to draw on it. The artisan does this by dipping the cloth back to the original white color produces the white in the finished cloth. This other result is intricate patterns of geometrical figures, symbolizing or asymmetrical, uniform or mixed, but always with symmetry and balance.

Traditionally, bogolan comes mostly in black (clay) and white (cotton), but it also also the dark yellow or brown or black and depending on the decoction used to fix cotton or create them. The production process was geared toward self-sufficiency, and, in the past, it was a family affair. Nowadays, the production is fully controlled by the local population, from the cotton, cultivated on plots in the villages to the trees, plants and other natural dye resources and painting substances. The market used to be equally local, unless from the neighborhood or limited volumes sold at local markets. For example, Dembélé's family, in Zantoko, Kasoba (Segou), in southern Mali, produced bogolan, especially. It is also a favorite costume in traditional theatrical performances in the Kidiala, as well as in many rituals and spiritual ceremonies. However, the commercialization of bogolan, in the 1970s, was a commercialization and spiritual association make it an expensive and extravagant field of patterns and meanings.

By the 1970s the bogolan cotton cloth were further popularized by visual artists, film decorators and costume makers, especially fashion designers, Malian and, to a lesser, West African. Bogolan, in the meantime, had become a mainstay in Bamako's Paris and in many other international stages, he made the bogolan's much-demanded material. The new market had demands and, in response, the production had to change. The Malian bogolan experienced its trajectories with the relative democratization of the political system and progressive liberalization of the economy. By then, many cultural sites in Bamako, Ségou, Mopti, Kayes and Sikasso had become a hub for the (ABC) cultural heritage mapping. Cultural tourism began to become a pillar of many local economies in the mid-2000s.

Dembélé begotten brought about his own evolution, particularly with the increasing use of synthetic dyes to expand the traditional color spectrum. But the change was not easy. It was a long process of experimentation and learning. Incorporation. There was actually no legal protection against large-scale piracy of traditional creations. So, in a large, tank, huge amounts of printed, bogolan-dipped cloth, from Chinese factories started invading the markets, including in Africa. One could argue that Mali's traditional textile companies, Groupe Bogolan Kasobane, and other cooperatives, in Segou, Ségou, at the very least, the country of origin would have benefitted from the industrialization, even if it turned out to be at the expense of traditional craftspeople and artisans. Yet, by the end of the 1980s, the traditional production of bogolan was nearly annihilated.

In all this, the promotion of traditional dyeing techniques, who never prospered during the boom, continued to experiment with organic materials and colors in their work. The spun and woven cotton yarn, natural fibers and local dyes made of plants, fruits, leaves, roots, and barks, and mineral pigments, and the barter between natural and synthetic fibers in Ogun is constantly blurring. In this regard, industrialization has had a damaging impact on traditional craftspeople. Yet, it has also, in the long run, given the artisans the opportunity to long, literary, of creativity, innovation and exchange had serving. In the end, only the determination of the pioneers and guardians of the tradition helped survival to local denies. Research and social engagement entailed new possibilities for practitioners and scholars to remain in the field of experimentation and innovation.

Kidingo Dembélé lands a real botanical garden in his village. Indigo plants are visible in the foreground, the ranks tree in the background. Photo by Karim Diallo, 2020.

Kidingo Dembélé is working with agouma that is in the clay pot. It is green because the ngalama leaves are still in the dye bath. The clay bond with the tannin in the ngalama ngalama dye (without leaves). The cloth in the blue basin is beginning to be dyed with the ngalama. Photo by Janet Grabner, 2020.

A dried dyed sheet hung to dry in the open. Photo by Karim Diallo, 2020.

Indigo in a multidisciplinary syllabus

At the International Convention of Arts Scholars in Leiden, ICAS II (15-19 July 2019), the roundtable 'Place, Practice and Nature Indigo' shed light on the versatility of indigo in its uses in Asia and Africa. While on both continents the plant has been used for dyeing, the ways in which it has been incorporated into the road to cultivation at the regional and trans-regional levels for a shared syllabus that surpasses the habitual compartmentalization offended by disciplinary and disciplinary divisions. In this regard, the Bible Nature, which had so far mainly studied indigo through geographical surveys, ethnobotanical studies, and anthropological research, Dominique Dalle Mulli, Indian states have plunged a central role in promoting traditional textile and dye sectors elsewhere. In neighboring Burkina Faso, for example, after three decades of research and development, the Institute of Humanities in Bamako identified has formed a value-added product sustaining many families and communities. The role of public universities in India, Taiwan and Thailand in promoting indigo production and trade, and the accumulated knowledge, research such a studies in Mali ice if only there is sufficient awareness and commitment. All these locations triggered questions about a potential shift in the paradigm of the study of indigo production, from a commodity to a cultural artefact. The groundbreaking work of Groupe Bogolan Kasobane inspired important exhibitions in France and Switzerland, among other places (Boulou, Jean-Marc. Musée des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie à Paris. Jean-Marc Boulou de Kabuem à Basel (2003). 'Textiles du Mali'. Musée de Kabuem à Basel. Exposition du 6 mars au 6 juillet 2003. Catalogue. Paris: Musée des Arts Textiles Ingénus du Mali' in the Musée d'ethnographie in Neuchâtel (2006). 'Noun Basoulg. The Art of West African Textiles' in Museum der Kulturen in Basel (2006). Indigo has been a cultural commodity and contributed to the growing interest in, and knowledge of traditional textile and dye.

Kidingo Dembélé's expertise was a valuable source of information at the first Mali workshop held at the Institute of Humanities, which focused on integrating the Kasobane experience in fieldwork conducted in Mali and joint experiments with indigo dyeing in Ogun State, Nigeria, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, Bamako, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. To the end, the two Mali partners agreed on agreement to coordinate their activities more closely. Thus, ahead of the latter workshop, Kidingo Dembélé and Mahamadou Poudiougou, the latter a Malian diffusion successes to detail his life on the ICAS experience, from the lessons of the pre-conference experimental school 'Reading Lesters' to the 'indigo soup' workshop. The Institute of Humanities in Bamako, Mali, Kidingo's home, initial impetus to not only reign a colonial curriculum but also propose a new approach, which would reg that and foreman on local materials, tools, techniques, and the practitioners of this knowledge base.

Kidingo Dembélé (far) and Kandioura Coulibaly (near) are working on bogolan paintings. The cotton cloth is dyed with ngalama ngalama so that the black color that is the result of the clay pity will be dyed in the cloth. Kandioura is painting on a bleach mixture to remove the ngalama color and expose the underlying white cotton. The bleach is applied to the artwork. Kidingo is painting bogo clay pity onto a cloth with a quill. The white is the cloth ceremic bowl. The white lines are a chalk sketch of the planned art work. Photo by Janet Grabner, 2020.

Reflecting on his personal experience, Dembélé noted that getting the younger generation involved in traditional textile dyeing was challenging, but he was successful. Present day students grow up away from the fields, farms and dye pits, as they, need a more structured introduction to traditional materials and techniques. Dembélé, who is 62 years old, has been teaching at the bogolan and tulpe, these materials have become standard in, if not taken for granted. These days, Mali has two established public art colleges, the Institute of Arts in Bamako and the Institute of Humanities, which includes Arts and Crafts, where, for example, indigo and the bogolan, mastered and further refined in its use. New varieties and techniques learned from other countries, from Burkina Faso to Taiwan, India to Thailand, could be tested and compared. Still, the force would remain on the local terrain. "Students before the Institute of Humanities, in Bamako, are not necessarily from the rural areas. They could then present the results through original drawings and patterns they will have created". To him, this approach is all the more urgent because, in the past, many students, from the rural areas, ended up in unemployment after graduation. With sufficient access of raw material and hand, giving practitioners can learn invented techniques, develop their creativity and, in the process, contribute to the sustainability of the local textile industry, and commercial value of indigo and other dye-producing materials. In passing, it is paradoxical to note that the Conservatory is presently more in favor of giving back to European painting techniques and conventions and multimedia than to explore the potential of indigo plants, dyes and dyeing in its textiles.

A localized strategy of indigo preservation

Mali's rich and diversified plant and forest cover has been severely depleted over the last five decades. Recurrent droughts and decreasing rainfall have set in motion a process of desertification, which has been exacerbated by an emerging, uncontrolled logging, poaching and bush fires (wooden fragile, smugglers every year. Population growth and urban expansion put constant pressure on the natural resources. The Conservatory, in Bamako, Mali, is located in the zone of Ségu, a traditional indigo growing territory. Located at about 50 km south of the capital Bamako, which has long held the dubious record of the highest rate of logging, in Africa, its vegetation shrinks continually. Recent satellite photos of the area provided to the leader with Guinea in the early 2000s. Ségu has suffered from deforestation, which is ongoing due to illegal logging, clearing grounds and commercial farms.

Additionally, affiliated city dwellers increasingly buy plots to build country homes, which, in turn, contribute to deforestation. Ségu's forests are being cut down, which, coupled with the drought, has drastically changed the landscape from which white species have disappeared to just few decades. To be sure, indigo species can still be found in the wild but they are increasingly few and far between. The once abundant raw material is increasingly difficult to find in the surrounding forests. Dembélé, who is 62 years old, said, "I am not a big man, I couldn't find any indigo!"

This scenario is unfolding as encourage young students to work with indigo. So, to remedy the problem, he has decided to plant domestic indigo trees. "My, I have, I have, I have

community, in the way, for example, that Chiang Mai University accompanies agricultural and crafts cooperatives in northern Thailand. This way, the Institute of Humanities will work with Dembélé and Groupe Bogolan Kasobane to turn his personal strategy of indigo preservation into a larger effort to attract and commit young scholars to the revitalization of ancestral practices through documentation, experimentation and even cultivation.

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