HUMAN MOSAIC

A JOURNAL OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

VOLUME 25 1991 NUMBERS 1 & 2

Published by the graduate students of the Social Sciences of TULANE UNIVERSITY

Barkcloth Designs of Mbuti Women

Barry S. Hewlett Tulane University
L.L. Cavalli-Sforza Stanford University

Although the African Pygmy cultures are relatively well-documented, little consideration has been given to the arts among these groups. The construction and designs of Mbuti barkcloths created by the Mbuti of the Ituri Forest, Zaire, reflect patterns found in their egalitarian and mobile lifestyle. Conventional interpretations from the study of "African art" are unsuitable for comprehending Mbuti barkcloth designs.

Key Words: Pygmy culture, Mbuti, Zaire, barkcloth design

African Pygmy cultures are relatively well documented, yet very little is known about their aesthetic life. Both authors collected limited data on Mbuti barkcloths on brief trips to the Ituri during the 1970s (Cavalli-Sforza in 1971 while doing biomedical research; Hewlett in 1974 while doing ethnographic research). In July and August of 1985, we conducted a biomedical study among the Mbuti and Efe Pygmies of the Ituri Forest, Zaire, and decided to try to collect more detailed data on barkcloths while traveling throughout the Ituri. We were interested in collecting more data on barkcloths because we thought they were exceptional pieces of art, very little had been published on barkcloths, they were slowly going out of style and were being replaced by cotton fabrics, and the Aka Pygmies of the Central African Republic, with whom we had conducted most of our research, no longer made barkcloth. Since we spent most of our time in the Mbuti area (between Epulu and Maseliko) rather than the Efe area, the data presented here refers primarily to this foraging group (also known as Basua), unless noted otherwise.

During most of human history, populations depended solely on wild plants and animals for their existence. Only within the last 10,000 years or so, or less than ten percent of human history, have domesticated plants and animals become a significant percentage of the diet. The domesticate way of life carries a tremendous amount of cultural baggage with it — i.e., there are a number of patterns associated with this way of life that affect perceptions of reality and aesthetics. Cultural life changed as domesticate plants and animals were adopted — farmers had to delay their return on their investments (i.e. rather than consuming foods immediately after they were captured or gathered, they had cleared plants and weeds for many months before harvesting), farmers had a greater need to develop storage and accumulation of foods to help them get by during a crop failure or seasons when few crops could be harvested, the stored crops then needed to be defended, and as more people settled and farmed in areas of rich soils, greater hierarchy and stratification emerged to deal with the higher population densities. The highly stratified and accumulating background of most people in the world today may make it difficult to recognize and appreciate art forms in egalitarian foraging (i.e., mobile hunter-gatherers) populations, and may explain, in part, why a paucity of data exists on the arts in these populations. The commonly accepted

forms of African art — sculpture, iron works, and masks are uncommon or non-existent in the foraging populations in Africa, in part, due to the fact that they are incompatible with a mobile way of life (i.e., it would be a burden to carry these art forms to a new camp every few weeks).

African Pygmies are the largest non-farming population in the world today, numbering about 150,000 throughout the tropical forests of central Africa. There are at least ten different ethnic populations in central Africa, each with its own language and cultural practices. This article focuses on the Mbuti of the Ituri Forest in northeastern Zaire. The Mbuti are net-hunters of the southern Ituri and are probably the best known of the African Pygmy populations because of Colin Turnbull's immensely popular and insightful book, *The Forest People* (1961). The Mbuti live in camps of 12-60 individuals and move their camps every few weeks or months depending upon a number of personal, social, and environmental factors. Mbuti have shallow patrilineages, practice sister exchange to acquire a spouse, and usually practice virilocal postmarital residence. The Mbuti are as egalitarian as human societies get; they are fiercely egalitarian and have a number of mechanisms to maintain sexual, intergenerational, and interpersonal equality. Sharing of game with everyone in camp, cooperation of men and women on the hunt, the avoidance of boasting or drawing attention to oneself if one kills an elephant or other large game, rough joking about those that do start to accumulate or do not share, are but a few of the cultural practices that maintain the egalitarianism.

The Mbuti barkcloth (pongo, Kimbuti; molumba, Kiswahili) construction and designs reflect patterns found in their egalitarian and mobile lifestyle. First, reflecting their immediate return subsistence pattern (as compared to the delayed return systems of farming described above), barkcloths are made quickly seldom taking more than a few hours to construct. Barkcloths are also made cooperatively as the husband collects the bark and pounds the bark until it is soft and pliable, while the wife provides the artistic designs.

The foragers use the barkcloth primarily as clothing while they are in forest camps. Men and women, young and old, use them as loin cloths in the forest hunting and gathering camps. In the village camps, they are more likely to wear "modern" clothing similar to their neighboring Bantu and Sudanic-speaking farmers — a shirt and shorts for men and a wrap-around cotton cloth for women. Men wear their barkcloth slightly differently than women. The barkcloth of men is wider and may cover the buttocks in the back and the upper thighs in the front (Figure 1). The barkcloth for women is narrower and does not cover the buttocks or thighs. Since they are relatively soft, barkcloths are also used as blankets for newborns. This is said to keep the newborn warm and to protect its eyes from the sunlight. A few individuals also mentioned that they use it as bedding; the barkcloth is placed on top of some leaves or logs and the individual lays on top of the barkcloth.

In the recent past, barkcloth was a common trade item with the neighboring farmers. The farmers would provide manioc, corn, or other village product to the Mbuti, and the foragers would provide decorated barkcloth. Today, villagers may commission an Mbuti to provide a special barkcloth for a special ritual, such as a funeral ceremony or a puberty initiation, or the Mbuti may construct especially decorative barkcloths for themselves

Figure 1. Mbuti man holding gardenia fruit *(embimbele)* to make black designs on barkcloth.

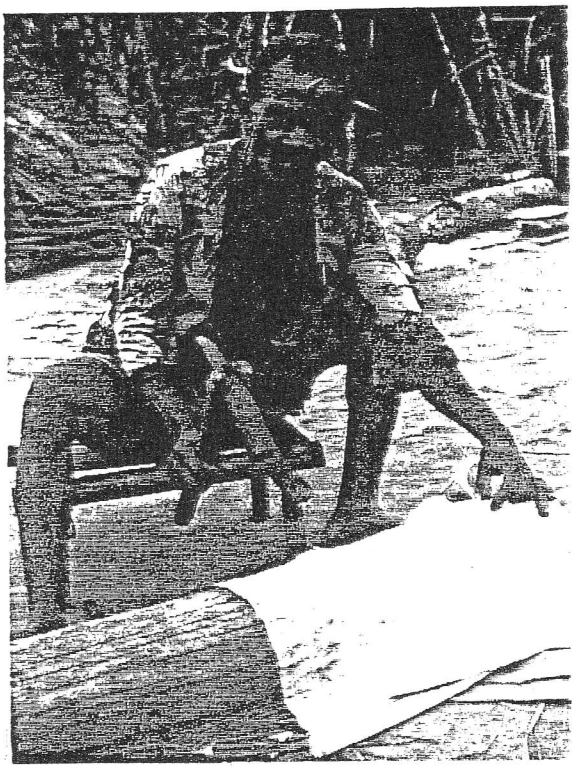


Figure 2. Mbuti man pounding barkcloth with *kolia* in order to make it soft and pliable.

for the village ceremonies. Some villagers indicated that there are villagers who know how to make and design barkcloth. The Mbuti indicated that only they made the barkcloths, and that if villagers had or wanted them, they received them from foragers.

The bark of a variety of trees is utilized to make the barkcloth. Most men preferred the light colored bark of the lengbe tree, but other trees with different colored barks were also mentioned (e.g. pongo pongo for a brown bark; supa for a light red bark). Men climb the tree and extract a number of pliable segments of various sizes, often from the upper reaches of the tree. Back on the ground, the remaining wood, if any, is separated from the bark. The bark strips are then softened by placing them in water or over a fire, and pounded with an ivory hammer (kolia) (Figure 2). If ivory is not available, an unhafted elephant's tooth or any hard wood (mwandjo and engangou were mentioned) is used as a hammer. It takes about two hours of hammering to adequately soften the barkcloth. Numerous barkcloths stop at this stage; they are worn as is without designs. This type of barkcloth was common until recently among the Aka of the Central African Republic. Some Mbuti men in the southeastern Ituri went a step further by placing the barkcloth for the tembu tree in a red mud (potopoto) to color the barkcloth red and draw out naturally occurring black lines in the bark. But after softening many barkcloths are given to the man's wife or female relative for decoration.

Women use their fingers, a twig, or piece of string (kusa) to apply black and red designs. The gardenia fruit (ebimbele) is the source of the black or black-blue colored designs (Figure 1). Charcoal is added to embimbele to get a darker color. Red mediums are obtained from the bark or wood of

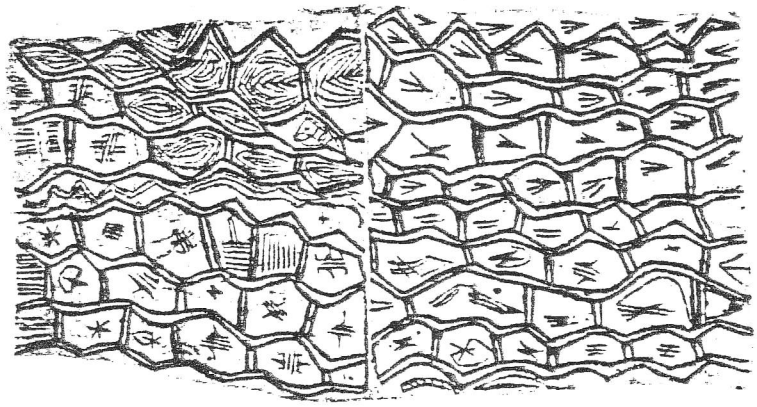


Figure 3. Mbuti barkcloth.

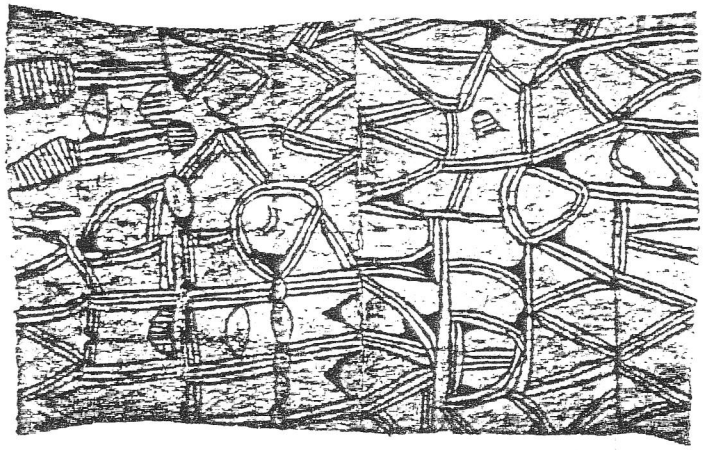


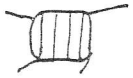
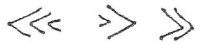
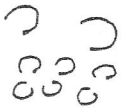
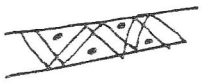
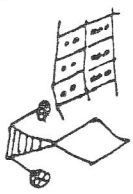
Figure 4. Mbuti barkcloth.

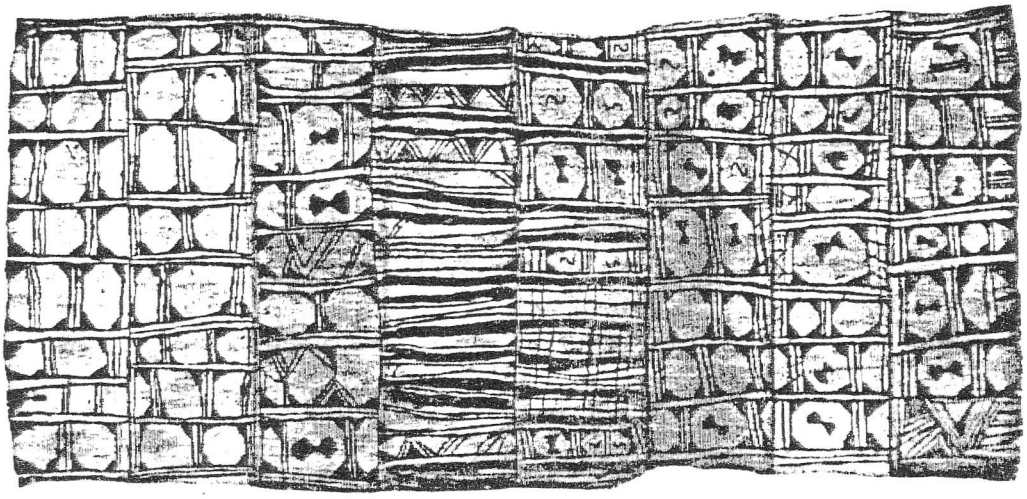
various trees (e.g. ndo, kura). The red bark or wood is scraped with a knife, and water is added to make the red paste. Some individuals use palm oil to give the cloth a reddish tint. Green is utilized on some barkcloths, and is obtained from pulverized manioc leaves.

The woman artist may utilize a variety of layouts to place her designs. She may divide the barkcloth into halves (Figure 3) or any number of segments (Figure 4) and work on each section separately. The length of time it takes to design a barkcloth also varies, but most do not take much longer than thiry minutes to design. Barkcloths for a tirual may take an hour or two to design.

The symbols or motifs that a woman utilizes vary from the very general to the specific. Some women said that part of their paintings were simply design and had no symbolic meaning attached to them, but most women had no difficulty in explaining, in detail, the symbols and their actions found in their painting. Table 1 lists some of the motifs identified by Mbuti. One can locate some of

Table 1. Mbuti motifs.

English	Kimbuti	Design
woven belt	*mokaba*	
basket	*salo*	
child's toy rattle	*mapisa*	
leaf--general	*mangobo*	
leaf for hut	*kasabulu*	
palm nut tree	*ngasi*	
flowers bees make honey with	*alombi*	
star	*nyota*	
moon	*songe*	
forest nut	*pusiya*	
forest insect (makes loud noise)	*amalielie*	
leopard spots	*mapilanga*	
snake--general	*njoka*	
snake--species	*mbia*	
snake--species	*amengenda*	
civet	*asimba*	
water antelope	*aphele*	
turtle	*amatiye*	



Figrue 5. Mbuti barkcloth.

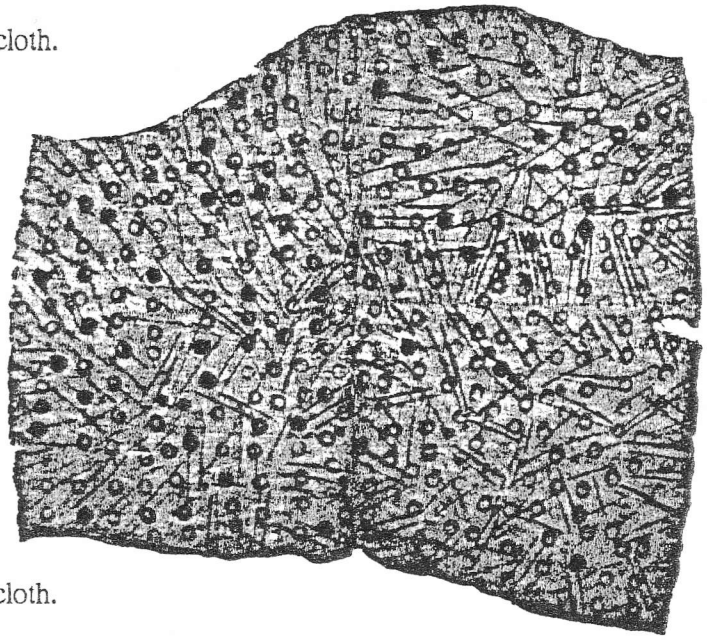


Figure 6. Mbuti barkcloth.

these motifs in Figures 3-6.

Other motifs identified by Mbuti included: termite mounds, palm leaves, string, hut, monky, okapi and other species of insects and snakes. These same motifs are also utilized for face and body paintings.

The Mbuti value barkcloth layouts and motifs that generate sights, sounds, and movement. When talking with Mbuti about the motifs, they would dramatically convey the sounds and movements of the animal or plants, and possibly relate it to a personal experience. Barkcloths designs are like the forest environment of the Mbuti; they are vibrant and full of energy.

While the Mbuti clearly identify a sexual division of labor in barkcloth construction, it is not unusual to see men trying to paint a barkcloth and women pounding barkcloth. Also, if one women gets tired or bored with painting, another woman may come over and provide her own designs to the barkcloth.

The cultural transmission of most subsistence skills occurs at a very early age, Mbuti boys and girls often being able to make living in the forest on thier own by ten years of age. Barkcloth construction is consistent with thei pattern of early skill acquisition as both men and women reported learning how to make or paint barkcloths when they were very young — about 4 or 5 years of age, and indicated that their parents were their primary teachers.

Thompson (1983) has offered possible explanations for Mbuti barkcloth art. He suggests that the visual dissonance and assymetry of the design composition are related to Mbuti's multilingual abilities (i.e. jumping between languages helps to understand asymmetry of jumping in design composition), mobile lifestyle (this exposes them to a variety of ideas and designs), and an extraordinary amount of liesure time provided when they kill large antelope. According to Thompson, liesure time is the key variable; it provides them the opportunity to paint, sing, learn languages and do other creative things.

Ethnographic studies of Mbuti and other foragers question the validity of Thompson's interpretations. First, Thompson assumes that the Mbuti haveabout the same amount of liesure time as !Kung foragers of Botswana and Namibia. Hart (1977) and others have demonstrated that Mbuti net hunt 5-6 days per week, 6-8 hours per day. Because of their trade with farmers Mbuti and other tropical forest farmers have been characterized as quantity maximizers, that is, they hunt longer hours for trading purposes, while groups like the !Kung are called time minimizers, that is, they work the least amount of time possible. Second, Mbuti are multilingual, but so are most Africans. Third, Mbuti are mobile, but they hunt and gather in specific territories that are very familiar to them. Mbuti do move between forest and village, and are thus exposed to ideas and motifs of these distinct worlds, but vilage men and women also go into the forest. Villagers, in particular village men, should be extraordinary artists, because they have more leisure time than !Kung, are mutlilingual and have exposure to village, forest, and urban worlds.

There are other cultural patterns in Mbuti life that may be more distinctive and useful for interpreting Mbuti women's barkcloth art. First, as mentioned above, the Mbuti have an immediate-return subsistence pattern and ideology. Food hunted, gathered, or traded is eaten within a day or two. Mbuti who try to farm seldom can wait the four or five month for the foods to mature. They harvest at the earliest possible date. Archaeologists call the tools of immediate-return hunter-gatherers expedient; tools that are manufactured, used and discarded according to the needs of the moment. Mbuti art is consistent with the expedient, immediate-return lifestyle. Intensive energy, but a relatively brief amount of time, is devoted to the art. Planning the layout and the designs is kept to a bare minimum. The art is therefore very spontaneous and creative, especially in comparison to art found in delayed return systems where planning and organizing are central to survival and success. This may help to explain, in part, why those of us from delayed systems describe the barkcloth art as visually dissonant, asymmetric, with sudden voids and breaks in patterning. These descriptive terms imply lack of organization and plan.

Second, the Mbuti practice prestige avoidance in order to maintain their egalitarian society. When a man kills an elephant or other

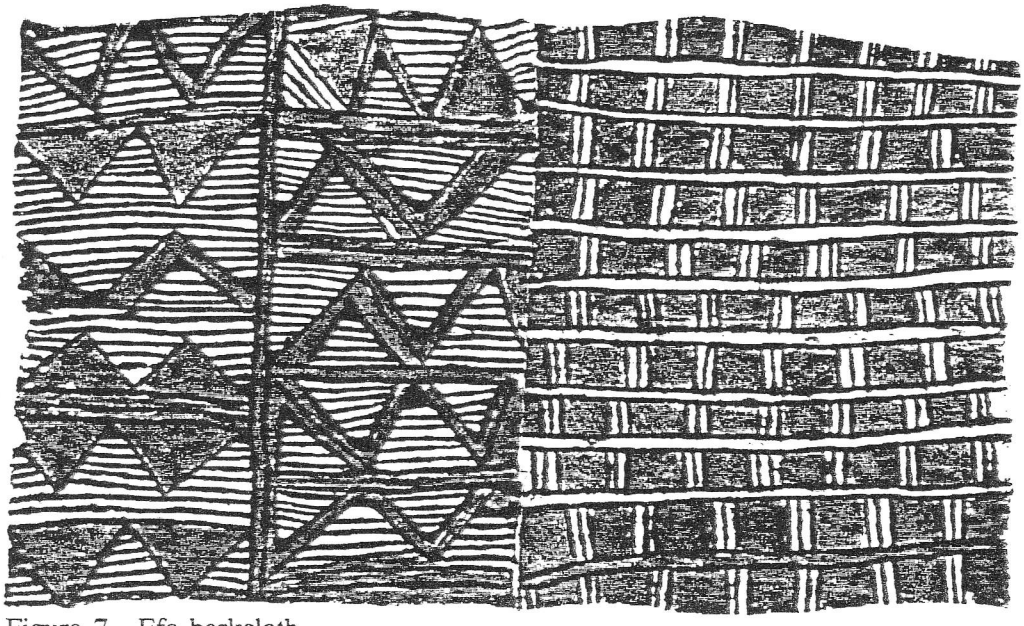


Figure 7. Efe barkcloth.

large game for instance, he does not boast or become demonstrative about the kill. This would bring a tremendous amount of attention to himself. The great hunter will be quiet and modest and will often indicate that someone else actually killed the animal. The prestige avoidance helps to maintain interpersonal equality in the group so cooperation and sharing patterns persist. If one individual starts to think that s/he is better than others in the group, s/he may try to keep more of the game and control the activities of others. This could threaten the survival of those in the group. Mbuti barkcloth art reflects this prestige avoidance and egalitarianism. No central motif or design overwhelms the canvas. There are no secondary themes. The barkcloth may not be "balanced" because of empty voids, but no one area or motif dominates the others.

Third and finally, play is central to Mbuti life. Play is an integral part of the net hunt, ritual activities, dance and music; joking, teasing, physical play and laughter occur throughout the day in a number of contexts. Rough joking about the size or shape of one's genitals is also another mechanism that is utilized to maintain the egalitarianism. Those who are boastful or greedy become the targets of rough joking about their genitals. This pervasive playfulness along with the immediate-return ideology contribute to the multimodal communicaiton that the Mbuti describe in their art. The Mbuti describe their own art as having movement, sound, and smell, and often having a playful improvisational story to it.

These data and interpretations should be viewed as preliminary. We spent a relatively short time in the field, and wre able to talk with only a dozen or so artists. Much more data on the barkcloths of the Mbuti and other African forest foragers is desperately needed. Data on the marked regional and ethnic variability in barkcloths is totally lacking. Figure 7, for instance is a barkcloth of the Efe archers in the northern Ituri, as as one can see, it is distinct from those of the Mbuti. While this article may provide only a preliminary understanding of Mbuti barkcloth art, we hope it generates a greater awareness and appreciation of the art of foraging pleoples in central Africa.

References Cited

Thompson, Robert Ferris
1983 Painting from a Single Heart: Preliminary Remarks on Barkcloth Designs of the Mbute Women of Haut-Zaire. Munchen: Red and Jens Jahn.

Turnbull, Colin M.
1961 The Forest People. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Hart, John
1977 From Subsistence to Market: A Case Study of Mbuti Net Hunters. Human Ecology 6:325-53.