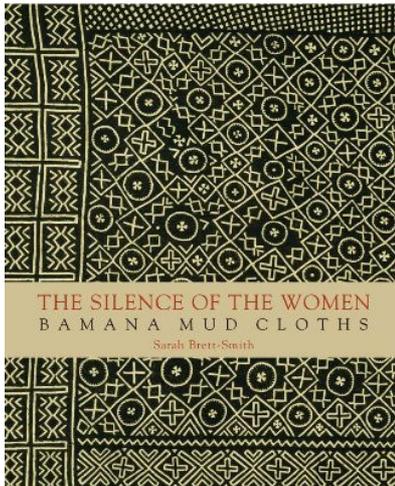


THE SILENCE OF THE WOMEN: BAMANA MUD CLOTHS by Sarah C. Brett-Smith; 5 Continents Edition, Piazza Caiazzo 1, 20124 Milan, Italy. 2014. Hardcover. 320 pages.



Review by Judy Dominic, Harrison, Ohio

To the casual observer, mud cloth is simply just strips of handspun and handwoven cotton cloth decorated with white geometric patterns on a black background. The marketplace has fallen in love with this humble cloth and has created a worldwide demand. What was once considered a woman's task is now performed by many men who see the economic benefits. The contemporary artists are developing a new 'language' as they make their cloth for the trade.

Sarah C. Brett-Smith has gifted us with her time, observations and diligence in ferreting out answers. Mud cloth (*bogolan fini*) is an art form in Mali, Africa that has been woefully lacking in research. Brett-Smith has gone above and beyond the typical research, over the course of 30 years in Mali, gaining the confidence and trust of the Bamana mud cloth dyers. Those women, in turn, have been able to speak of things typically not mentioned.

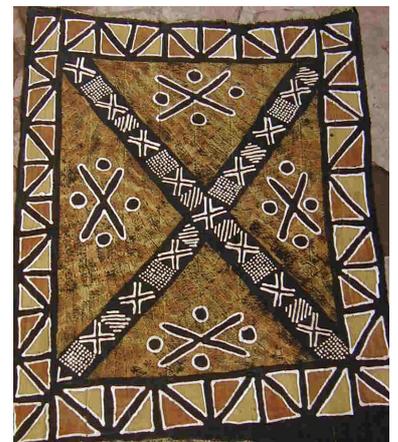
What Brett-Smith presents is the language of earlier artists, documenting patterns to the early 1900s and some to the mid-1800s. What she also documents is the moral code of Bamana villages, especially in terms of women and the cultural expectations and restrictions imposed on them. That moral code is subtly and deftly placed on the wrappers (skirts) of the village women as a daily reminder to be the person expected and needed within the extended family to keep order.

It is clear the author understands Bamana beliefs - she is straightforward and offers no apology when discussing the social implications of beliefs and actions with which the Western world would vehemently disagree. This is not her story but that of the Bamana women and it is presented intelligently and sensitively.

In a patriarchal society where women are feared for the life-giving power they possess, not only for birthing babies but in keeping the family alive and healthy, they are taught to hold their tongues for a variety of reasons relevant to the safety of the family and village. Silence on anything remotely important is prime. Mud cloth designs fill the gaps with crucial precautions and advice without the need for the spoken word. There is much more to the cloth than the obvious geometrics.

This is not a recipe book. It does describe in detail, from start to finish, what one woman artist does to create her mud cloths. There are twelve pages of very good diagrams that complement the 46 pages of photo illustrations. Almost half the text is devoted to understanding various designs and the marks that make up those patterns. The author, as in a typical scholarly treatise, includes 36 pages of additional notes to accompany the text.

With so little previously written about mud cloth, it is quite moving to learn of the 'behind-the-scenes' reasons for the cloth. I now have a much greater respect for the Bamana women and their art. I encourage anyone interested in societal issues, traditional designs, mud cloth, Mali, or mark making in general to examine Brett-Smith's research.



From Judy Dominic's website: Bogolan fini is a technique historically used by the Bamana women in Mali, West Africa, to dye cloth for important life occasions. The cloth is locally grown, spun and woven cotton - the dyestuff is mud collected from the Niger River - the tannin is from the leaves or bark of several bushes/trees. The finished

product is a white symbolic design on a black background. There are a whole slew of variables that make the process work perfectly in Mali. Those same variables make it difficult, if not impossible, to follow the process exactly anywhere else.

Judy Dominic teaches 'mud cloth' and notes that her modified version of bogolan fini produces cloth that is similar to what is found in Mali - in that it uses the color from mud to dye the cloth - but certainly not the same. She says: "There is an ongoing debate about the use of the terms 'bogolan fini' vs. 'mud cloth' - who should use them and when and why." As she cannot duplicate the process, Judy refers to her work as mud cloth, leaving bogolan fini to be used by those who practice the original, traditional process.

<http://www.judydominic.com/mudcloth.html>