

Korhogo

Robert Irwin and Magie Relph explore the textile Picassos of Côte d'Ivoire



'BIENVENUE À KORHOGO,' says the signboard. Like everything else in this small, isolated market town in northern Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), it's covered in red dust.

Getting here wasn't easy. On our three-month journey across West Africa, we'd survived numerous leaps of faith aboard ramshackle buses, wrecked minivans, barely roadworthy Peugeot 504s, taxi motos and the occasional donkey cart. 'Why endure all those miles of discomfort?' you might ask. 'Fabric', we reply.

Magie and I had arrived in Korhogo on a mission: to find, document and buy the eponymous textile of the region – hand-painted Korhogo cloth. We left with bag-loads of cloth, and this story. It stars two local artisans, Soro Navanga and Silué Joseph, and Pablo Picasso.

First encounters

In the beginning, as always, there was a bar. Sitting there at a rickety table under the trees in the middle of the Sacré Bois roundabout on the Bouaké road, we sipped, watched and waited for something to happen. Eventually, serendipity arrived in the person of a wiry little man with a penchant for beer.

Meet Petit Solo. In addition to his thirst, he possessed the three prerequisites of the small-town Ivorian guide: a moto, passable (or should that be 'possible'?) English, and local knowledge. We hired him on the spot. It was Christmas Day, after all.

Next morning, he showed up almost on time, with an equally bleary-eyed buddy and a second moto. After a quick fuel stop and some minor repairs, we hit

Background:
Magie Relph rides a moto to Fakaha village.

Above:
Soro Navanga, a Korhogo artist in Fakaha.

Opposite, anticlockwise from the top:
Soro Navanga, and his elephant design, mordant leaves and mud.

Soro Navanga's elephant emerges.

Spinning cotton in Fakaha village.

the road. That didn't last long, less than an hour. After that, we followed a rutted red track through endless cotton fields and cashew plantations. There were no people, only goats. Until, through the bush, a village.

'Fakaha,' says Petit Solo. 'Here they paint Korhogo cloth.'

We dismount. Our lesson and our shopping spree begin.

Life in Fakaha – as in most villages dotting the vast arid Sahel that spans Africa south of the Sahara – is a struggle to survive. Farming is tough in a land of extremes: either no rain at all, or floods wash away crops, roads and entire villages.

We are formally greeted by a village elder, who leads us to a clearing of modest rondavels housing the basic studios of the village's artists. These men of



varying ages – only men paint Korhogo – supplement their meagre farming income by painting Korhogo cloth. If they're lucky, a local trader might come from Korhogo and buy a few pieces to sell in the market. Tourists are rare here – it's too hot and too far from anywhere hospitable. That makes us celebrities.

We meet Soro Navaga. He sits on hard cement, legs framing his work. Tacked to a low plank surface, a blank canvas awaits his inspired lines. Traditionally he would have painted on a cloth made of hand-spun, hand-woven cotton strips – the same sort of strips used to make the

more well-known mud cloth from neighbouring Mali. Today, most Korhogo artists use wider, machine-woven cloths.

We call these Korhogo cloths 'paintings', but Soro has no brush. Instead, he dips a roughly forged iron blade into a dense black solution of fermented swamp mud. Scraping more than painting, he begins drawing lines on his cloth. Gradually, from his simple, rather naive lines, an elephant takes shape.

As he works, Soro tells us what he knows about Korhogo cloth.

All across the Sahel, most people are either Christian or Muslim – but only to a degree. Just in case, they still cling to their old animist beliefs



as well. For Soro's tribe, the Senufo, everything in nature is powerful and symbolic. For example: the fish represents water and life, the snake and the turtle are earth, and the guinea fowl is feminine beauty.

To a European eye, Korhogo figures make us think of one of our most celebrated artists – Picasso.

'Mais oui. He came here,' confirms Soro. 'To this very Fakaha. I was not born yet, but the old men remember.' Amazing, but this is true. When we dug into it, we found references to Picasso visiting Fakaha in the 1930s.

'But what about the cloth,' we wonder.

Traditionally, the Senufo painted their symbols onto woven cotton clothing, mainly to bring good luck to hunters. These original designs were much smaller than the ones we see today, usually only 10cm across. Then in the 1960s a Swiss art collector encouraged the artists to go big.





Background:
A cotton field near Fakaha.

This page:
Boiling leaves for mordant.

from head to toe in red dust – showers are relegated to second priority. Petit Solo is thirsty and so are we.

A magical technique

So, did our encounter with Soro Navaga tell the whole story of Korhogo? We thought so – until we spent an afternoon with Silué Joseph, we think the finest Korhogo painter of all. He works only 300 metres from our hotel, but it took three days to find him. It was worth it.

Everything Silué did matched the process we'd already seen. Same fermented mud, freehand drawing and iron blade. Oh, he also had a toothbrush!

But, Silué's images seem different. The lines are much darker, more distinct, even blacker. That's because Silué uses an additional technique we hadn't noticed in Fakaha, probably because Soro was so anxious to sell us his cloths!

After completing his design using mud, Silué dips a small sponge into a second solution – a yellow-green mordant made from boiled leaves. We ask what tree, but Silué's language is Boualé and his French does not stretch to arboreal nomenclature.

Opposite, top to bottom:
Silué Joseph painting with a toothbrush.

Silué Joseph, Korhogo artist, sponge-dabbing mordant.

Deftly, he dabs the sponge onto the existing mud lines. As it touches the mud, we see an instant reaction. The black lines turn even blacker. This is pure alchemy. Later, we learned that the old method used only the iron blade to draw first with the mordant, then to overdraw with the mud – a much slower process.

Celebration!

So, after documenting this fascinating textile art, tracing the link between ritual Senufo symbols and Picasso, then power-buying bags-full of Korhogo cloth plus a few hundred metres of hand-spun, hand-woven cotton strip cloth, what's left to do for two old African hands footloose in Korhogo?

Easy. We head for the Sacré Bois roundabout. It's dark by now and the Christmas illuminations are ablaze. Promenading locals take selfies, but we need sustenance. Settled at a maquis table under the trees, we ponder our next move.

S'il vous plaît, madame. Poulet et poisson braisé, pommes sautées, salade. Et deux bière Beauforte. Très glacé.

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Opposite:
Silué Joseph, Korhogo artist, sponge-dabbing mordant.

Traditional clothing morphed into large wallhangings, and modern Korhogo was born.

As Soro completes his tale, he turns to his gallery of finished cloths. Now we're not just admiring a talented artist; we're shopping for our fair trade business, The African Fabric Shop. We select several pieces and the price we pay makes Soro very happy, though he is disappointed that we don't buy all of his stock. It's tempting, but there are other artists here in Fakaha. We must meet them all and spread our money for the maximum benefit across the community. Obviously, we aim to buy the very best, but in the interest of fairness we buy from a few less accomplished apprentices as well. They need the money and the encouragement.

Back on our motos, our bags stuffed with Korhogo cloths, we retrace our route back to town. Despite our appearance – caked

The African Fabric Shop: Magie Relph and Bob [Robert] Irwin have been travelling in Africa for over 30 years, researching, documenting and buying textiles for their fair trade business. Find out more at: www.africanfabric.co.uk

World Textile Days 2018

Magie and Bob also co-organise seven annual World Textile Days (WTD) events, which take place in England, Scotland and Wales. The theme for this year is 'Working Together'. Discover how families, villages and communities around the world work together to make the fantastic textiles that WTD experts bring back for you to see, handle and buy.

- 17 March:** WTD Wales, Minerva Arts Centre, High Street, Llanidloes SY18 6BY
- 14 April:** WTD South East, East Horsley Village Hall, East Horsley, Surrey KT24 6QT
- 2 June:** WTD Central, King's Sutton Millennium Memorial Hall, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX17 3PG
- 16 June:** WTD Scotland, Bridge of Allan Parish Church of Scotland, Bridge of Allan FK9 4NW
- 8 September:** WTD East, Mundford Village Hall, Mundford, Norfolk IP26 5DW
- 29 September:** WTD North, Frodsham Community Centre, Frodsham, Cheshire WA6 7QN
- 6 October:** WTD West, Saltford Hall, Saltford, Bristol BS31 3BY

For more information, visit: www.worldtextileday.co.uk