

# Woven History: Raffia Cloth in the Kongo

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The Kongo have historically used raffia-made products to serve as signifiers of status and spirituality. My research investigates the long history of raffia products, beginning with its importance in the Kongo Kingdom (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries), and continuing in the practices of Kongo peoples in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Past scholarly attention to raffia products focuses on small, intricately embroidered and embellished raffia textiles. These small textiles (about the size of a placemat)

featured intricate geometric designs and were used by the Kongo king, or *Mani*, as a status symbol. However, little attention has been given to the spectacular raffia mats used during funerary practices of the Kongo in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These mats are larger in size and feature both geometric and figurative designs.

My research explores continuities of use and pattern between the embroidered raffia textiles of the Kongo Kingdom with the raffia mats produced by the

Kongo people in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, I identified a connection between Kongo cosmology and the interwoven matrices of the geometric patterns. Past scholarship focuses on the simple cross-patterns, but I have taken this further to reveal that the patterns are complex manifestations of the Kongo belief of the connectedness between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Therefore, by using these designs, the textiles signify important spiritual connections. Just as embroidered raffia textiles served as indicators of status, they also showed the important spiritual affirmation of the *Mani*. The *Mani* derives his power from the spirits. Thus, the textiles served as indicators of status and spirituality. The funeral mats, I found, serve an identical purpose. Whether through geometric or figurative motifs—all aspects continually serve as symbols of power and spirituality.

This research project grew out of my involvement in the “Kongo across the Waters” exhibition—a collaborative project between the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium, and the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art. Curators Susan Cooksey, Robin Poyner, and Hein Vanhee, encouraged my specific research on Kongo textiles as a part of the exhibition and publication. This led to a research trip to the RMCA in the summer of 2012 to view objects and archives. In this trip, I viewed many examples of these textiles and was able to use the accompanying collections data.

This research became the basis for my Master’s thesis and is included in the “Kongo across the Waters” catalog and exhibition didactics. I was also able to present my findings at the 32<sup>nd</sup> annual Florida State University Graduate Symposium in Art History, and a version of my paper will appear in *Athamor* in summer 2014.

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