

# CAPT<sub>ex</sub>

Towards a better appreciation of Central African Textile Masterpieces: understanding the craftwork and Preserving the collection of Textiles

Contract - B2/202/P2/CAPT<sub>ex</sub>

## Summary

More than 5000 textiles originating from the Democratic Republic of Congo and neighbouring countries are housed in the collection of The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. This collection is mainly collected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by various collectors e.g. Albert Alfons Maesen (1915-1991), Gaston Fr. de Witte (1879 – 1980), Marie-Jeanne Walschot (1896 – 1977). The textile collection comprises objects from 137 different cultures ranging from negbwe's, costumes, bark cloth to masks, pagnes, sacs, etc.. Unfortunate this unique collection didn't received the much-needed attention and care in the past that it deserved. This in stark contrast to other objects, like fishnets, sculptures, masks,... The undervaluation of the textiles and the textile making practices is apparent in different aspects. First of all while collecting, the notes that were taken were non-existent or very brief. In the notes almost nothing was found on the purposes, material or the making practices of the objects. An exception are the field notebooks of Maesen, he made an attempt to describe the textiles but it was obvious that he had no understanding about textiles, structures were often wrong described. Secondly, photographs that were taken during the creation of textiles did not have the attempt to capture the making process or to provide information on how textiles were created. The photographs are too zoomed out or are made from an angle where nothing can be seen. An exception are photographs that were taken of the weaving process. In the museum it is also visible that the textiles were undervalued. The storage area where the textiles are stored is not according to the museum standards. Textiles are crammed into drawers, and lie in acid cupboards without the necessary support. Also the digitalization of this collection lags behind, the majority of the textiles aren't photographed and the information in TMS is non-existent, very brief and/or wrong. The method of preservation and the lagging of digitization makes the collection rather inaccessible. At last also in research is very little attention paid on Congolese textiles, Kuba and Kongo is more studied, but on the other cultures almost none information was found. About the creation of Congolese textiles, only the weaving techniques was studied more in-dept.

Textiles connect us and are often an important element in different life events. It's important that this valuable collection is made disclosed and appreciated as it deserves. To accomplish this goal, more knowledge about this collection had to be gathered and disseminated. During a two years research, a selection of textiles was studied in-dept in collaboration with Botanical Garden Meise. During this period different aspects of the collection were studied. An attempt was made to map the different materials, structures and techniques used for creating traditional textiles in Congo and to link this results with the current textile making practices in Congo.

Based on literature and archival research a selection of 46 costumes, originating from different cultures and periods, was made to examine. The choice of focussing on the costumes was based on

the fact that very little is written about costumes and consequently also about the materials and structures of them. A lot of mistakes were found in making an effort to describe them. Even the thesaurus used to describe the structures and materials in the database of the museum, The Museum System (TMS), don't comprises the correct terms to describe them, since the thesaurus is based on terminology of western textile making techniques which cannot be applied to the techniques we find in this Congolese collection.

For the determination of the materials first a reference database had to be initiated. The plant fibre collection of the RMCA and a couple of samples from the Botanical garden in Meise was the basis of this database. An overview was made of the most occurring textile fibres in Congo by as well as a literature study as a research carried out in Kinshasa. The plant fibres were analysed by using macro observations, Dino-Light Edge Digital Microscope, Field-Emission Scanning Electron Microscopy (FE-SEM- and Polarized Light Microscopy (PLM) in which both cross-sections as macerations were made of the samples. The goal of the database is to have a frame of reference for the analysis of the costumes.

The costumes were structurally analysed through visual inspection to discover how they were created. Some of the structures were recreated to a fully understanding of their complexity. Technical drawings were made to visualise the structures. Overview and detailed photographs were taken of the costumes to document and classify the textiles and structures. For updating the database of the museum, new terminology had to be incorporated into the thesaurus.

Understanding the materials and the technical processes aids in the identification of the major deterioration catalysts of plant-fibre based textiles. To discover other catalysts and to optimize the storage conditions of the collection a survey was carried out. The survey mapped the condition of the collection and the weakness in the preservation. The knowledge gained from the analyses had served as the basis for a proposal for proper care and long-term storage of the textile artefacts.

The main goal of this research is the valorisation of the collection and to reveal the complexity of the techniques used to create these beautiful and intriguing textiles with long traditions and make the scientific as well as the broad public aware of this. Understanding textiles and cloths in a broad spectrum is a significant step towards understanding the cultures who wore and used them. To accommodate to this cause, the findings of the project is distributed and a network of textile specialist, conservators, researchers, students, and so on was created. With an up-to-date database achieves the project to make the collection more accessible and more well known to create more awareness of the high skills of Congolese craftsmen and -women and the richness of Congolese cultural practices in general.

120 plant fibres are photographed, and images were taken with the Dino-Light Edge Digital Microscope. SEM images are taken from all the fibres, 40 cross sections are made and 48 macerations. Through the analyses it became clear that different methods are required for the determination, it depends on the fibre which method provide the most information. Identification with macerations is difficult, but cross-sections and the FE-SEM images give a lot more of information. The current technique for making macerations is not suitable for fragile fibres and will need further refinement.

To continue with the identification of the textile fibres other analytical methods for the identification of plant fibre materials should be explored to develop a more efficient method for the identification

of the materials. Other methods that can be explored in the future are Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) and Micro-computed tomography.

During the project an in-dept analysis of 45 partial or full costumes was performed. In total more than 100 objects were looked at to compare with the initial selection. The main structure of almost all costumes consists of looping worked with relatively short lengths of cordage. The processing method, which is the same for all the objects examined, allows the garments to be shaped as they are made, and makes possible designs consisting of stripes, checks and ovals. Through the examination of the structures little differences could be noticed between the cultures. For example the Chokwe costumes are very sophisticated costumes with different designs made using scaffolds cords. But most of the structures occur in different areas, also not much differences is noticed in costumes over time.

The outcome of the survey makes it clear that material loss appears the most occurring damage. This was to be expected and is no surprise since plant material is a very sensitive material to easily due to manipulation, fluctuations in relative humidity, light and insufficient support. Other damages occurring are, stains, tears, fixed folding lines, discolorations and deformations. The majority of the appearing damages could be linked to the method the textiles are stored. This survey once again face the facts that a rehousing of textiles is much needed to ensure the future of textiles. The textiles needs the necessary care and needs to be rehousing with proper support for each object and packed with appropriate materials, according to the protocol made during this research, to accommodate the museum standards and to conserve this textiles for future generations.

The results of this research was presented at the end on a one-day workshop into the museum. The workshop wanted to bring a diverse group of stakeholders, researchers, textile specialists, conservators,... together to talk and discuss the research and textiles. During the day different presentations were given to disseminate the results, there was time to observe 6 costumes and at the end of the day a paneltalk was programmed to discuss the social role of textiles.

This project was merely the start of an in-depth study of the textile collection through the analysis of plant fibres for the determination of textile fibres and the research towards the structures and techniques on a selection of costumes. The research makes it clear that there is still much work ahead regarding the identification of plant fibres, thus far no ideal method is founded so far. The current physical state of the collection needs to be optimized to secure the collection for the future.

The workshop was a success to create a network and for opening up the collection but there is still much work to familiarize the broad public to the textile collection and the textile making practices in Congo.

#### *Keywords*

Democratic Republic of Congo, Textiles, Mask-related costumes, Plant fibres, Preventive conservation