

Toolkit: Textiles and Fashions from the Islamic World - 2021

## TEXTILES FROM EAST AFRICA

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The Swahili Coast, which stretches from Northern Mozambique in the South to Somalia in the North, is known for its kangas (*leso* is Kenya). Kangas are rectangular pieces of printed cloth that are bought and worn in pairs. They are bought as a single strip of cloth with the same design printed on it twice. The design is defined by its patterned border (*pindo*), large central area (*mji*) featuring a motif and a motto (*jina*) in Swahili. The larger cloth is then cut in half and hemmed before being worn as a pair. Although they are now worn by a wide range of different people in a variety of different ways (including tailored) they have their origins amongst the Islamic societies of the Swahili Coast where they are traditionally worn with one used as a waist wrap and the other covering the shoulders, or head. Women also wear other forms of Islamic dress such as 'bui bui' which provide more extensive covering. The extent to which they have been adopted by other communities is shown clearly by kangas which feature images of Jesus and the Pope.

Kangas originally developed in the mid-nineteenth based on handkerchiefs (*lenço*) which Portuguese traders first brought to the Swahili Coast in the sixteenth century. Some accounts state that women began stitching handkerchiefs together to make larger, wearable cloths while others say that the handkerchiefs were traded as printed blocks of 6 that needed to be cut. Instead of cutting out the handkerchiefs women chose to cut them in half and wear them. By the end of the nineteenth century cloths in this style were being produced specifically for the East African market by a number of textile manufacturers including those based in Manchester. They are associated with many important life stages such as marriage, the birth of a child and funerals but are also everyday wear. A large collection of kangas can be an important signifier of wealth and status.

Islamic male dress across East Africa is made up of an ankle length white tunic known as a Kanza. Kanza's are seen as the national dress and are widely worn in some countries while in others they are specifically associated with Muslim communities. Kanza are not generally well represented in UK museum collections. Better represented are *koffiya* which are prayer caps. These are worn both with kanza and with other forms of dress. *Koffiya* are typically white with off white embroidery or pale coloured embroidery and are heavily decorated with eyelet embroidery. They are the most decorated part of a man's outfit and this, along with their size has meant they have been collected more widely.

There are other East African Islamic textile traditions that are notable by their absence. Acquiring cloth, clothing and jewellery was an important part of Somali culture from the mid-nineteenth century onwards as the area benefitted from trade in ivory and livestock. However, while jewellery can be found in museums examples of textiles are less easy to find.

The textile traditions of the Sudanese Mahdiyya (1885 to 1899) are well represented in UK museums as a direct result of British military action. Collected as trophies of war the jibbas and flags represent a distinctive Islamic tradition. In 1881 Muḥammad Aḥmad Abdallah, a Sufi religious leader, declared himself *al-Mahdī al-Muntaẓar* (the Expected Rightly-guided One). He launched a religious and political movement and by February 1885 he had seized power from Ottoman-Egyptian occupiers. In 1899 the Mahdī's successor Abdullahī al-Khalīfa was defeated by a slow but relentless advance of British forces in which tens of thousands of Sudanese were killed in a series of one-sided battles culminating in a massacre near Omdurman.

The use of banners by followers of the Mahdī and his successor the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi was an inheritance from Sudan's Sufi tradition that was given a military dimension in 1881 when Muhammad Ahmad Abdallah added a quotation from the Quran – *Yā allah yā ḥayy yā qayūm yā ḏhi'l-jalāl wa'l-ikrām* [O Allah! O Ever-living, O Everlasting, O Lord of Majesty and Generosity] – and the highly charged claim "*Muḥammad al-Mahdī khalīfat rasūl Allah*" [Muḥammad al-Mahdī is the successor of Allah's messenger (i.e. the Prophet Muḥammad)]. Flags were observed in every military encounter with the Mahdī's forces and as the jihad progressed, banners became specifically colour coded – black, green and red. This allowed to marshal effectively on the battlefield.

Jibba's are tunics, usually made of handspun and woven cotton that were worn by followers of the Mahdi. They are decorated with a series of patches on the front and back and frequently have small pockets to the left of the chest which held amulets. The patches on the jibba deliberately references an earlier form of clothing, the *muraqqa'a*. The *muraqqa'a*, a ragged, patched garment was worn by Sufi adherents as a sign of their asceticism. However, by the time of the 1898-1899 campaign the *muraqqa'a* had developed into the more stylised form of the jibba. The Mahdī had decreed the *jibba* compulsory for all, this was a deliberate to enhance unity and cohesion by blurring traditional visual markers differentiating ethnic groups.

Harar (sometimes Harer), a Muslim walled city in southern Ethiopia, has an important textile heritage. The best known Harar textiles are wedding dresses which combine the sumptuous imported fabrics with local embroidery. Traditionally the dresses had the same patterns inside and out and could be reversed. Trousers would be worn beneath the dress.

### Further Reading

Gillow, J. (2010) *Textiles of the Islamic World*. London: Thames and Hudson

Nicoll, F. and O. Nusairi (2020) The Origins, Development and Use of Banners During the Mahdīa. *Sudant Studies*. Vol. 61, January 2020: 16-27

Ryan, MacKenzie Moon. (2017) "A Decade of Design: The Global Invention of the *Kanga*, 1876-1886." *Textile History*. Special issue "Entangled Histories: Translocal Textile Trades in Eastern Africa, c. 1100 to the early twentieth century," edited by Sarah Fee and Pedro Machado. Vol. 48, No. 1 (spring 2017): 101-32.

Spring, C. (2012) *African Textiles Today*. British Museum Press



**Title:** Kanga

**Date:** c.1915.

**Accession number:** T.10943.2

This example clearly shows the three defining features of a kanga patterned border (*pindo*), large central area (*mji*) featuring a motif and a motto (*jina*). In this example the Swahili motto is given in Arabic script, this became increasingly rare during the twentieth century.

Many early kangas were produced in this colourway and it continues to be popular particularly for Kanga's associated with weddings.

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**Title:** Pair of uncut kangas

**Date:** 2017

**Accession number:** Royal Pavilion Museum and Galleries, Brighton: R6060/17

This design celebrates Ramadan with its green colours and crescent shapes. The motto translates as 'Welcome holy month of Ramadan'.

This example was made by Kaderdina Hajee Essak Limited a company based in Mombasa, Kenya. The company designs kangas for printing in India and then imports them to Nairobi before selling them to retailers across the region. It was purchased from Haria's Stamp Shop, Nairobi in 2017 just before the start of Ramadan.

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**Title:** Pair of uncut kangas

**Date and place:** 2017, Mombasa, Coast Province, Kenya, East Africa, Africa

**Accession number:** Royal Pavilion Museum and Galleries, Brighton: R6060/16

This distinctive red, black and white pattern is one of the oldest kanga patterns still in use today. It is associated with weddings and is known as kisutu. It is worn by the bride and members of her family. It does not usually have a slogan on it.

This example was made by Kaderdina Hajee Essak Limited a company based in Mombasa, Kenya and was purchased from Haria's Stamp Shop, Nairobi in 2017.

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**Title:** Pair of uncut kangas

**Date:** 2017

**Accession number:** Royal Pavilion Museum and Galleries, Brighton: R6060/12

Slogans on kanga's are often used to give messages to the wider community, or can be aimed specifically at an individual. The motto on this one translates pointedly as 'Good manners define you'.

This example was made by Kaderdina Hajee Essak Limited a company based in Mombasa, Kenya and was purchased from Haria's Stamp Shop, Nairobi in 2017.

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**Title:** Kanga design

**Accession number:** The British Museum  
2012,2026.2

One of six kanga designs made by Mr K.G.Peera (aka Miwani Mdogo 'Little Spectacles') in Dar Es Salaam, collected by Chris Spring for The British Museum. The designs were made in Tanzania for cloths printed in Japan.

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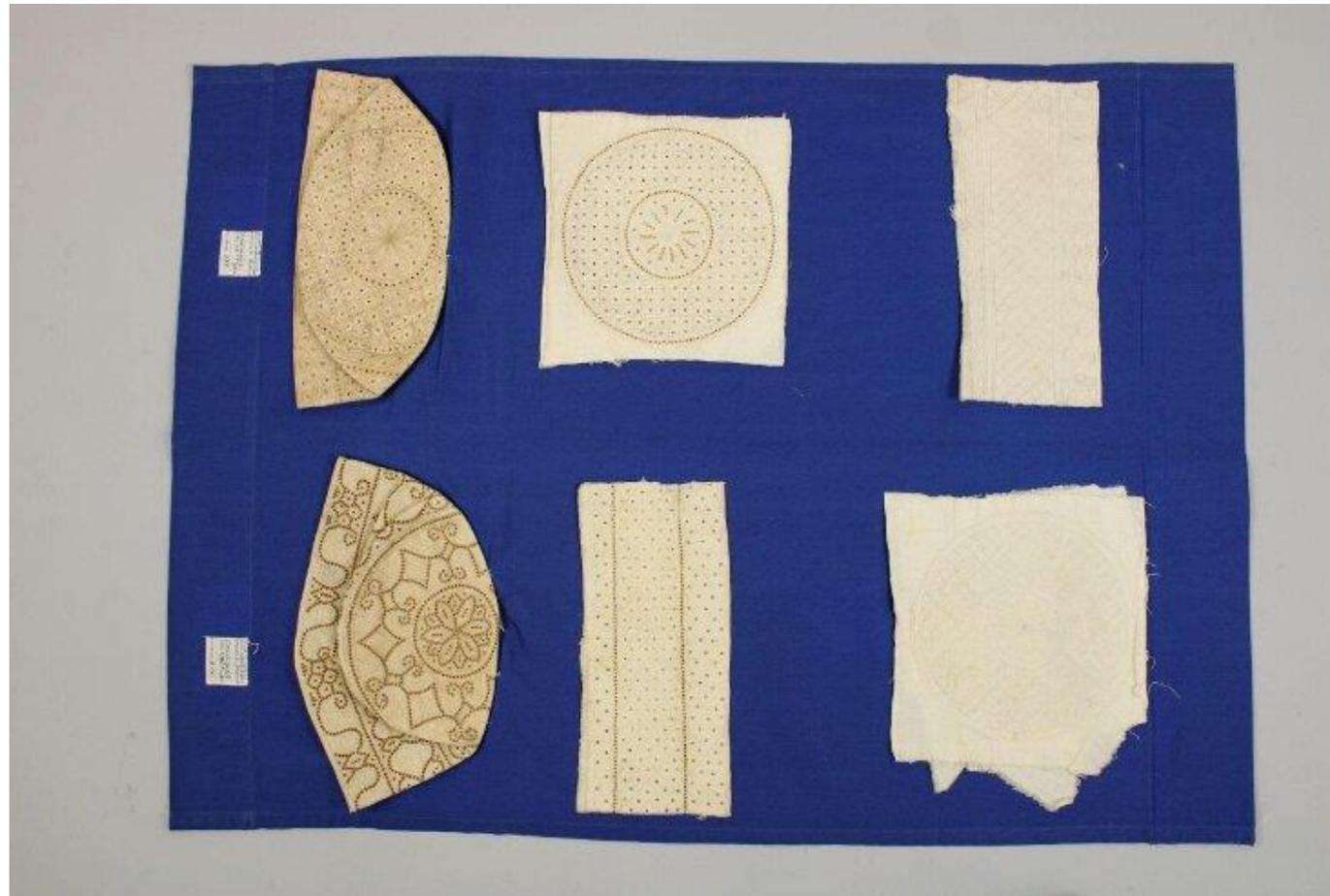
**Title:** Bui Bui, woman's veil.

**Date and place:** Lamu, twentieth century.

**Accession number:** Museum of archaeology and anthropology: 1981.63

Unfortunately, this image is not very clear but the bui bui is made of a tube of black fabric which is worn over the body, a single piece of fabric at one end is used to cover the head. This example was acquired in Lamu, an important town on the Swahili coast.

©Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology



**Title:** Men's caps being made.

**Date and place:** East Africa, early twentieth century.

**Accession number:** V&A: CIRC.178 to B-1962

This pair of embroidered caps given to the V&A by the Needlework Development Scheme is useful because it shows clearly how they are made. A pattern is drawn onto both the circular top and straight band that forms the side of the hat. They are each made of several thicknesses of fabric which allows the hat to hold its shape. The eyelets are created by forcing something through the fabric such as a porcupine quill or palm frond and the pattern hand embroidered in silk. Silk does not occur naturally in East Africa and would have been imported, emphasising again the central role of trade to the economy and culture of the region.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London



**Title:** Kofiyya, Men's prayer cap.

**Date and place:** Lamu, twentieth century.

**Accession number:** Museum of archaeology and anthropology: 1981.63

©Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology



**Title:** Anṣār banner

**Place and date:** Sudan 1890s

**Accession number:** Royal Engineers Museum: GGC144.1

Banner carried by Anṣār (الأنصار) in battle. White background of rough local cotton with script laid out on four regular lines in highly literate, applied script in red and blue. Script arranged in lozenges is a common form for these flags. The Arabic script reads:

“yā allah yā raḥmān yā raḥīm, yā ḥayy yā qayūm yā ḏhi’l-jalāl wa’l-ikrām lā illah ill’allah muḥammad rasūl allah muḥammad al-mahdī khalīfat rasūl allah”

*(Oh Allah, O the compassionate, O the merciful, O ever-living, O everlasting, O Lord of Majesty and Generosity There is no god but Allah [and] Muḥammad is the Prophet of Allah Muḥammad the Mahdī is the successor of the Prophet of Allah)*

© Royal Engineers Museum



**Title:** Anṣār banner

**Date and place:** Sudan 1890s.

**Accession number:** Royal Engineers Museum.  
4801.96.2

This banner includes an invocation of the important historical Sufi figure, sheikh ‘Abd-al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, along with the honorific walī allah, literally ‘friend of Allah’. The central coth features a pattern of a dark blue stylized floral shapes and would have been imported into Sudan. The appliqued script is made from local Sudanese cotton, folded into lengths and stitched in rough fashion. The Arabic script reads:

*“bismillah al-rahman al-rahīm  
yā allah yā rahmān yā rahīm  
lā illah ill’allah muḥammad rasūl allah muḥammad  
al-mahdī khalīfat rasūl allah | al-jīlī walī allah”*

(In the name of Allah the compassionate the merciful

Oh Allah, O the compassionate, O the merciful  
There is no god but Allah [and] Muḥammad is the  
Prophet of Allah Muḥammad the Mahdī is the  
successor of the Prophet  
of Allah | al-Jīl[ān]ī is a friend of Allah)

© Royal Engineers Museum



**Title:** Man's tunic (muraqqa'a)

**Date and place:** Sudan, nineteenth century

**Accession number:** The British Museum: Af1886,0628.1

A rare example of a muraqqa'a, predecessor to the more common jibbas that were worn by Sufi adherents. The simple tunic, much mended and patched was a sign of their ascetic way of life.

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**Title:** Man's tunic, jibba

**Date and place:** Sudan, 1890s.

**Accession number:** The British Museum: Af1972,11.14

Tunic made of hand spun and woven cotton cloth with applique panels in dyed cotton and wool. The patches deliberately reference ascetic Sufi tunics. On the left hand side of the chest is a pocket which would hold an amulet. There are also pockets at the side. There are a wide range of jibbas in UK museums but it not entirely clear what the differences denote, possibly rank or ethnic origin.

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**Title:** Harar wedding dress,

**Date:** late nineteenth century.

**Accession number:** The British Museum: Af2001,06.1

Wedding dress of woven green and pink silk decorated with strips of multi-coloured embroidery. The central v-shape is typical of Harar dress design as is the use of imported silk combined with embroidery done in the city itself.

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