Part 2: Embedded Relationships
For more than 500 years, foreign-manufactured cloth has been a major commodity imported into Central Africa. From the earliest moments of interaction, African consumers made clear their aesthetic preferences and foreign traders sought to provide cloth that appealed to local tastes. This essay will focus on a collection of around 100 samples of printed cotton fancy or roller prints produced by various textile manufacturers in Europe specifically for Central Africa and presented in 1894 at the Exposition Universelle in Lyon, France. These samples, conserved at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, reveal the formats in which the flimsy, low-quality cloth was sold: namely as handkerchiefs and as bolts of plain and printed cotton. In some cases, labels attached to the cloth indicate the prices that varieties were expected to achieve per yard in different Central African markets. By tracking both the design process and subsequent use of printed cottons in the ceremonial regalia of a Kongo religious practitioner, or nganga, a complex power dynamic between manufacturer and consumer is revealed.

Beginning in the late fifteenth century, Portuguese traders (later Dutch, English, and French) who came to the Loango coast for enslaved men and women and ivory recognized African societies which, like their own, deeply valued and appreciated fine cloth. Satisfying the African consumer was essential for good business, and seventeenth-century accounts from Dutch merchants on the Loango coast provide detailed inventories of African preferences. A list prepared for the directors of the Dutch West India Company (Oud West Indische Compagnie) in 1642, for example, reveals how the most desirable fabrics were only those of the finest quality. Cottons from India, linens, silks, and wools in black, blues, and reds were valued, and there is a strong emphasis on qualities such as weight and color as well as technical sophistication.

The appreciation and deep knowledge of cloth shown here indicates its importance in the central African economy prior to the arrival of Europeans. Long established traditions in the weaving of cloth from threads made from the inner membrane of the long pinnate leaves of the raffia palm are recorded in travel accounts, and some of the earliest works of African art to enter European collections from this region are exquisite raffia textiles. Foreign-manufactured cloth was readily incorporated into...
this existing system of value, and traded far inland via a network of marketplaces that connected the various peoples of the Congo Basin. Already by the 1580s, the Teke (Anzique) people of Congo Pool—a central marketplace inaccessible to Europeans until the late 1870s—were celebrated by their Kongo neighbors nearer to the coast for their elaborate dress that was said to make extensive use of imported goods including cloth. According to the 1591 account of Filippo Pigafetta and Duarte Lopes, European silks and velvets were popular items of dress among the slave trading gentry: “The nobles wear silk and other garments ... also velvet caps from Portugal.” At the same time, the account notes that the Teke were celebrated regionally for their own traditions in raffia cloth manufacture. The dress of the elite is described as combining the finest materials derived from local sources such as raffia and shell with imported velvets and silks.

By the mid-nineteenth century European and American advances in manufacturing technology allowed for the mass production of brightly colored and patterned cotton cloth. Two varieties of printed cottons were exported to Africa in great volume: wax prints (wax batiks) and non-wax prints (fancy or roller prints). In Central Africa, “Manchester cloth,” as this cheap imported trade cloth became generally known, steadily replaced the finer quality imported cloth of earlier centuries and also locally produced raffia cloth. This change in cloth preferences occurred first in settlements near the coast where trade cloth was cheapest and most readily available, while people living further inland are recorded as continuing to wear a combination of raffia and imported cloth through the 1890s. Printed cottons were desirable for many reasons including the light weight of the cloth, which could be easily laundered, and even though the quality was generally accepted to be low by African consumers, the

---

See also Alisa LaGamma with contributions by Christine Giuntini, “Out of the Kongo and into the Kunstkammer,” in Kongo: Power and Majesty, ed. Alisa LaGamma, exh. cat. Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 2015), 131–59.

4 Trade routes encompassed the entire Congo Basin and reached over 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) north, south, east, and west. The basins of the Kasai, Kwilu, and Kwango rivers in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Ogooué Basin in Gabon can also be considered as part the same vast network. See Colleen E. Kriger, Pride of Men: Ironworking in 19th-Century West Central Africa (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999), 44.

5 Filippo Pigafetta and Duarte Lopes, Report of the Kingdom of Congo and of the Surrounding Countries Drawn Out of the Writings and Discourses of the Portuguese Duarte Lopez (London: 1881), 29.

6 See Norm Schrag, Mboma and the Lower Zaire: A Socioeconomic Study of a Kongo Trading Community, c. 1785–1885 (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1993) for an extended analysis of the shift in cloth preferences by Kongo consumers.

7 Slave ships also continued to carry a large supply of lightweight cotton Indian textiles in the eighteenth century. See David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz, and Anthony Tibbles, Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 244.
range of colors and styles allowed for greater personal expression. Wealthy individuals soon wore many layers of trade cloth as a sign of wealth and status as demonstrated by Teke fashions on the Congo Pool.

“Paying Some Attention to the Traditions of Other Races”

In the run-up to the Berlin Conference of 1885–6 when the continent of Africa was formally divided into colonies by competing European nations, Welsh-American explorer Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904) gave a series of lectures based on his travel experiences in which he presented Central Africa as the world’s last great untapped markets for European-manufactured goods. Speaking at the Manchester Chamber of Commerce in 1884, he described an almost limitless potential market for cloth: “Supposing that all the inhabitants of the Congo basin were simply to have one Sunday dress each ... 320,000,000 yards of Manchester cloth [would be required], just for one Sunday dress!” Stanley underscored that he has left out questions regarding the aesthetics and desirability of Manchester cloth in his calculations: “I have said nothing about Rochdale savelists, or your own superior prints, your gorgeous handkerchiefs, with their variegated patterns, your checks and striped cloths, your ticking and twills ... your own imaginations will no doubt carry you to the limbo of immeasurable and incalculable millions.” The statement was met with the laughter and cheers from audience which echoes the broader economic necessity of finding new markets for British-manufactured goods at this time. Britain had an economy several times larger than the needs of its own people and depended to an increasing degree on international trade for economic growth.

Manufacturers throughout Europe competed fiercely to gain control of the global market and international fairs, such as the Exposition de Lyon of 1894, were arenas of national competition where manufacturers could exhibit their latest “tickings and twills” in order to solicit orders. According to the Exposition guidebook, the potential of the trade of European products in Central Africa—now the French colonies

---

8 Justine M. Cordwell, Appendix: The Use of Printed Batiks by Africans, in Fabrics of Culture: the Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment, ed. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 495.

9 Henry M. Stanley, Address [on the Congo and its Future] to the Manchester Chamber of Commerce (Manchester: A. Ireland and Co. printers, Pall Mall, 1884), 12. In imagining Congo women wearing Sunday dresses, Stanley is in fact imagining the imposition of an entire colonial structure. Marie Claude Dupré, personal communication to author, January 25, 2018.

10 Giorgio Riello, Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 267.
of Congo and Gabon—was enormous, with cotton fabrics of particular interest. The author hoped that: “French manufacturers could readily appreciate the appropriate types and prices, the width, the design, the color, the general quality [of the cloth], so as to replace their foreign competitors who are mostly English or German, and apply to serve their customers according to their often barbaric tastes.” In other words, behind the racist terminology, are European nations competing to create cloth that would be most desirable to consumers around the world and to do so required an understanding of indigenous aesthetic taste. The samples under study, created by a number of manufacturers from different European countries, are the product of this fierce competition. Underpinning the desire to sell cloth was an explicit vision of expanding empire. As the editor of the British trade journal Textile Manufacturer succinctly notes as early as 1878: “consistent with the extended views of a great empire … the modern Englishman pays some attention to the traditions of other races and to the history of the world.” In other words, by gaining knowledge about foreign cultures, manufacturers were in a better position to understand local fashions and tastes and so create merchandise that was so desirable as to transfer to Europe control of the market.

Motifs and Preferences

How did European manufacturers gain a sense of the aesthetic preferences of Central African consumers? By 1885, trading settlements along the Loango coast, extending from Abriz in Angola as far north as Gabon, were busy, chaotic, and complex multi-ethnic places. Some 250 foreigners were permanently living in the region operating over 160 trading establishments, with Dutch, French, English, and Portuguese traders representing the major European nationalities. A regular steam line connected Banana, Boma, and Vivi with Liverpool, Antwerp, Hamburg, and Bordeaux, and the journey between these ports could be completed in 17 days. One of the most

11 Chambre de commerce et d’industrie (Lyon), Exposition coloniale organisée par la chambre de commerce à l’Exposition universelle de Lyon en 1894. M. Ulysse Pila, membre de la chambre, commissaire général (Lyon: A.-H. Storck, 1895), 220.
12 The acquisition of these samples by the Philadelphia Civic Museum indicates that around this time America was also considering entering this trade.
13 Editor’s Note, “Oriental Style as applied to Fabrics,” Textile Manufacturer (1878).
14 By the late eighteenth century, the dominance of slave traders from Liverpool in Central Africa meant that cloth manufactured in England—especially from textile centers such as Manchester—increasingly made its way into the local marketplaces controlled by Kongo traders. British products accounting for 65–75% of all trade goods imported by 1900.
15 Norm Schrag, Mboma and the Lower Zaire, 73.
16 James Green, Material Values of the Teke Peoples of West Central Africa (1880–1920), PhD diss. (University of East Anglia, 2017), https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/67911/.
Fig. 1: Tusk with figurative relief. Kongo peoples; Vili group, Loango Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola, ca.1880–1890. Ivory, H. 22 in. (55.88 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Charles B. Benenson, B. A. 1933, Collection (2006.51.468).
compelling portraits of these trading settlements is found in the tradition of ivory tusks created by Vili Kongo carvers as souvenirs for visiting Europeans (fig. 1). In an example conserved at the Yale University Art Gallery scenes are depicted in media res: enslaved men are shackled at the neck by chains, while above a man dressed in European clothes holds an umbrella. In spite of the evident power imbalances indicated by this artist—which would only grow more pronounced as colonialism was formalized in the region—the sculptor reveals the close proximity of European and African traders in the marketplace and how the exchange of goods necessitated close working relationships. Information about what the African consumers desired was gathered through informal conversation and shared experience in the marketplace, but also in the form of photographs, ethnographic data, and the amassing of material culture all of which served as design inspiration.

Many of the designs for printed cottons and wax prints produced in Europe for the African market appear to have been based specifically on those found in indigenously produced cloth. Cloth produced in Manchester for sale in Madagascar thus looks noticeably different from that produced for Senegal, for example, reflecting differences in local textile traditions. In order to replicate such designs accurately, some textile manufacturers are known to have acquired their own collections of textiles from African and other markets around the world. Public collections, such as new ethnographic museums in industrial cities like Liverpool, also provided textile designers with objects they could readily study firsthand. In producing designs spe-

---

17 See the work of Nichole Bridges and Zoë Strother on this topic. Nichole N. Bridges, Contact, Commentary, and Kongo Memory: Souvenir Ivories from Africa’s Loango Coast, ca. 1840–1910, PhD diss. (University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2011); Zoë S. Strother, “Depictions of Human Trafficking on Loango Ivories,” in Humor and Violence: Seeing Europeans in Central African Art, 1850–1997 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

18 The family archives of the Lawson Family, for example, centered on the small port of Aneho (Little Popo) on the West African coast, contain correspondence dating from 1877 between R. C. Lawson and the Edwards Brothers firm that reveal the close relations between African traders and European manufacturers, and include specific lists of desired goods. Adam Jones and Peter Sebald, An African Family Archive the Lawsons of Little Popo/Aneho (Togo), 1841–1938 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

19 One example is the collection of textiles from West Africa and Indonesia formed by the West Africa-based trader and later textile manufacturer Charles Beving Sr. (1858–1913), subsequently donated by his son to the British Museum. The collection provided samples on which his firm might model its productions for the African market. See British Museum website entry on Charles A Beving, accessed November 12, 2019, https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?biold=41572.

20 The Annual Report of the Liverpool Museums for 1910 notes that: “The usefulness of many of the objects in the African Section for trade purposes is evinced by the reproduction of designs on native cloths by a local firm, and the copying of designs by Manchester calico printers.” Quoted in Zachary Kingdon, Ethnographic Collecting and African Agency in Early Colonial West Africa: A Study of Trans-Imperial Cultural Flows (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), 255.
cifically for the Central African market, the abstract patterns displayed on several samples suggests manufacturers were aware of local traditions in raffia and specifically sought to replicate distinctive Kongo style geometric patterns.

European manufacturers also relied on information about taste that appeared in printed accounts of travel to the region. One sample includes a print of crisscrossed spears of the kind depicted as engravings in several European accounts of travel to Africa of this period, including as chapter headings in Stanley’s own *Through the Dark Continent*, a bestseller of its time (fig. 2). Spears, knives, and other weapons were also immensely popular collector’s items and vast collections were brought back to Europe as souvenirs and trophies. In this sample, Central African weapons from dif-

---

**Fig. 2:** Printed kerchief with Central African weapons, French, 1875–1900. Printed plain-weave cotton, 47 3/4 x 30 in. (121.3 x 76.2 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum (also known as the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004, inv. no. 2004-111-8.
Fig. 3: Display of Central African arms ("Armes congolaises – collection du Duc d’Uzès"). From Jacques de Crussol d’Uzès, *Le Voyage de mon fils au Congo* (1894), 263.
Different regions are presented crisscrossed in each of the four corners of the central medallion. The presentation of weapons in this way is reminiscent of wall displays of African arms in private houses and museums in Europe such as those collected by Jacques de Crussol d’Uzès (fig. 3). In a similar vein, European-manufactured goods with a known market value—like umbrellas, thimbles, scissors, cowrie shells, coral, or even different styles of European hats—were also printed onto cloth (fig. 4). One of the hats depicted is a pith helmet, popularized by explorers of the nineteenth century, and possibly derived from a manual on suitable clothing for the tropics produced at this time. The transformation of merchandise with a known trade value into a decorative pattern symbolic of value sought to increase the desirability of the cheaply made machine produced cloth.

Certain designs move beyond replicating what is of known value into the realms of humor and fantasy. Central Africa is presented as a pastoral ideal, where against a red background, white and black monkeys hold fruits, surrounded by palm trees and sitting in tall grass and flowers (fig. 5). Labels that advertised the manufacturing firm may also be thought of as part of the overall cloth design. In a sample sold by the Edwards Brothers of Liverpool, the label for the firm’s “hippopotamus mark” shows a white European man bathing with a hippopotamus, his clothes neatly piled in the background, including shoes and bowler hat (fig. 6). The improbability of such a scene is intended as a joke that transcends cultural specificity to amuse everyone: the European trader who will transport it to the Loango coast, the market seller who will acquire it from him, and eventually the African consumer who will remove the label and make use of the cloth decorated with a geometric motif in red, white, and black.21 The same process is in play in the design of a Congo toile depicting African individuals shooting at each other while using only umbrellas for protection (fig. 7). The joke here—which combines depictions of goods known to have value such as guns and umbrellas with an act of violence—was intended to appeal to the tastes and humor of European and African traders alike; a surreal twist on life in a trading settlement on the Loango coast.22

---

21 Ruth Nielson has studied a related phenomenon of the labels printed on cloth for the Indian market intended to appeal both to British and Indian consumers. See Ruth T. Nielsen and Justine M. Cordwell, “The History and Development of Wax-printed Textiles Intended for West Africa and Zaire,” in Fabrics of Culture: the Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment, ed. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 467–98.

22 Indeed, in the souvenir ivories of the same period produced by Vili carvers for Europeans we see a similar process at play. For an extended engagement with this theme see Z. S. Strother, Humor and Violence: Seeing Europeans in Central African Art, 2017.
Fig. 4: Printed kerchief with European hats, France, 1875–1900. Printed plain-weave cotton, 7 ft. ½ in. × 2 ft. 6 in. (214.6 × 76.2 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum (also known as the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004, inv. no. 2004-111-6.

Fig. 5: Detail from printed kerchief with monkeys, French, 1875–1900. Printed plain-weave cotton, 69 ½ × 27 in. (176.5 × 68.6 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum (also known as the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004, inv. no. 2004-111-7a,b.
Fig. 6: Edwards Brothers label affixed to printed textile, Manchester, England, 1875–1900. Printed plain-weave cotton, 26 ft. × 20 ¾ in. (817.9 × 52.7 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum (also known as the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004, inv. no. 2004-111-16.

Fig. 7: Printed textile with guns and umbrellas, French, for export to the French Congo, 1875–1900. Printed plain-weave cotton, 35 ¼ × 26 ¾ in. (89.5 × 67 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum (also known as the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004, inv. no. 2004-111-9.
Red, White, and Black

In designing cloth for Central African consumers it is clear that color was a major consideration. Seventeenth-century European traders on the Loango coast recognized that red was desirable and references to red cloth appear regularly in Dutch trading reports of the seventeenth-century. Red cloth was worn alongside items of European dress by wealthy slave-trading chiefs as an indication of status. One early nineteenth-century eyewitness account provided by British explorer James Hingston Tuckey (1776–1816) describes a chief who had grown wealthy in the slave trade as seated on a throne of red velvet, wearing a “crimson plush jacket with enormous gilt buttons, a lower garment … in red velvet … and a pair of Morocco half-boots,” and elsewhere he is described as having a “red cloak laced.” The accounts of various European visitors to this region in the late nineteenth century emphasize the continued use of red cloth as a standard attribute of chiefly leadership throughout the region. Stanley, for example, describes the Teke chief Mankoneh (Nga Nkuma) of Congo Pool as having “a large crimson bolster” displayed in his court as a symbol of his leadership. The recognition among European manufacturers that Central Africa was a market for cloth of a brilliant red is perhaps best encapsulated by the naming of a chemical dye first synthesized by chemist Paul Böttiger in 1883 in Germany as “Congo red.” The analysis of a fragment of cloth knotted to a Power Figure (Nkisi N’kondi) conserved at the Yale University Art Gallery includes a fragment of red cloth dyed with paranitraniline red, one of the first synthetic dyes and a forerunner of “Congo red”, attached to an iron nail likely by a Kongo religious practitioner as part of a process of activation (fig. 8).

For the Kongo peoples, red is a color associated with vulnerable states of health, including pregnancy, old age, and sickness, and crucial moments of transition, such as from life to death, the color also expresses a woman’s beauty and sexual maturity at the completion of her initiation and so is associated with new life. As it relates to leadership, red stands for absolute power without any restrictions and thus expresses qualities of physical force and magical power, and is symbolic of sexual desire and

---

23 Jadin, Rivalités luso-néérlandaises, 228.
24 James Hingston Tuckey, Narrative of an Expedition to Rxplore the River Zaire, Usually Called the Congo, in South Africa, in 1816 (London: Murray, 1818), 156, 186.
25 This bolster was likely a copy of the likuba royal seat made of red cloth that was one of the major symbols of leadership for the Teke peoples of the Pool and plateau region. Stanley, 1885: I 296
26 The dye Congo Red (C.I. 22120) was identified on Yale University Art Gallery inv. 2006.51.563 using Raman spectroscopy. For more information and the location from which the samples were taken, see Pablo Londero, Mary Wilcop, and Olav Bjornerud, analytical report for Power Figure (Nkisi N’kondi), conservation files, Yale University Art Gallery.
27 James Green, “Investigating the Cloth on a Kongo Power Figure,” Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin (2019): 36
war. A local source of red pigment, known in Kikongo as *tukula*, is composed of ground heartwood fiber from one or more of the redwoods indigenous to Central Africa was an important item of trade. The colors white and black also had longstanding indigenous significance. The brilliant white clay of Congo Pool and its vicinity known as *mpembe* was, like red *tukula*, a a lucrative item of barter. Soft to the touch, with a

---

28 Anita Jacobson-Widding, *Red–White–Black as a Mode of Thought: A Study of Triadic Classification by Colours in the Ritual Symbolism and Cognitive Thought of the Peoples of the Lower Congo* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1979), 143, 154–5, 157–60, 179–80.
29 A version made from crushed stone is also used. See the work of Ellen Howe on this topic.
little water the material forms a binder paste. Among the Teke Fumu in the early twentieth century, white clay was considered a major “substance” of the ancestral realm. When used to empower a sculpted wooden figure known as a tege figure, the material became “the bones of ancestors.” Among Kongo people, mpembe likewise was extensively used on Yombe funerary monuments. Black is a color opposed to social order and associated with the evil doer—it is consequently recorded in power objects intended for revenge and preparing for killing, or those used to hunt down a guilty party. In a religious setting, red is often presented with white, a color associated with health and connected with hunting and the counteraction of evil. Red and white materials are thus found in Kongo power objects or minkisi intended for healing, to give good luck, or encourage success in trading or hunting.

With these myriad associations, the sight of red, white, and black in combination would have been profoundly impactful from a Kongo perspective. The religious specialist of the Kongo people, the nganga, is recorded as wearing a costume that displayed these three colors together both in the form of cloth and as body decoration. As part of an nganga’s costume, he might also have worn a mask decorated in these colors (fig. 9). Accessioned in Musée de l’Homme, Paris, by 1892 and previously the possession of an unidentified nganga in a Yombe Kongo community, the mask would have been worn during ceremonies of healing or judgment. It is likely the nganga would have acquired this mask undecorated from a professional sculptor, and thereafter made it his own through the addition of locally sourced pigments, including red redwood or stone tukula, white clay (mpembe), and black pigments such as charcoal. Additionally, a headband of imported industrially manufactured Manchester Cloth with a background of red and a floral design with geometric patterns in black and white was tacked around the forehead. A section of the same textile has been affixed to the chin with brass tacks and it closely resembles the type of printed cotton seen in the 1894 Exposition de Lyon samples.

By the time this mask was in use (the cloth suggesting not long before it was first inventoried in 1892), industrially manufactured cloth was a staple in the Central African marketplace. By deploying the cloth here as part of a dramatic costume where it would have been seen in motion and as part of a ceremony, the cloth is transformed. No longer a cheap imported commodity, it now signified the awesome religious authority of the nganga and his ability to negotiate with forces in the spiritual realm on behalf of a client. Colors appropriated by European textile weavers from a Central

30 Hottot, Robert, and Frank Willett. 1956. “Teke fetishes” Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. 86: 29
31 Jacobson-Widding, Red—White—Black, 182–3, 143, 336–7.
32 Anthropologist and art historian John Mack has compared it to “seeing all the traffic lights on at once,” Conversation with the author, April 4, 2018. See also Anita Jacobson-Widding, “The Red Corpse, or the Ambiguous Father,” Ethnos 44, nos. 3–4 (1980): 202–10
Fig. 9: Anthropomorphic mask, Kongo peoples, Yombe group, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola, 19th century, before 1892. Wood, pigment, skin, fabric, brass nails, and grass, 24 7/16 × 10 1/4 × 5 9/16 in. (62 × 26 × 14.2 cm). Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, Donor Mr. Vincent, inv. no. 71.1892.62.4.
Fig. 10: Red, white, and black materials for sale in Brazzaville market, January 20, 2018.

Fig. 11: A bolt of red cloth manufactured in China, a gift for Makoko Auguste Nguempio (r. 2004–present), January 15, 2018.
African value system and sold back to African consumers have here gone through a process of re-sacralization. The presence of cheap, industrially produced, synthetically dyed cloth on this works of religious sculpture reveal a world on the cusp of great change and yet also demonstrate the resiliency of Kongo religious practices.

In Brazzaville, the Republic of the Congo, in 2018, red, white, and black foreign-manufactured cloth was still for sale in the market alongside raffia cloth and a variety of other locally sourced materials associated with the spiritual forces connected to these colors. Pieces of red and black industrially manufactured cloth, likely from China, are displayed in the market alongside cloth woven from raffia and the pelts of white cats and rabbits (fig. 10).

Today, Chinese manufacturers specifically create red cloth with labels intended to appeal to royal or chiefly authority. This bolt of cloth was one of the required gifts for Makoko Auguste Nguempio (r. 2004–present), ruler of the Teke people in Mbe (fig. 11). Various labels are attached to the cloth by the modern-day inheritors of trading firms such as the Edwards Brothers, and their “Hippopotamus Mark” including labels that read: “Super Deluxe Quality Royal 1–11” and “Royal Tex” along with the labels of the Chinese manufacturer. Interpreting Central African tastes by foreign manufacturing powers remains big business, while Kongo and Teke religious figures of authority continue to maintain their spiritual authority implicit in these colors.
