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Blue Depths

African indigo master Aboubakar Fofana brings the blues to Santa Fe for the 2017 International Folk Art Market

by Keith Recker

To most of us, indigo is just blue jeans, a commonplace commodity of global fashion. But to devotees of organic indigo like Aboubakar Fofana, a veteran of the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, it is an evocative color whose handmade variations are evidence of ancient dyeing traditions worthy of a lifetime of study.

A native of Burkina Faso and resident of Paris and Bamako, Fofana has spent over thirty years contemplating indigo's intricacies. The results of his dedication? Complete mastery of the full range of indigo blues, from a chilly almost-white to an interstellar blue-black; deep experience with the care and feeding of a vat of natural indigo, which can produce gorgeous color for as long as fourteen months; and a clear-eyed view of the place of ancient ways in the contemporary world.

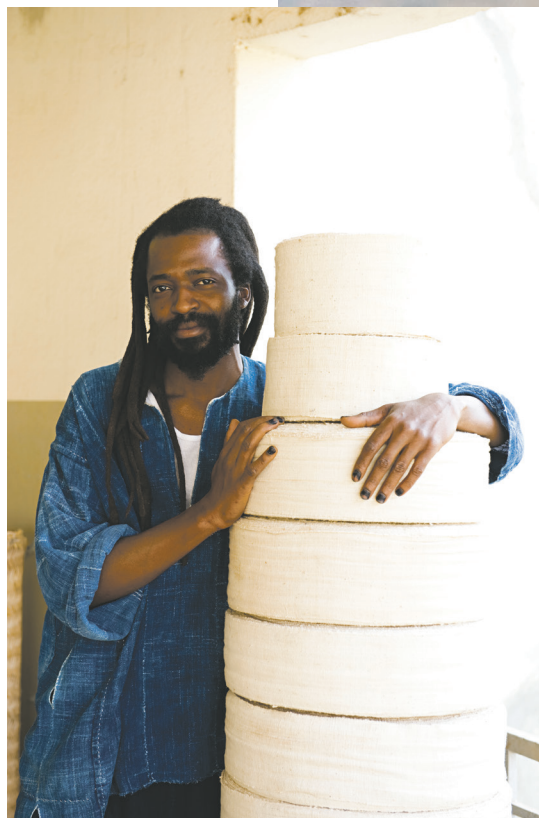
With leaves harvested from his indigo farm near Bamako, Fofana starts the temperamental process of turning greenery into blue dye. Macerating in the vat, the leaves release *indican*, a colorless amino acid. Bacteria-driven fermentation transforms this into *indigotin*—the dye responsible for both nineteenth-century jeans and some of the twenty-first century's most beautiful artisan textiles.

When a vat of indigo is fresh and young, a glossy foam rises atop the dark, greenish-amber liquid, and an unmordanted, hand woven cloth will color quickly with just a brief dip into the dye. The cloth emerges tinged with green, and only gradually turns blue through exposure to oxygen. Each pass in the vat absorbs a bit more colorant, with indigo's darker shades requiring at least eight immersions.

At the end of a dye session, Fofana nourishes his vat with bran, honey, and crushed bananas. The bacteria must replenish themselves in order for the vat to continue to produce. "I know by taste," he says, "when the vat is in balance. Just a drop on the tongue tells me when it is alive and healthy."

In Bamanan, a language spoken in Mali, there are twelve words for blue, starting with *bagafu*, the palest blue, a barely-there color achieved

left to right: dyed skeins, Aboubakar Fofana, crushed indigo leaves. Photos: Francois Goudier.



with a single dip. *Lomassa*, divine blue, is the darkest tone. Saharan Tuaregs treasure lomassa head wraps, whose depth is sometimes enhanced by beating additional pigment into the fibers with a wooden mallet. The indigo, which rubs off onto their skin, serves as a sunscreen—and gives them their nickname, the Blue Men of the Desert.

When in Paris, Fofana wears the darker shades of indigo, including lomassa. But in Bamako he wears the palest color he knows how to make—a bagafu that comes from the very last hours of the long life of a vat of indigo. “For me, it is the color of an early spring morning—something fresh and optimistic. Something I earn by caring for the vat for such a long time.”

Fofana’s other textile passion is *bogolanfini*, the traditional mud-dyed cotton cloth of Mali. He goes out with fishermen into the Niger River each March to gather the soft, pure silt that settles to the bottom during the dry season. He adds *ngalama*, a traditional medicine plant rich in tannin, and lets the mud ferment into an iron oxide-rich inky black. Hand-spun African cotton fabric is mordanted in an ngalama bath, which imparts a delicious ochre color, atop which Fofana places calligraphy-like brushstrokes as authoritative as those of Robert Motherwell or Brice Marden.

Like his work with indigo, his unique adaptation of traditional mudcloth expresses something important to Fofana. “The twentieth century saw a vast decline in our textile traditions. But we must find a way to have our traditions coexist right next to our most modern technologies. Our very existence calls out for it: humans are an ancient biological form, extending our reach with computers and space ships. We always have a foot in the old and the new.”

Keith Recker, founder of *HAND/EYE Magazine*, writes about color, culture, and craft traditions. Aboubakar Fofana is one of many indigo makers—from Africa, Asia, and Latin America—bringing their versions of this ancient color to Santa Fe this summer.

Twelve Shades of Indigo

- 1 Baga fu – blue of nothingness – *bleu néant*
- 2 Baga fôlô – a hint of blue – *souçon de bleu*
- 3 Baga nônôkènè – milky blue – *bleu naissant*
- 4 Baga kènè – lively blue – *bleu vivant*
- 5 Baga djé – azure blue – *azur*
- 6 Baga fin – blue of the horizon – the blue of the distant skyline – *bleu d'horizon*
- 7 Baga kalé – ultramarine – *bleu outremer*
- 8 Baga djalan – assertive blue – *bleu absolu*
- 9 Lomassa – divine blue – *bleu divin*
- 10 Lomassa djè – light divine sky – *ciel divin clair*
- 11 Lomassa dun – deep divine sky – *ciel divin foncé*
- 12 Lomassa fin – profound divine sky – *ciel divin profond*