

CAPTEx

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

DURATION
 15/12/2020-15/03/2023

BUDGET
 120 000 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Royal Museum for Central Africa houses an exceptional collection of more than 6000 ethnographic and historic textile objects. With exception of some well-studied Kuba textiles, little to no research has been conducted on the materials and techniques used for most of this collection. The textile creation techniques of Central Africa have been undervalued for a long time. CAPTEx will focus on the undervalued textile making processes and materials and intends on sharing knowledge with crafts(wo)men, experts and conservators in order to create more awareness of the high skills of Congolese crafts(wo)men and the richness of Congolese cultural practices in general. Understanding the textiles and cloths is a significant step towards understanding the cultures that wore and used and still use these important objects. Furthermore, understanding the technical processes will aid in the identification of the major deterioration catalysts of plant-fibre based textiles.

CAPTEx intends to create a structured overview of the materials and techniques found in the textile collection housed at the Royal Museum for Central Africa. In collaboration with Meise Botanic Garden, the plant fibres from a selected group of representative textiles will be examined and analysed using transmitted light microscopy, raster electron microscopy and polarised light microscopy. The used techniques for making the textiles will be examined by visual inspection, photography and compared with known textile techniques found in literature. In order to better understand the textiles and their degradation phenomena, mock-up textiles will be recreated to fully understand the techniques and the deterioration processes of the textiles.

This project will build a network of African textile makers, artists, researchers, and conservators who are working on central African textiles. The findings of the initial research on materials, techniques and degradation processes will be shared with central African textile makers in central Africa, Belgium, and other countries to identify textile-making techniques that are still in use today and the techniques that have disappeared over time.

When an object is added to a museum collection the connection of the object (as well as the crafts and the meaning of the object) with the source community can be weakened or even be lost. CAPTEx aspires to re-establish or strengthen the connections between textile objects and their source community by creating communication channels such as a website as well as an online working group to connect them. Furthermore, a workshop will be given at the RMCA, where participants will be able to socially interact with each other, share experiences and knowledge and become familiar with the different methods that are used to create Central African textiles, specifically the textiles from the collection of the RMCA that were analysed.

The knowledge gained from the technical analysis will serve as the basis for a proposal for proper care and long-term storage of the objects. By understanding the materials and techniques related degradation, deterioration processes can be foreseen. The storage conditions can be adapted according to the observed damages which will lead to the extension of their lifespan. When damages occur, a thorough decision-making process concerning the conservation treatment will be made involving the opinions and advice of the members of the African textile group. This collaboration is therefore crucial in the advancement of conservation practices of African Textiles.

The concurrence of the research project with a significant investment in the rehousing of the textile collection will allow the conservators to implement the research findings concerning storage immediately onto the ongoing rehousing efforts.



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The results of the CAPTex research will provide a first overview of the different materials and techniques used in the creation of textiles in Central Africa and will be of relevance in several fields such as conservation science, archaeology, biology, anthropology and art history. The outcome of the project, an overview of the different plant fibers, their microscopical images and technical information on textile practices; will be included in an online database which can be consulted by researchers, students and stakeholders. The findings will furthermore be shared within the existing network of Congolese and Rwandese heritage workers and conservation students through the addition of this valuable information in future conservation workshops in the DRC and Rwanda.

Lastly, the photographic records of each textile will be attached to the museums general database and as such will provide a visual overview of the textile items that are stored in the RMCA, opening an collection to the public in a digital matter, making the collection accessible for study across the globe and especially for stakeholders in Central Africa.

CAPT_{ex} intends to be the start of a thorough research effort on objects in the RMCA's ethnographic collection. Textiles, or elements thereof, have been widely used in other ethnographic objects such as masks and figurines. The information obtained through the successful completion of this research project will allow us to also identify those textile elements and therefore further valorise the collection of ethnographic objects that is under the care of the RMCA.



Detail of a knotting technique of a textile from RMCA collection



Storage cabinet holding a fraction of the textile collection at the RMCA

CONTACT INFORMATION

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LINKS

<https://www.africamuseum.be/en/research/discover>