AFRICA AND BRAZIL: TEXTILES

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In 1810 King Adandozan of Dahomey (today in the Republic of Benin) presented a group of seven textiles including an extraordinary appliqué banner adorned with multiple heads to the Portuguese Regent Dom João VI who lived in Rio de Janeiro. Related textiles presented to the French Emperor Napoleon III in the 1850s are still preserved in the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac in Paris, while the gift to Brazil was lost in a fire that tragically destroyed Rio de Janeiro's Museu Nacional in 2018. Textiles, whether gifted, forcibly extracted, or bought and sold, mediated the long and brutal history that formed the Afro-Atlantic world. In this exhibition focused on transatlantic artistic exchange a small group of museum quality West African textiles reminds us of this long-standing but little known aspect of the ongoing relationship between Brazil and the Atlantic Coast of Africa.

By the 1600s textiles produced by enslaved African weavers in the archipelago of Cabo Verde, utilising cotton and indigo grown on the islands, were an essential component in the bundles of goods that Portuguese traders assembled to exchange for ivory, gold, indigo, and enslaved people on the African coast. Such was their importance to the "triangular trade" that brought sugar to Europe from the plantations of Brazil and the Caribbean that in the 1750s the Portuguese crown threatened the death penalty for anyone caught selling Cape Verde textiles to rival French or English ships. Multiple other textile connections reflected a complex interaction over the centuries. Both enslaved and free people of African descent in Brazil sometimes wore hand woven indigo dyed textiles exported in large quantities from the coast of present day Nigeria. There were even a few elderly men of Yoruba descent making stripweave cloths they called pano da costa in Brazil as recently as the 1960s.

Ewe chief, Togo, circa 1920s.

Fante Asafo flag bearer dancing at a festival, circa 1970

The textiles displayed here are primarily from the Ewe and Yoruba peoples, who despite linguistic differences shared a cultural heritage based on vodu and orisha spirits that contributed so much to Afro-Brazilian religious practice. Yoruba women indigo dyers who created the “adire eleko” cloth sacrificed to an orisha called Iya Mapo to ensure their success in the complex task of creating and maintaining their indigo dye pots. Ewe kente cloths were primarily about prestige display, drawing on an ancient and widely shared association of fine textiles with wealth and power. Yet some of the finest examples such as we exhibit here also evoked deep cultural resonances through multiple small woven motifs that recalled proverbs and aphorisms among respected elders.

A few of these motifs, such as the double zigzag axe design on one of the cloths directly referenced the orisha deities (called vodu by the Ewe), here likely alluding to the thunder deity Sango who is so prominent in Afro-Brazilian religious practice. At the same time Ewe kente master weavers of the first half of the twentieth century explored improvisation and abstraction, assembling complete cloths through multiple narrow strips in a format that required both careful preplanning of the structure and overall layout, combined with numerous more or less subtle elaborations and variations throughout. Only the wealthiest of chiefs and merchants could afford to commission cloths of this quality, woven to order by established master weavers.

Early C20th Ewe chief