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MANUFACTURES AND TECHNOLOGY

BARK CLOTH

By ALFRED MÉTRAUX

The bark-cloth industry developed particularly among the tribes along the tributaries of the upper Amazon and among those of eastern Bolivia along the Guaporé, Mamoré, and Beni Rivers. Bark cloth was used to a greater extent among the tribes of eastern Bolivia than in any other part of America, but it is not necessary to attribute its popularity in this area to White influences, as Nordenskiöld does (1924 a, p. 209); the fact is, contact with White civilization failed to increase the use of this material elsewhere, even when the Indians had been provided with iron tools. The fact that the Indians of eastern Bolivia wore cushmas, copied after Andean models but made of bark cloth, is sufficient reason for the importance of the industry there. It is only indirectly, by encouraging the more general use of tunics, that missionaries might have influenced somewhat the manufacture of bark cloth.

Nordenskiöld (1924 a, pp. 208–210) has drawn up a list of the tribes who make bark cloth and also has prepared a map showing the distribution of the wooden mallets used in that industry. Actually, bark cloth and wooden mallets cannot be separated, even though a few tribes use stone rather than wooden instruments.

Bark cloth was put to various uses. It was made into tunics or cushmas (*Yuracare*, *Mosetene*, *Chimane*, *Guarayú*, *Atsahuaca*, *Chamá*, *Chacobo*, *Mojo*, *Chapacura*, *Záparo*, *Chébero*, *Encabellado*, *Moré*, *Orahone*, and *Betoya*), aprons or breech-clouts (Indians of the Cauca Valley, *Tucuna*, *Warran*, *Piaroa*, *Cubeo*), mosquito nets (*Yuracare* and *Mosetene*), dance masks (Indians of the Caiarí and Uaupés Rivers, *Witoto*, *Tucuna*), and covers (*Jivaro*, *Mosetene*, and *Witoto*).

The species of trees that provided the bast for these fabrics generally are not indicated, but they seem to belong to the genus *Ficus*. We know that the *Witoto* made their cloth out of the *Fiscus redula*.

The technique used in making bark cloth has been described for only a few tribes. The *Mosetene* make their bark cloth from the thick bast layer of the bibosi (*Ficus* sp.) tree and of some other trees not identified. They cut a limb 8 to 10 inches in diameter and of the desired length, incise the bark longitudinally with a quartz splinter or a sharp tooth, and then heat the limb until the dry bark can be removed with a single jerk. The bark is stretched to separate the outer bark with its

green layer from the inner bast, from which all the whitish fibers have been scratched. The bast then is beaten with a grooved wooden mallet until it becomes soft. Several pieces of bark cloth are sewn together to make blankets, shirts, and mosquito nets.

The ancient *Mojo* detached from bibosi trees large pieces of bark, sometimes 12 feet long and 3 feet wide, which they laid over a log and beat with a grooved wooden mallet. Afterward they washed the cloth, wrung it out to remove the sap, and dried it in the sun.

The *Moré* select the bark of various trees in order to obtain different colors for their bark cloth. The bark is removed so that the inner bast appears; this is beaten with the grooved edge of a flat wooden mallet and is separated from the lower layers and is cut to the required length. The bast then is pounded with the same mallet over a smooth log. After the bast strips have been washed and wrung out several times, they are dried and later are tailored (Snethlage, 1937, pp. 55-56).

The technique used by the *Carajá* is somewhat more primitive. They use bark cloth only for women's fringed aprons. The material is obtained from a gameleira (*Ficus* sp.) or from some other tree which gives them a reddish or white bark. They cut a limb, generally from 1.50 to 2 m. long, beat the bark with a stone, cut it lengthwise, and pull it off. The pieces of bark are then moistened, folded, and laid on a round wooden mortar where they are beaten with a stone, usually an old stone ax (Krause, 1911, p. 287).

The *Cubeo* use white bark cloth for their dance masks but prefer a reddish kind for their pouches, breechclouts, and aprons. They remove the bark from the tree by chopping the thin trunk into suitable lengths and then by pounding until the bark loosens sufficiently to be slipped off. After that, they pound the cloth until it is properly stretched. (See Handbook, vol. 3, p. 779.)

Bororo women also make a kind of bark cloth. They make their breechclout of a strip of tiliacea (*Apeiba cimbalaria*), which they chew to give it greater flexibility (Colbacchini and Albisetti, 1942, p. 60). In most tribes the strips of bark cloth are sewn together to make large pieces for shirts or covers. The *Moré* use needles made of *Astrocaryum* or of bone splinters.

In many tribes (*Yuracare*, *Mojo*, and *Moré*) bark-cloth fabrics are decorated with painted ornaments applied by means of wooden stamps. The most elaborate and beautiful ones are those that decorate the *Yuracare* tunics. The *Moré* enliven their tunics and coats by glueing different colored bark-cloth strips onto the whitish or dark background pieces.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Colbacchini and Albisetti, 1942; Krause, 1911; Nordenskiöld, 1924 a; Snethlage, 1937.