

Large Print Labels — English

**Backs in Fashion:
Mangbetu Women's Egbe**

PLEASE RETURN AFTER USE

Backs in Fashion: Mangbetu Women's Egbe

The Mangbetu peoples established powerful kingdoms during the 1800s in present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo. They were visited by European explorers and scientists, who wrote detailed accounts of the Mangbetu's art and architecture, high standard of living, lavish royal courts, and cultural practices, such as skull elongation. Written from a limited European perspective, these published accounts also contained other unfounded and unsavory falsehoods based on generalizations and sensational ideas. Regardless, this spread of information increased global interest in Mangbetu culture. By the early 1900s, their villages had become tourist attractions in colonial Belgian Congo, with the Mangbetu as active participants.

Backs in Fashion: Mangbetu Women's Egbe

It is likely because of tourism that upper-class women who interacted with tourists created a new fashion for themselves: egbe (singular, negbe), or back aprons. They were made of plantain leaves and decorated with appliqué or stitched designs.

This new garment met the needs of both comfort and modesty for Mangbetu women. Egbe provided a cushioned sitting pad, while also protecting the wearer's body from being exposed to the gaze of European men. Egbe, worn most frequently during the years of Belgian colonization (1908–1960), continue to be worn on ceremonial occasions.



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Possibly Majogu village,
Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

The maker of this tassel-style negbe cut dried plantain leaves into long, thin strips and attached them at one end to the foundation pad so that the strips could hang freely. Because the tassels moved along with the wearer and made a gentle rustling sound, this style was a popular choice for Mangbetu dance ceremonies.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.5



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Possibly Medje village,
Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

This negbe is decorated with broad and narrow strips of dried plantain leaves that were blackened with mud dye and sewn onto a ground of light-colored corn husks. The pad, composed of compressed layers of tan-colored leaves, is visible at the center. This style of negbe continued into the 1970s, if not longer.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.11



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

Over time, braided raffia decoration evolved from a single strip along the garment's edge to wide border designs, and finally to elaborate patterns covering most of the negbe. Numerous egbe collected in the 1930s display variations of this pattern, which remained popular into the 1970s.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.10



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

Blackened with mud dye, broad strips of dried plantain leaves are sewn onto a ground of light-colored corn husks. The foundation pad, composed of compressed layers of tan-colored leaves, is visible at the center. Three concentric circles of raffia braid enliven the design. This style of negbe continued into the 1970s, if not longer.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.13

During the colonial era (1908–1960), the Belgian government promoted tourism to raise interest in the Belgian Congo as an attractive colony to visit, and in which to work and invest. Indigenous peoples like the Mangbetu participated in this profitable venture. The Mangbetu welcomed tourists to their villages, where they could explore architecture painted with geometric and figurative designs, be entertained with ceremonial dances, and buy artwork and household goods made by Mangbetu artists. The latter included salt cellars, shoehorns, napkin rings, and forks.

Mangbetu chiefs encouraged their wives to interact with visitors by demonstrating hair styling, food preparation, and elongation of their infants' skulls by binding. They also demonstrated how to make egbe (back aprons), which they sold directly to visitors or through Christian organizations such as the Dominican Missionary Sisters of Namur, Belgium, the source of most of the egbe in this exhibition.



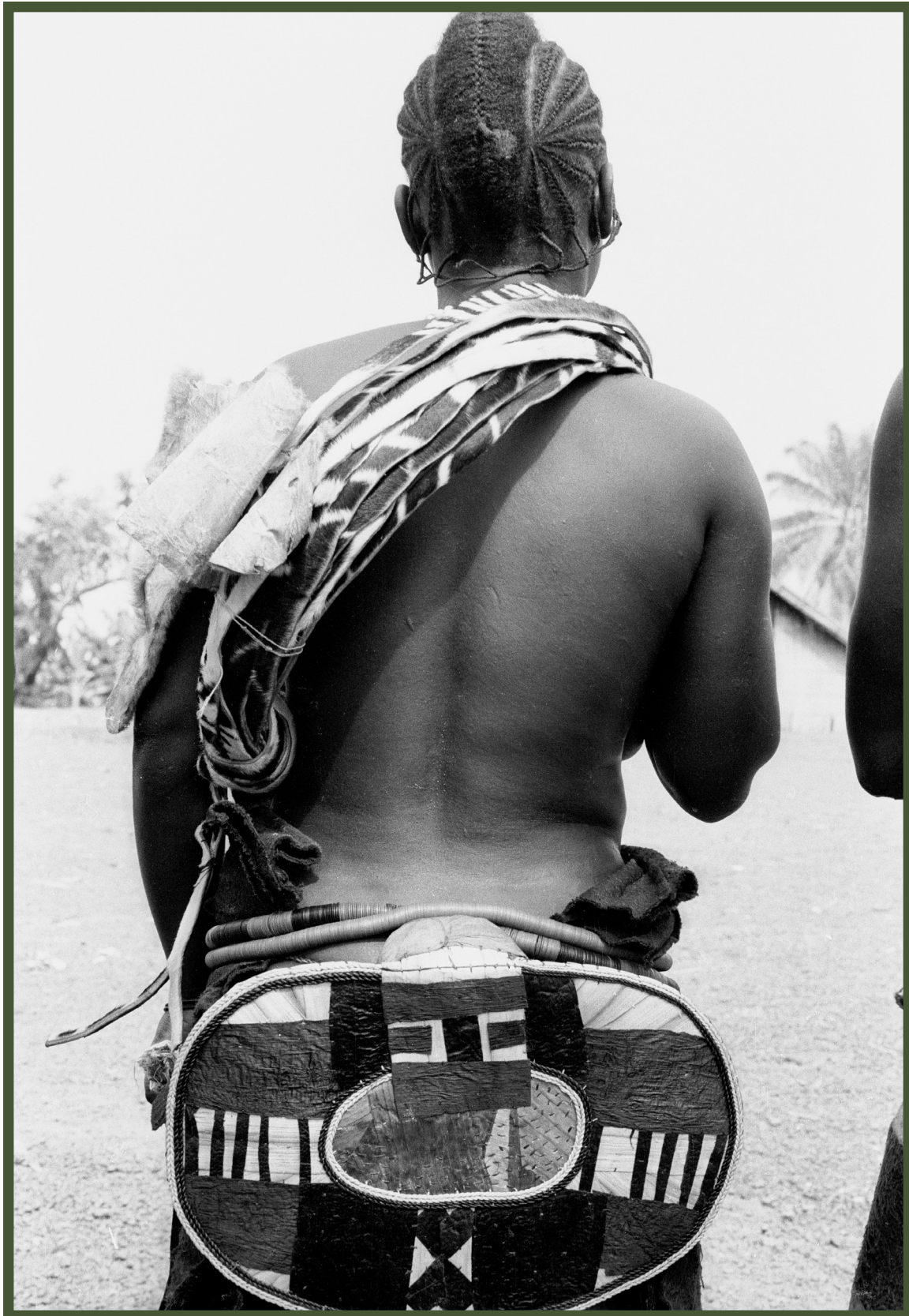
Two women wearing traditional egbe (back aprons).

Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1970. Slide no. F 3 MNG 67.2.EE 70, National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



The wives of a Mangbetu chief wear egbe (back aprons) decorated in bold geometric patterns with black and white plantain leaves and braided raffia.

Photograph by Michel Huet, Democratic Republic of the Congo, about 1930–1949.



Woman dressed for a dance ceremony in an oval-shaped negbe (back apron).

Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1970. EE. Neg no 1-2-2. National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

The design of this negbe may have evolved from egbe decorated only with corn husks and without braided raffia. This negbe is decorated with a combination of broad and narrow strips of dried plantain leaves that were blackened with mud dye and sewn onto a ground of light-colored corn husks. The pad, composed of compressed layers of tan-colored leaves, is visible at the center.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.3

KEEP IN MIND

The Mangbetu peoples created egbe (back aprons) in response to increased, and sometimes unwanted, attention from European and American tourists and researchers. Learn about one of these colonial-era expeditions, organized by the American Museum of Natural History, by scanning the QR code.



“American Museum Congo Expedition” by Gordy Slack. Part of the American Museum of Natural History’s online research library. <https://www.amnh.org/research/research-library/search/research-guides/congo>.

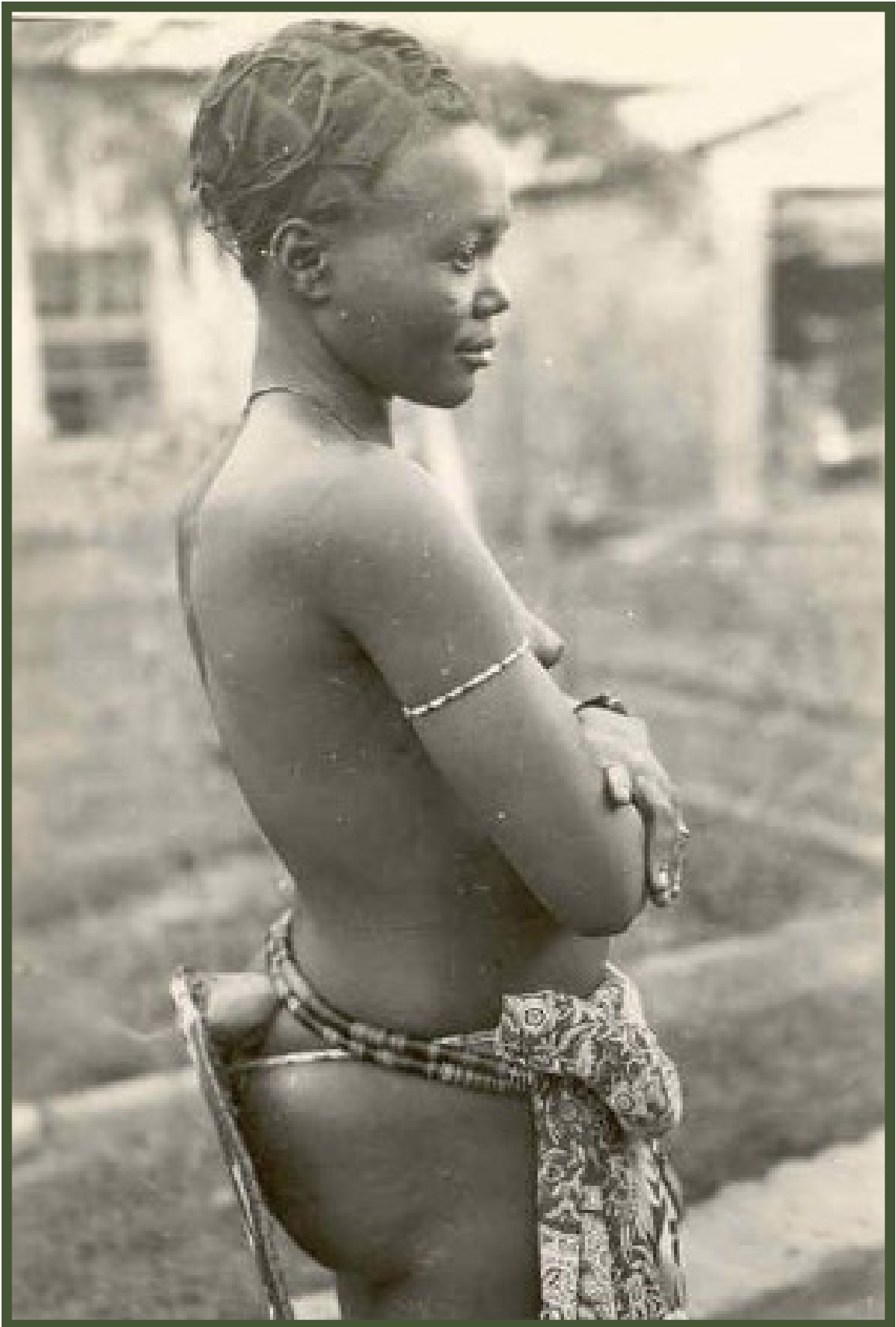


Photo: Collection City of Antwerp, Museum
Aan de Stroom, Antwerp, Belgium,
AE.1955.0002.0001.D.



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

The maker sewed narrow strips of blackened plantain leaves onto a ground of light-colored corn husks to create a dense and lively geometric pattern. The foundation pad, made of layers of tan-colored leaves, is a constant design feature visible in all egbe within this wall case.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.1



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

Over time, braided raffia decoration evolved from a single strip along the garment's edge to wide border designs, and finally to elaborate patterns covering most of the negbe. Numerous egbe collected in the 1930s display variations of this pattern, which remained popular into the 1970s. This one is distinguished by a wavy line and a natural-colored braid on the outer edge.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.7



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

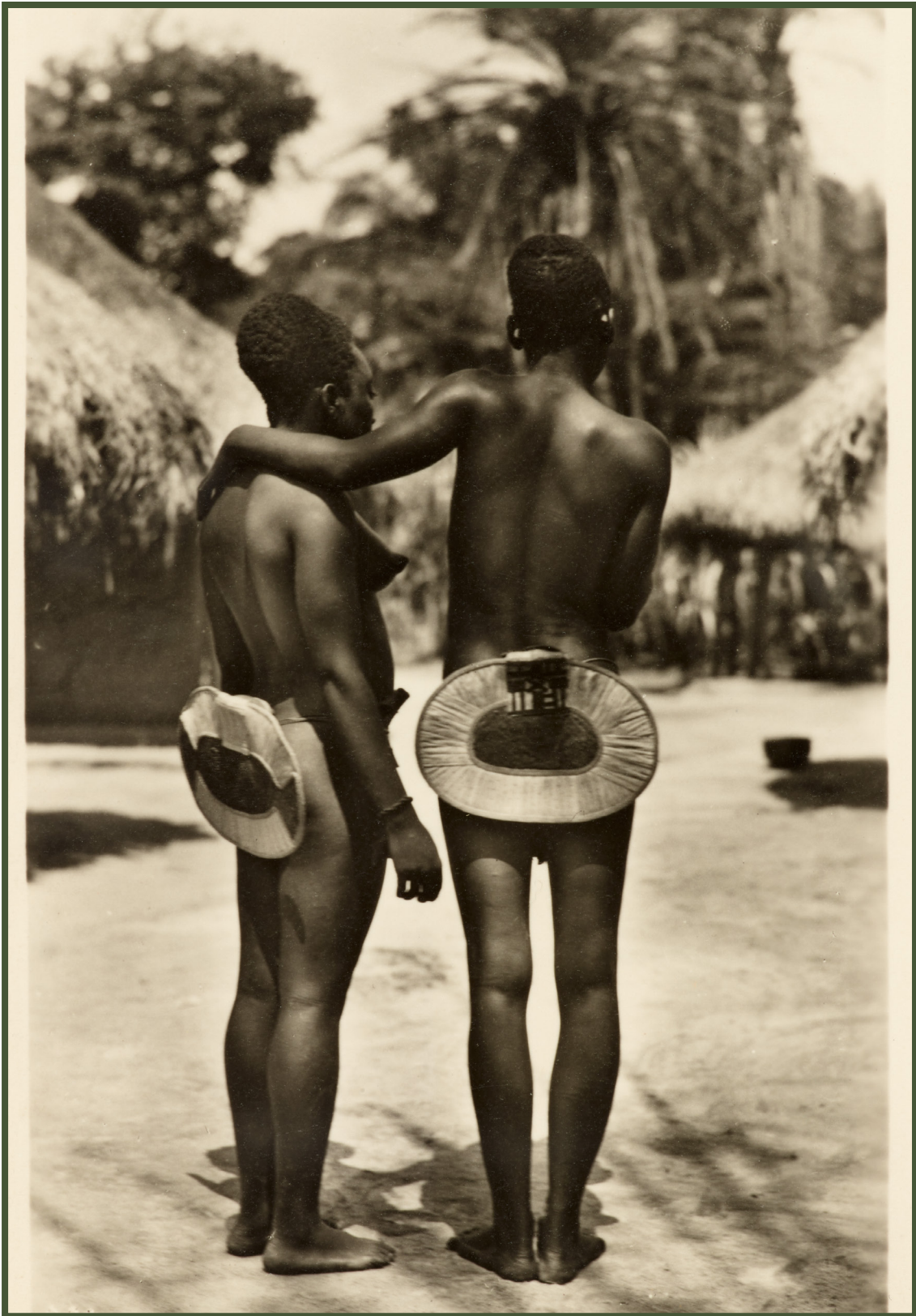
Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

This negbe is adorned with a raffia braid and is like the egbe worn in the image below. In this postcard from the 1930s, wives of a Mangbetu ruler wear plain egbe, devoid of any decoration on the corn husk border.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.9



Mangbetu women's attire in Niapu, Oriental Province, Belgian Congo (modern Upper Uélé, Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Photograph by Zagourski, 1919–1937. Silver gelatin print on postcard stock. From Christraud M. Geary, *In and Out of Focus: Images of Central Africa, 1885–1960*. (Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 90.



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

Here, the maker alternated dark and light strips of varied widths and lengths to create a dynamic pattern of rectangles and triangles. The edge of the negbe is bound with raffia braid.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.6



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

Tassel-style egbe, such as this example, were the fashion during Herbert Lang's visit to the Mangbetu village of Medje in 1909–1915. In the 1920s or 30s, women abandoned wide strips of plantain leaves in favor of long, thin ones. Instead of securing the leaves to the pad, they gathered and attached them to the top of the negbe, allowing the thin strips to hang and move freely. This negbe is also adorned with appliqué shapes cut from pieces of dyed leaves.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.14



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

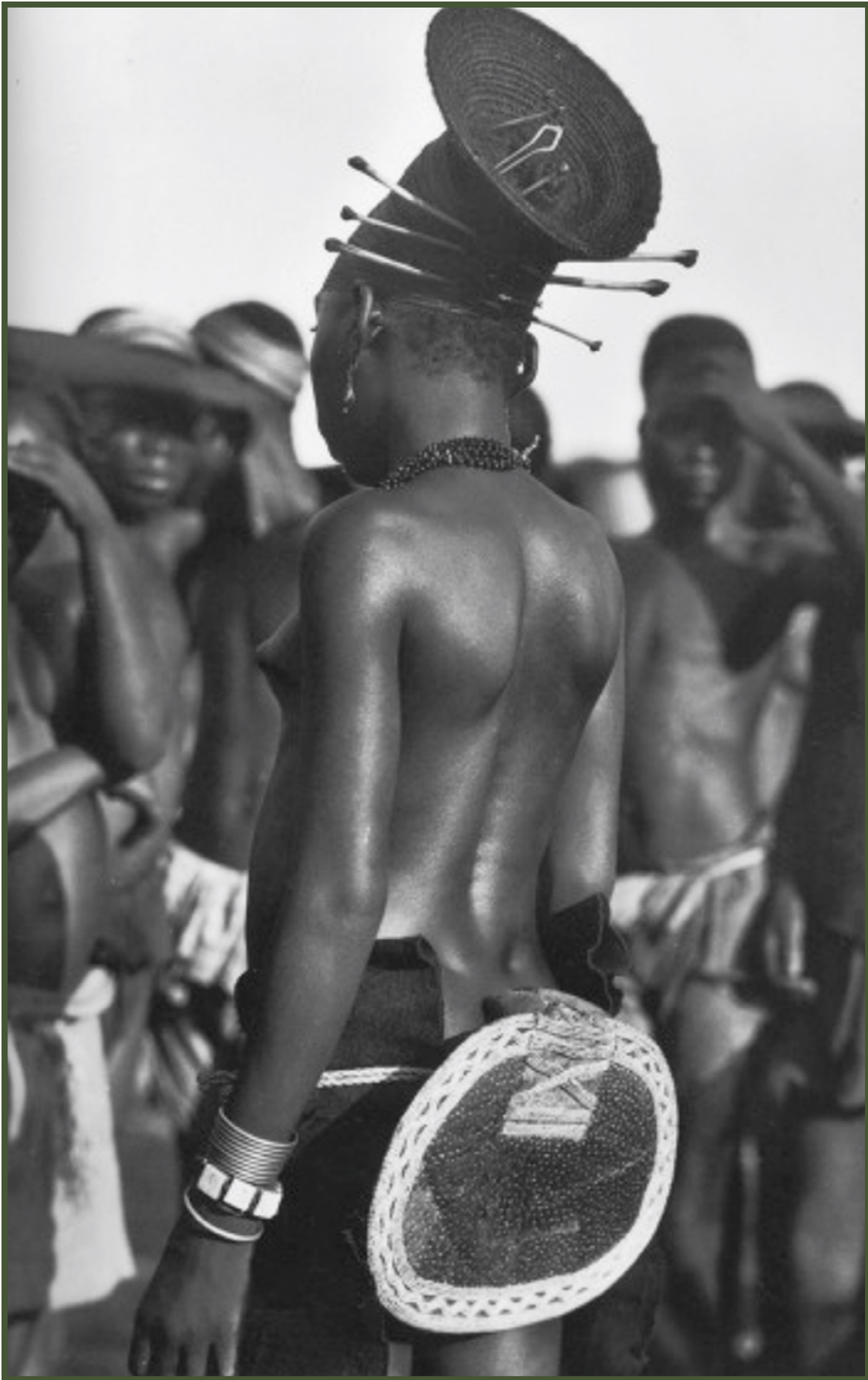
Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

Creating a sense of motion, alternating dark and light bars and slanted lines decorate the braided border of this negbe. Numerous egbe collected in the 1930s display variations of this pattern, which remained popular into the 1970s.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.15



From *Zagourski: Lost Africa*, from the *Collection of Pierre Loos* (Milan: Skira, 2001), 192.

KEEP IN MIND

The Mangbetu created egbe (back aprons) in response to European tourism. Increased interest in Mangbetu culture can be attributed to colonial Belgian propaganda and published accounts from research expeditions. Scan this QR code to read about the ways outsiders' images perpetuated fictional beliefs about life in the Belgian Congo.



In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885–1960. Online resource for exhibition under the same name, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/focus/intro.html>.



Photo: Herbert Lang, Medje village, 1909–1915.
American Museum of Natural History, New York.



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

The maker of this negbe created a border design with raffia braid, pieces of dyed leaves, and fancy stitching around the foundation pad of compressed plantain leaves. Mangbetu women seem to have had an endless repertory of border designs.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.17



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

This negbe is decorated with both broad and narrow strips of dried plantain leaves blackened with mud dye and sewn onto a ground of light-colored corn husks. This style may have evolved from egbe decorated only with corn husks and without the braid.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.4



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

The shape of this elegant, roughly trapezoidal negbe anticipates how it would be embellished. The maker decorated the outer edges with blackened plantain leaves and raffia embroidery to create triangles. She used restraint in sewing the raffia braid in alternating rows of light and dark around the central section of compressed tan-colored plantain leaves.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.19



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

Unlike egbe with a foundational pad, this one was made by bunching together long, thin strips of plantain leaves and binding them to the fiber bar at the top. When the negbe was worn during dancing, the dried leaves made a pleasant rustling sound.

Textile Purchase Fund, 2021.10.1.8



Negbe (Back Apron)

About 1930–1949

Mangbetu peoples

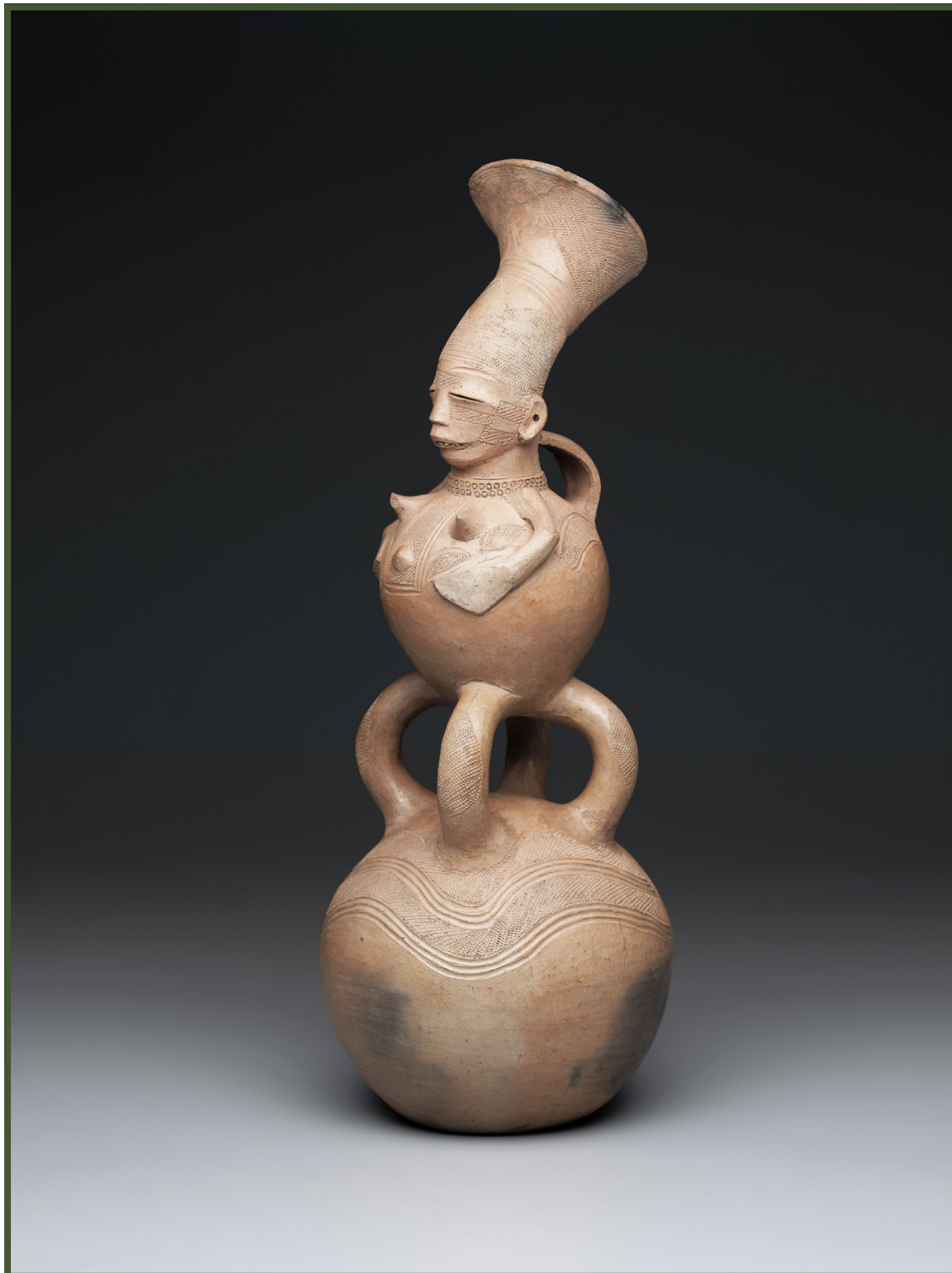
Democratic Republic of the Congo

Plantain leaves, plant fiber,
and natural dye

Wives of Mangbetu rulers used dried plantain leaves to make egbe, dual purpose modesty panels and sitting pads, which they wore on ceremonial occasions and when they welcomed foreign tourists to their villages. Egbe decorated with raffia braid became fashionable in the 1930s.

The oval or kidney shape of egbe may echo the flaring hairstyle worn by upper-class Mangbetu women, which is frequently depicted on palm wine vessels like the one pictured here.

**See this object on display in
the African Art galleries!**



Palm wine vessel, 1900–1925. Mangbetu peoples. Democratic Republic of the Congo. Terracotta. Dallas Museum of Art, gift of the Junior Associates, 1995.20.

How to Make Egbe (Back Apron)

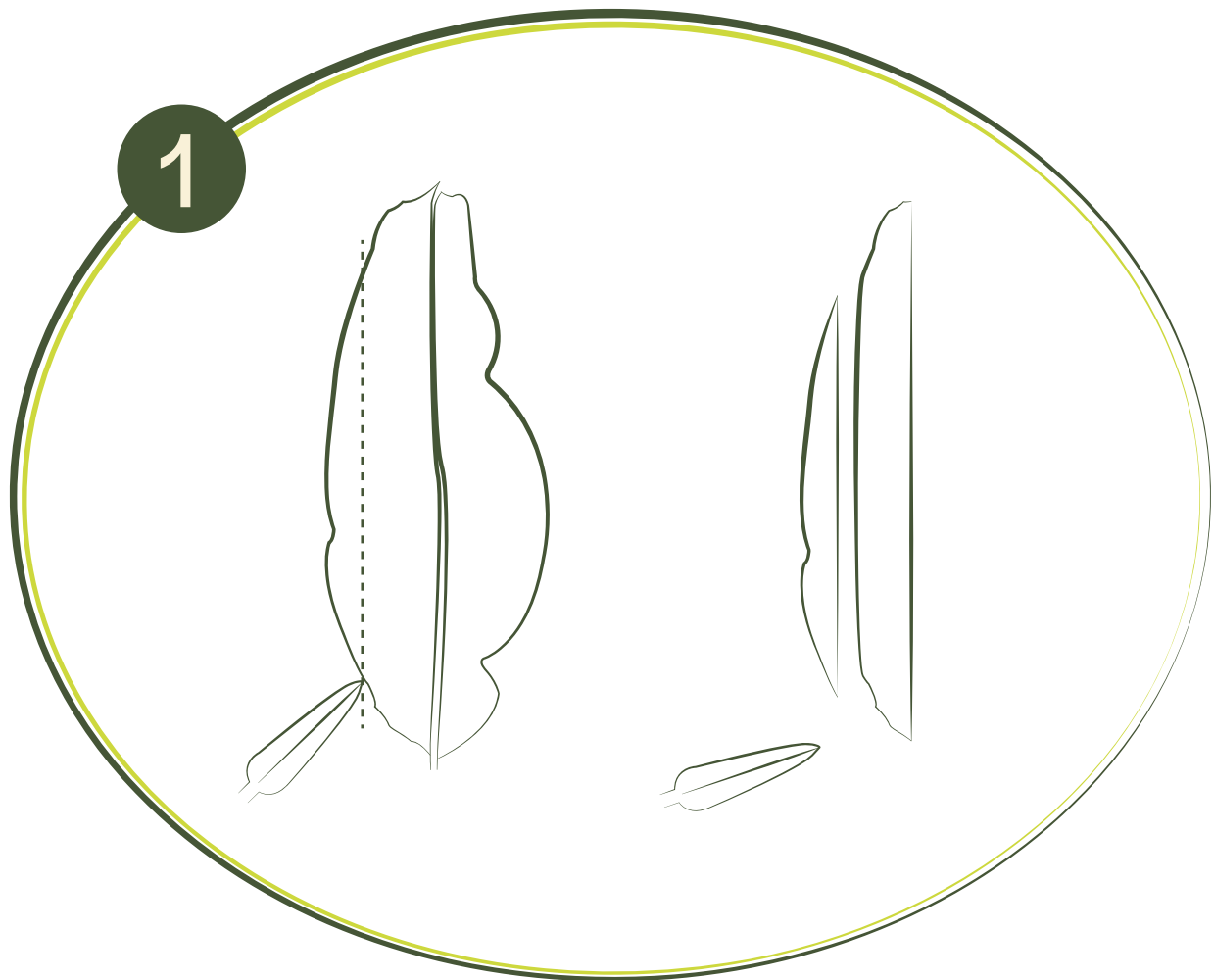
Making egbe, or a single negbe, was considered a specialized skill that few women mastered. According to the notes of Herbert Lang, a scientist on the American Museum of Natural History's Congo Expedition of 1909–1915, it took a full day to construct one negbe. Because Mangbetu women were simultaneously tending to other tasks relating to their homes and families, the process typically took several days.

The following description is based on the field notes Lang took while observing Mangbetu women making egbe.

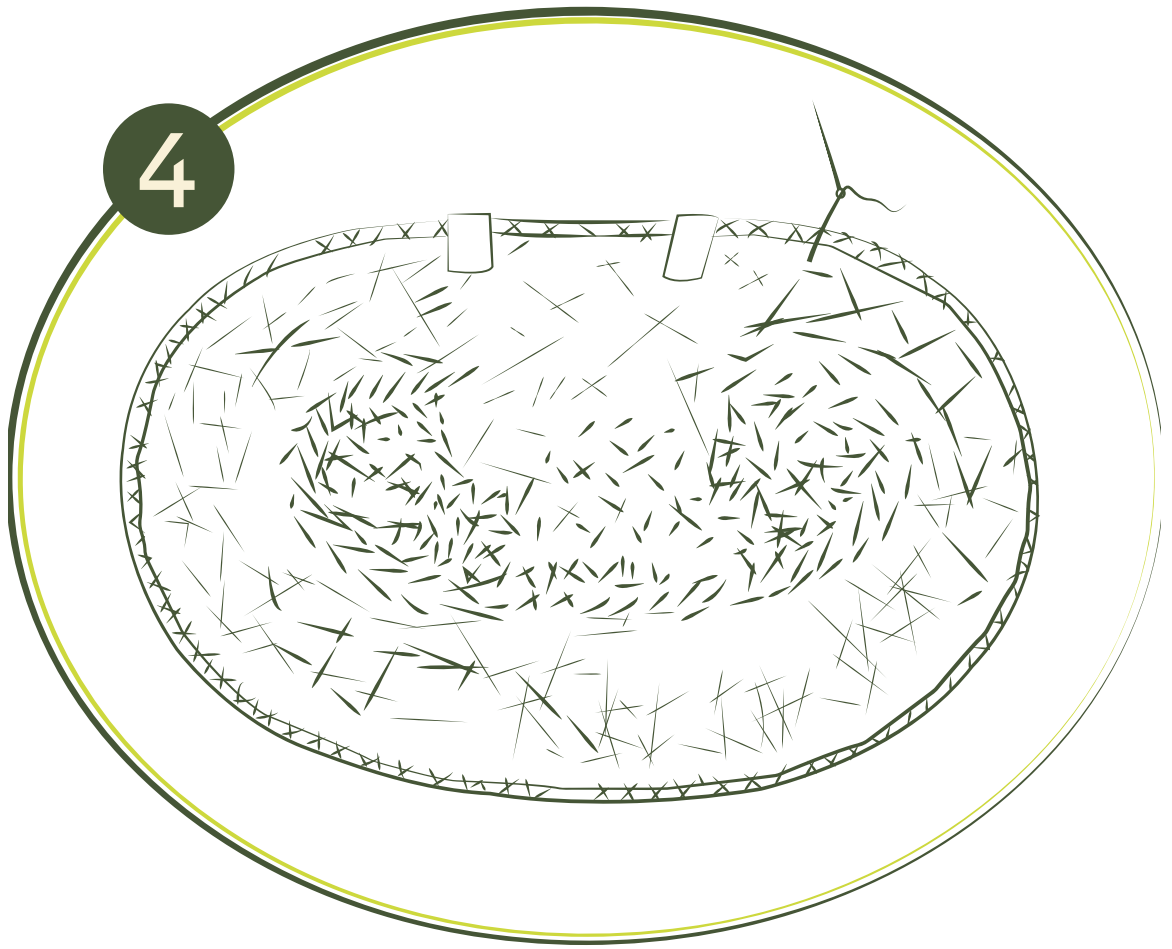
Tools and materials required:

- The reddish leaves of the plantain; light-colored corn leaves may also be used
- A needle for stitching leaves together
- A pointed stick (to make knots in thread)
- A knife to cut freehand designs from the leaves
- Iron-rich mud

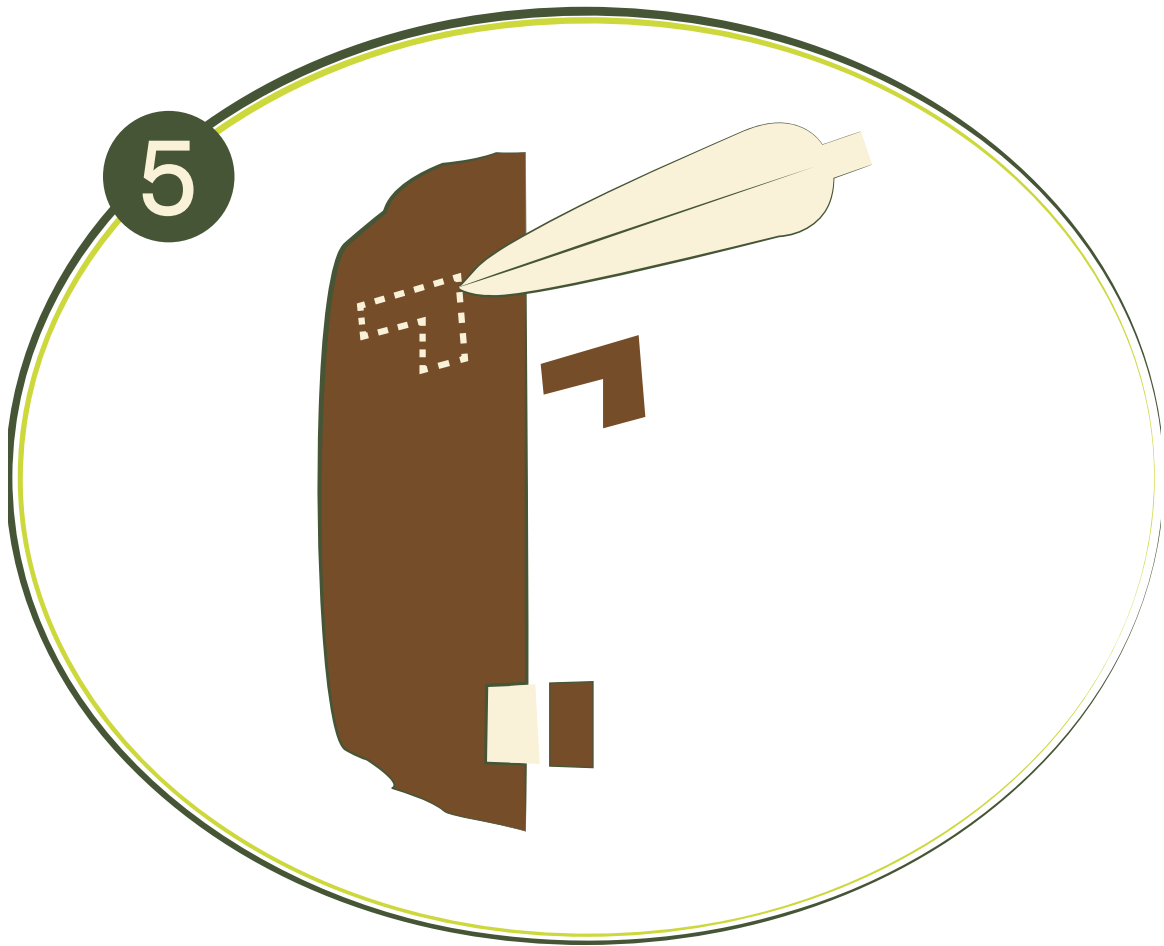
Directions:



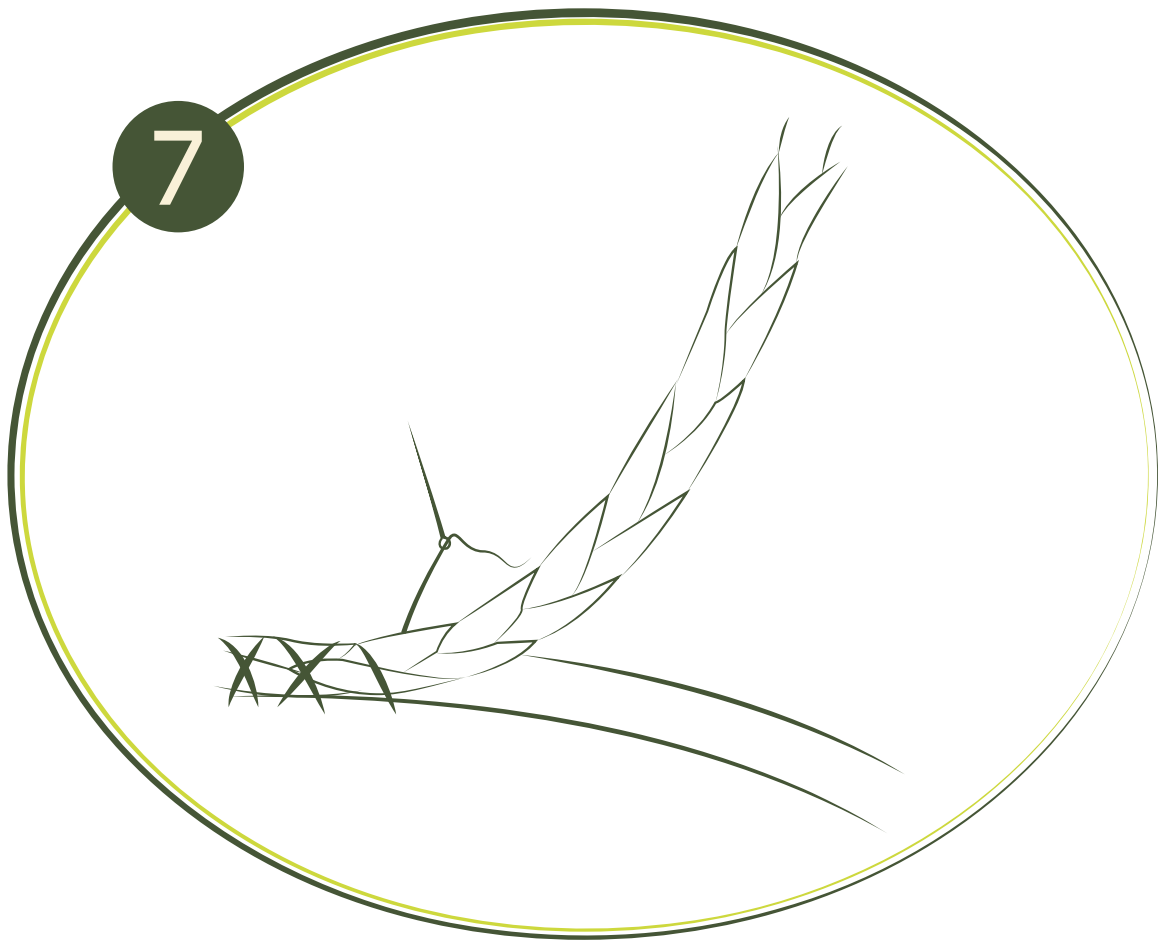
1. Dried plantain or corn leaves are sliced into strips.
2. Strips are placed between the mats of the maker's bed for a few days to flatten them.
3. Some of the strips are dyed with iron-rich mud, resulting in a black color.



4. Using thin strips of leaves as thread, naturally colored leaves are sewn into an oval or kidney-shaped pad. This is the foundation of the negbe.



5. Using a knife, the maker cuts freehand shapes from the dyed leaves. The pieces are then stitched to the surface of the negbe to create decorative patterns.
6. To create tassels, bunches of leaves are gathered and cut into thin strips. The strips are sewn to the top of the negbe and allowed to hang freely.



7. Raffia twine, made from thin strips of braided leaves, can be sewn around the outer border or stitched to the surface of the negbe to create patterns.



8. A padded, crescent-shaped fiber hood is sewn to the back of the negbe. The hood attaches to a string belt that fastens around the wearer's waist. When worn, the hood fits into the hollow near the base of the wearer's spine.

PLEASE RETURN AFTER USE

DMA

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

2023