

Cloth of the Earth: Indigo, Cape Verde, and West African Knowledge

August 1, 2026 - March 28, 2027

Deep blue and rich with meaning, indigo is more than a color. Across cultures and generations, this natural dye signals protection, healing, identity, and extraordinary skill. This exhibition brings together a rare blue-and-white Cape Verdean *pánu di téra* (cloth of the earth) from the early 1900s and contemporary Nigerian indigo-dyed textiles on loan from local community member Maria Tavares. Originally from Cape Verde, Tavares has spent more than 30 years building a textile collection that traces connections between West Africa and the Cape Verdean diaspora in southern New England.

The *pánu di téra* powerfully expresses intertwined histories of Atlantic trade, enslavement, migration, and cultural resilience. It is framed by the blue spiraling patterns of textiles made in Kano, Nigeria, home to some of the world's oldest continuously operating indigo dye pits. In many West African traditions, the spiral symbolizes the cyclical movement of life. Together, these textiles reveal indigo as a living archive of agricultural knowledge, technical mastery, spiritual belief, and cultural memory, carried across generations and geographies.

Kate Irvin

Curator of costume and textiles

In the late 1500s, the Cape Verde islands were a Portuguese colony and a major hub of trade networks, linking West Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Goods, enslaved African people, and indigo-dyed cotton textiles like the *pánu di téra* were circulated along routes connecting Cape Verde to the African coast from Senegal to Sierra Leone. Beginning in the 1800s, many Cape Verdeans migrated by choice to Massachusetts and Rhode Island aboard whaling ships, seeking opportunity amid drought, famine, and colonial hardship. Today, southern New England remains home to one of the world's largest Cape Verdean communities.

Separated by more than 2,000 miles, the Cape Verde islands and Kano, Nigeria, are linked through indigo cultivation, textile production, and trans-African exchange. For Cape Verdean educator and collector Maria Tavares, these connections came into focus through friendships with Nigerians and repeated visits to Kano's historic dye pits. Nigerian textiles recall the indigo *pano* cloths worn by women in Tavares's Badiu community on Santiago, revealing shared visual and material traditions across Africa's Atlantic coast.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Unknown Cape Verdean artists (Santiago)

Pano d'Obra Bicho (Woman's Shawl), early to mid 1900s

Hand- and machine-spun cotton; plain weave with continuous supplementary weft-float patterning; indigo-dyed yarn; six joined strips

Mary Ann Lippitt Acquisition Fund **2026.22**



Woven as narrow strips on handlooms and stitched together, *pano d'obra* (cloth of labor) developed in Cape Verde in the 1500s through the expertise of enslaved West African weavers. This specialized art form combines locally cultivated cotton with indigo dyes produced from plants grown on the islands' volcanic slopes.

Pano d'obra bicho motifs evoke animal skins and include geometric forms that combine Islamic, Hispano-Moorish, and Sephardic Jewish influences. These complex textiles functioned as status markers, ceremonial textiles, baby carriers, and, significantly, as currency in trade networks linking Africa, Europe, and Brazil. Following Cape Verdean independence from Portugal in 1975, *pano d'obra* were reclaimed as *pánu di téra* (cloth of the earth): powerful symbols of African heritage, cultural resilience, and diasporic pride.

For Cape Verdean educator and collector Maria Tavares, *pánu di téra* carries histories of labor, care, and survival. Her father's family belongs to the Badiu communities of Santiago, descendants of enslaved Africans whose cultural traditions were preserved in the island's rural interior. Raised among female relatives who wore *pánu* daily, Tavares recalls women wrapping the cloth around their waists while carrying water, caring for children, working the fields, and recovering after childbirth. *Pánu* also connected Tavares to broader African histories: seeing related indigo-dyed textiles in Nigeria "brought me back to my heritage," she explains.

Wrapped in Indigo

Maria Tavares layered these mannequins in indigo-dyed tunics, shawls, and head wraps made in Kano, Nigeria, to evoke the physical and emotional experience of being held by cloth. Tavares moved to the northeastern United States from Cape Verde in the 1980s, and she wears Nigerian indigo textiles as a gesture of love, pride, and connection to ancestral ties with the West African mainland. For her, indigo carries social memory. Shared as a gift to her community, these garments and textiles invite reflection on cloth as a living expression of kinship, migration, and belonging.

Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth with “Royal Family” Pattern, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Tunic, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed; embroidery
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Shawl, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Tunic, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed; embroidery
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Shawl with "Royal Family" pattern, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Head Wrap, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Indigo Dyeing in Kano, Nigeria

Kano, a city in northern Nigeria, has long been known for indigo dyeing. There, skilled Hausa artisans produce richly saturated blue textiles using fermented indigo leaves, a technique practiced in the Kofar Mata dye pits for more than 500 years. Circulated for centuries across West Africa through extensive trade networks, cloth from Kano is prized for its depth of color and technical refinement. For Maria Tavares, witnessing these dyeing practices firsthand revealed the vitality of knowledge systems rooted in agriculture, chemistry, and generations of artistic skill.

The largest ethnic group in West Africa, the Hausa are renowned for their textiles, architecture, and agricultural practices. Most Hausa are Muslims living in Niger and Nigeria.

Spirals, Indigo, and the Cosmos

The geometric and spiral motifs dyed in Nigeria by Hausa artisans carry spiritual meaning as well as artistic beauty. Maria Tavares describes indigo as symbolizing eternity, with the textiles' patterns—created through hand-tying and dyeing without measurements or written instructions—evoking continuity and the movement of life itself. Tavares also links indigo to botanical healing traditions, seeing the plant as a source of medicine, love, abundance, fertility, memory, and a profound connection to nature. In many indigo traditions, this sense of vitality extends beyond the plant to the dye vat itself, which is understood as a living entity requiring careful tending, nourishment, and respect to remain active.

Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed; embroidery (on tunic)
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Indigo Tie-Resist Dyeing

These indigo-dyed textiles were created through tie-resist techniques practiced for centuries at the Kofar Mata dye pits in Kano, Nigeria. Before dyeing, artisans wrap, twist, or tightly bind sections of cloth that they want to resist the indigo and remain white or lighter blue. After the fabric is repeatedly immersed in dye, the bindings are removed to reveal radiating circles, starbursts, and other designs. These patterns record the work of the maker's hands, transforming cotton cloth into layered compositions of rhythm, contrast, and deep blue saturation.

Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Collecting Indigo Textiles

Traveling in Nigeria in the 1980s, Maria Tavares was drawn to the visual power and craftsmanship of textiles dyed with indigo by Hausa artisans. She began acquiring examples to share with others, encouraging a greater appreciation for African textile traditions. Over time, her collection has become a way to participate in cultural preservation and educate others. Tavares sees parallels between the disappearing textile practices of Cape Verde and the living traditions she has encountered in Kano's workshops and markets.

Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth with "You and Your Family" Pattern, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Shirt, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



RISD MUSEUM

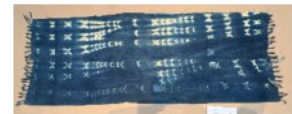
Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Skirt, 1990s–2010s
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Wrap, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Head Wrap, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth with “Moon, Stars, and Cloud” Pattern, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; indigo tie-resist dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Notice the shifting rhythm of these circles: tightly ordered at the center, they gradually loosen into more open, wavering forms near the edges. They evoke continuity and repetition, echoing the centuries-old indigo traditions of Kano, Nigeria, where the Kofar Mata dye pits have remained in continuous operation since 1498.

This pattern was created through tie-resist dyeing, in which the cloth was tightly gathered and bound before repeated immersions in indigo vats. This rich hue required multiple dye baths, layering blue upon blue. To see tie-resist cloths in various stages of production, visit the study center.

Costume and Textiles Study Center

Commissioned by Cape Verdean educator Maria Tavares from artisans at the Kofar Mata dye pits in Kano, Nigeria, these textiles document the process of tie-resist indigo dyeing. Tightly bound undyed cloth reveals how stitching and wrapping determine the final pattern. The finished textiles demonstrate how folding, stitching, and repeatedly immersing plain cotton fabric in indigo dye transforms it into an intricate composition.

Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; tied and dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Process Piece, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; tied
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Indigo Cloth, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; tied and dyed
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Process piece, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; tied
Courtesy of Maria Tavares



Hausa artists
Karofi Kofar Mata Dyeing Center
1498–present; Kano, Nigeria
Process Piece, ca. 1990 - 2020
Cotton plain weave; dyed and still tied
Courtesy of Maria Tavares

