

Stitching Raby Diop's Presence

A Narrative Woven and Dyed in Fabric

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Abstract

This photographic essay, which is part of my research project “Black Yarns: Fashion and Women’s Resistance in the Parisian Afropea (1939–1966)” started in 2021. Here I investigate the life of Raby Diop, my Senegalese aunty, who at 29 years old travelled to Paris in January 1939, following her husband Galandou Diouf, my then 64-year-old great-great-grandfather. Throughout the research in my family archive, I uncovered many photographs of Raby—a Wolof woman from Rufisque—whom I never met. I was able to trace her journey at a time when France remains reluctant to confront its colonial history and voices like hers, along with those of other African women living in Paris, are crucial to recovering that Afropean Parisian past.

Insisting on wearing her Senegalese garment instead of assimilating, Raby stood out as one of the very few African women in the city then, raising curiosity and sometimes mockery from journalists. Recovering the story of my family and making her presence and voice matter is essentially a practice of radical kinship. It allows the hidden potential story of a French Senegalese woman—who was considered “illiterate”—to be told through textiles.

In this text I imagine the twenty days before her journey on the vessel *Medie II* from Dakar to Paris. Meanwhile, relying on a practice of stitch-resist dyeing technique using indigo, together with Atelier Tesss’ Binta Gaye and Maï Diop in Saint-Louis in Senegal we reproduced the garment Raby proudly wore during her layover in Casablanca. “No, I won’t wear European style,” she asserted in a French newspaper, while wearing her indigenous dress.

This is an slideshow article, please visit the source article to view it.

Footnotes

1. Kopytoff, Igor, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process" [1986]. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Ed. Arjun Appadurai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014. pp. 64–91.
2. Hartmand, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts". *Small Axe*. Vol. 12. No. 2. 2008. pp. 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>; Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish-Muslim World*. New York: Verso. 2024.
3. In his 1952 novel, Abdoulaye Sadjì states: "Their degree of emancipation astonished Maïmouna and charmed her. They were real women of the world." Sadjì, Abdoulaye. *Maïmouna*. Paris: Présence Africaine. 1952. p. 80. Translation from French by the author.
4. Listen to Fall Niang, Fatima. "Maam Kumba Bang: Mythe ou Légende?". 22 September 2022. Institut International de Recherche sur la Radio et la Magie. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/maam-kumba-bang-master-100922> (accessed 2025-10-09). The act of pouring milk in the river Senegal is still in practice today.
5. See Patricia G rimont's research on *bazin*: "Just like wax fabric, bazin is an industrial textile, designed and manufactured by Europeans, which has paradoxically become an emblem of West African identity." G rimont, Patricia and Veirman, Anja. *FANI FANI: Une conversation autour des savoir-faire du Mali*. Brussels: LUCA School of Arts—Asbl Autres Regards. 2018. p. 84. Translation from French by the author.
6. Unless indicated otherwise, all images   the author.
7. Victoria Rovine describes a "craft-centered nostalgia" in interwar France and how textiles were, ironically, "recreated" in West Africa and sold in the big Parisian department store Galeries Lafayette, as "pure craft" because "[colonial administrators blamed] West African artisans [to be] responsible for the corruption of their own work." Rovine, Vitoria L. "Crafting Colonial Power: Weaving and Empire in France and French West Africa" In *Rhapsodic Objects: Art, Agency, and Materiality (1700–2000)*. Ed. Yaelle Biro and Noemie Etienne. Leiden: De Gruyter Brill. 2022. p. 180. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110757668-009> (accessed 2023-10-23).
8. Raby Diop and Galandou Diouf are described in their Parisian apartment filled with birds, which they imported with them from Senegal. See Villiers, No l, 'La Propagande des oiseaux'. *Le Monde Illustr *, 4 February 1939. Available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6201724t/f12.image.r=galandou?rk=214593;2> (accessed 2025-10-13).
9. Diop, Birago. *A Rebrousse-Temps*. Paris: Pr sence Africaine. 2000 [1982]. pp. 29–30.
10. See *M moires de Paulette Nardal*, Nardal recounts her encounter with one of Galandou Diouf's "concubines" (perhaps Raby?) during which they shared a dish with shrimps in Saint-Louis. Grollemund, Philippe, *Fiert s de femme noire: Entretiens / M moires de Paulette Nardal*. Paris: L'Harmattan. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ocio.17569>.
11. Botanist and chemist Michel Garcia is renowned for making indigo dyeing accessible through his signature 1–2–3 method. At his atelier in Brittany, France, he hosts workshops in which participants learn techniques such as making dye from dried leaves and preparing an ancient indigo compost vat. I was introduced to this practice in 2023 by Lieve Jacobs (Lieve Bluefingers) during an indigo and Shibori workshop in Flobecq.
12. On 12 January 1920, the vessel Africa sank en route from Bordeaux to Dakar. The disaster resulted in the deaths of 570 passengers, among them 192 African infantrymen known as *Tirailleurs*. Today, some of these soldiers' graves can still be found in Sables-d'Olonne, France. See Mornet, Roland. *La Tr g die du paquebot Afrique*. Paris: Geste. 2006 ; and Corlou r, Jean-Luc. *Le Bosco de Kerp lud*. Paris: Ramsey. 2015. Also listen to the podcast "Les oubli s du paquebot Afrique". *France Culture*. 20 August 2022. Available at

<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/une-histoire-particuliere-un-recit-documentaire-en-deux-parties/les-oublies-du-paquebot-afrique-3985031> (accessed 2026-05-16).

13. Stoler, Ann Laura. "The Rot Remains: From Ruins to Ruination". In *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Ed. Ann Laura Slotter. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2013. p. 5.
14. Azoulay, *The Jewelers of the Ummah*, p. 112.
15. A photograph in the February 1939 issue of *Vu: Journal de la semaine* depicts Raby Diop enveloped in her sky-blue cape, the image clearly showing the shiny, textured quality of the velvet. Available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bd6t521305628/f2.item.r=galandou> (accessed 2025-10-09).