

Chitenge Cloth

Caprivan women, particularly in rural areas, wear a piece of cloth called a *chitenge*. Chitenges are brought down from Zambia and sold at markets in Caprivi and Kavango. A chitenge is a piece of cloth, 2 yards or meters in length that women wrap around their body. The width of the cloth is long enough to cover you more or less from your waist to your ankles (depending on your height!). It is used to cover women's legs and preserve their modesty since legs are a part of the body that is seen as erotic and shouldn't be shown, even in trousers.

In some areas of Caprivi women are required by the Khuta, the Traditional Authority, to wear chitenges whenever they are out in public. It is a practical item too, it covers your clothes which can become dirty quite quickly in the dust and charcoal stoves of rural life, it can be used to cover your hair so you don't smell of smoke from cooking and it can be coiled onto the crown of the head as padding when you fetch water and they are essential for carrying your baby.

According to the British/Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, these pieces of cloth which are used by women all over sub-Saharan Africa originated from Indonesia. Today some are imported from the Democratic Republic of Congo whilst others are produced in Zambia. Quality and fabric vary, cotton ones are more expensive than the polycotton. The patterns and colours are immensely varied and can be with pictures of politicians on them, stylised light bulbs, even mobile phones. They are used to publicise, support or promote certain items or people.

They make great souvenirs as wrap-arounds, or made into products such as these that are seen on sale here today.

Ladies in a village sporting their chitenges



A few chitenge designs

