Shweshwe

Sudré Havenga

What does shweshwe - the ethnic print indigo blue and brown cotton cloth synonymous with traditional black South African dress - have in common with German settlers, King Moshoeshoe, the catwalks of New York and the National Museum in Bloemfontein?

In June of this year Dr Juliette Leeb-du Toit, a renowned expert on shweshwe, and Kirsten Nieser visited the History Department’s textile collection in search of German print (also known as amaJamani, isishweshwe, seshoeshoe, seshweshwe, iblaauw, amadakhí, indigo cloth or blue cloth). A small child’s sun bonnet (kappie) in the National Museum’s collection, made from original German print, was identified by them (a very rare example according to Leeb-du Toit) and has inspired this article.

German print reached South Africa in 1652 with the establishment of a sea port at the Cape. Slaves, Khoisan and Voortrekkers wore indigo cloth from India and Holland. German print was brought to South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century by colonists, predominantly German and English missionaries and traders. During the nineteenth century, black South African women gradually replaced their animal skins with newly available cotton garments, often choosing German print. “School women” or women at mission stations responded to pressure from the missionaries to wear European style clothing. This was mainly due to the missionaries’ emphasis on morality and decent dress as part of their Christian teaching.

“Blue cloth” originated in Europe, using cloth imported from Asia, mainly India, where they used a natural indigo dye that was obtained from the leguminous plant of the genus *Indigofera*. In about 1890 a German factory developed a synthetic indigo dye that is still used today. The fabric was then manufactured and printed in Czechoslovakia and Hungary by Gustav Deutsch. Deutsch emigrated to England in the 1930s and his factory, machinery and expertise were later purchased by Blue Printers Ltd. in Wigan. Eventually a number of companies produced this print style, the largest being Spruce Manufacturing. Production of shweshwe in South Africa began in 1982 when the UK company, Tootal, invested in Da Gama Textiles, situated at Zwelitsha near King Williamstown. The blue print was trademarked “Three Leopards”, the South African version of the “Three Cats” trademark that was produced in Manchester. Tootal also introduced a new range called Toto. Two new colours were added — a rich chocolate brown and a vibrant red. In 1992 Da Gama purchased the sole rights to own and print the Three Cats ranges and the copper rollers were shipped to South Africa. Today Da Gama is probably the only known producer of traditional indigo-dyed discharge-print fabric in the world.

Many believe that Shweshwe (or seshoeshoe) was named after the founder of the Sotho nation, King Moshoeshoe. Others say its name comes from the “shw-shwe” or swishing sound it makes when the wearer walks. Either way, in South Africa the cloth was adapted and modified to suit African values. African women developed its usage, attaching to it an encoded vocabulary that signified their African and even particular group (tribal) identity, as well as their status and gender. Unlike many African fabrics, shweshwe was never culturally specific. It has formed an integral part of the Sotho, Tswana, Zulu, Xhosas and Swazi cultures. Although it was originally a colonial import, it has emerged as the most South African of all cloths.
According to Juliette Leeb-du Toit the cloth is associated with women's coming of age ceremonies as well as with marriage and maturity. In the Transkei a tradition arose whereby a newly married woman would wear a full-length shweshwe dress with a modest high neck and long sleeves for the first three months of her marriage. It still remains a traditional wedding cloth for Xhosa and Tswana women. In early March each year hundreds of rural Sotho women purchase an identical pattern to make matching outfits for Moshoeshoe Day. Sotho women also wear shweshwe during traditional festivals, weddings and functions of international significance.

With various poly-cotton imitations on the market, traditional consumers of the fabric verify its authenticity by slipping a piece of cloth into their mouths. The distinctive smell and taste is a dye-fixer known as turkey oil, although no turkey oil is present. Another means of identifying the "real thing" is the stamp on the back of the material. This stamp is so prestigious that women sometimes wear the cloth inside out. The range of shweshwe motifs remains limited. Though originally designs were restricted to florals and fine geometric prints, in the 1970s indigenous animals like lions and leopards were introduced, as well as Sotho hats and blankets, made specifically for the Sotho market. The cloth is still available in panels, divided by nifty cutting lines—five of these panels will make an A-line skirt.

Da Gama still produces the original German print, Ujamani or shweshwe, and the printing process is still done by feeding fabric through copper rollers etched with intricate patterns on the surface. This allows a week acid solution to be fed into the fabric, bleaching it and leaving the traditional white design. Shweshwe is stiff when new. This is because starch was traditionally used to preserve the fabric on the long sea voyages from the UK to South Africa. The starch is still used today, but after washing the stiffness disappears, leaving a soft cotton feel.

The use of shweshwe for traditional ceremonies ensures a constant demand for this particular fabric. In Lesotho special designs are produced for very important occasions such as the King's birthday and other national festivals. The tourism industry has embraced shweshwe, using it for items like cushions, book covers, lamp shades, place mats and even dog blankets. Surprisingly, it is also in demand among American quilt makers. Due mainly to a burgeoning of neo-national pride there has been a renewed interest in this traditional cotton. From couture runways to student shows and flea markets, designers are using indigo, signal red or chocolate brown shweshwe. In the fashion world it has been elevated by South African designers like Amanda Laird Cherry, Bongiwe Walaza and Marion Fassler. Walaza has shown shweshwe in Paris and New York.

Beware though, due to the scale of this new trend there may be imitations on the rack—so when in doubt do not be scared to take a bite.

References

www.southafrica.info
www.lifestyle.iafrica.com
www.african-cotton.co.za
www.designhistorysociety.org
www.designindabamag.com
www.dicklouis.com
www.orientalplaza-fordsburg.co.za

Example of a Da Gama trademark (the Three Leopards) on the wrong side of shweshwe fabric.