

BLUEPRINT TEXTILES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

isiShweshwe: A History of the Indigenisation of Blueprint in Southern Africa.

By Juliette Leeb-du Toit.

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Isishweshwe is an industrially produced blueprint textile made in South Africa. The cloth is usually cotton dyed indigo blue, although there are red or brown variants. After the initial dyeing, machines apply an acid to the textile, which removes the color and leaves white or lighter designs of geometrical patterns and occasionally images of objects, animals, or even faces of prominent individuals, such as Nelson Mandela and Albertina Sisulu.

Although this incarnation of blueprint has only been produced in South Africa since the 1970s, art historian Juliette Leeb-du Toit reveals a much deeper history of blueprint consumption in southern Africa, from the founding of Cape Colony to the present. Early modern trade networks, European and African migrations, colonialism, missionization, nationalism, and anti-apartheid sentiment influenced who wore the blue patterned cloth, what styles they made from it, and how wearers used it to navigate social and cultural change. Based upon decades of research in museums and commercial archives, as well as interviews, observation, and her personal experiences as a blueprint wearer, Leeb-du Toit offers a material approach to histories of identity and affiliation in southern Africa. Ultimately, this industrial cloth — ostensibly ‘foreign’ in origin — became central to local understandings and enactments of ethnicity, race, gender, class, and national heritage. In different times and places, its wearers used the textile to communicate hard work, tradition, religiosity, respectability, and resistance.

After a brief Introduction, Leeb-du Toit situates the origins of the textile within the early modern global history of the cloth and indigo trades and dyeing technologies. Next, she traces how waves of migration to and within southern Africa altered its uses and meanings. In the Dutch and British Cape Colony, durable indigo cloth was used as ‘slave dress’ and as workwear for Trekboer women (41). In her third chapter on ‘pioneer dress’, Voortrekker women and children and working-class British migrants in the nineteenth century interior wore outfits and *kappies* made of imported blue printed cloth, or *blaudruk* (in Afrikaans). Chapter Four reorients to the Eastern Cape and the roles of German Moravian missionaries in spreading preferences for conservative blueprint ensembles and associating them with Christian women’s respectability. White and Coloured wearers largely abandoned the fabric when it became part of ‘African dress’ in the twentieth century.

Chapters Five through Seven shift analysis to the design and manufacturing of the cloth. The fifth chapter, the book’s weakest, takes a far-reaching approach to blueprint production with snippets about Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the United States, among others. In contrast, Chapter Six offers a rich and well-researched account of blueprint

manufacture, design, and use in Britain. Of particular note are Leeb-du Toit's interviews with British women designers from the 1970s who, in contrast to European designers for the print and wax West African market, never travelled to South Africa and instead found inspiration for their 'African' motifs in 'coffee-table books', magazines, and advertisements (125). The next chapter returns to South Africa and the DeGama textile company which bought designs and machinery from the declining British textile industry after 1961 to become the maker of today's *isishweshwe*.

The final five thematic chapters pick up on the consumption of the commodity in the last century. Chapter Eight describes the roles of traders as mediators of African cloth choice in terms of design, brand, and style. In Chapters Nine and Ten, we learn that, by the 1950s, the fabric became integral to Lesotho 'national dress' as BaSotho women used it to embody respectability and to 'convey identity' as they travelled as migrant workers (188, 184). During the same decade, BaSwazi men adopted ochre or brown versions to make the *sidvawashi*, the 'traditional' waist-to-knee wrap of the *amabutho*, the Swazi king's regiment. Meanwhile, in parts of South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia, associations of *isishweshwe* with Christian missions continued as particular African groups exchanged it upon marriage and as the fabric signified formal education and 'denoted authority, respect, and cultural propriety' (230). The final chapter covers what Leeb-du Toit calls the 'modernities' of *isishweshwe*. First, educated liberal white women began to wear it to suggest 'political opposition to apartheid' (247). Leeb-du Toit acknowledges the 'cynicism' that this practice might draw from academics, as well as how it could draw accusations of 'cultural appropriation', but ultimately, she argues that 'cross-cultural dress challenges the specifics of exclusivity in a multicultural context, upholding the porosity of traditional boundaries ostensibly demarcating race, ethnicity, and nationhood' (239). Second, *isishweshwe*, similar to artisanal and industrial cloths in other parts of the continent, has become part of high fashion 'in the Afropolitan context' over the last few decades (252).

Leeb-du Toit's account of the 'indigenisation' of a textile from production to consumption reveals the multiple lives of fabric and dress as markers of identity, affinity, and values in Southern Africa. In doing so, she aptly reminds us of the instability of materials as they relate to individual and collective identities, especially under colonialism, as well as the ahistoricism of conceiving of forms of dress as exclusive to particular groups. Her book is enriched by an abundance of beautiful illustrations, including historical photographs and more recent prints of the textile and its wearers. Yet many of these wonderful illustrations are not referred to in the text, leaving readers to draw connections between the images and her analysis. Despite this, Leeb-du Toit's book is of great interest for historians of global fashion and commodities, of African material culture, and of race, ethnicity, and gender.

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