

The fabric

THAT
whispers

From rural work clothes to street wear to haute couture: isiShweshwe's story in southern Africa echoes the adaptations of denim in the northern hemisphere. But, unlike denim, the intense indigos, sassy reds and burnt browns of isiShweshwe remain deeply rooted in tradition. **By Dianne Tipping-Woods**



IsiShweshwe material's transition from the realm of work wear to sought-after fashion was unexpected but insistent. As South Africa embraced democracy and nation-building in the 1990s, the understated tones of this humble fabric grew into a surprising but celebratory roar.

Appearing first on the runways in South Africa, isiShweshwe soon garnered global attention, thanks to a number of local designers who were able to reflect the complex relationship between fashion and identity in their creations.

"I grew up in the rural Eastern Cape," says fashion designer Bongive Walaza. "My mother was a dressmaker, but, as a young girl, I didn't like homemade things – I wanted a dress that was bought from the shop."

Remembering a dress her mother made using isiShweshwe fabric, she describes it as something "traditional". "And I didn't like anything that was traditional," she says. "I am still not a traditional person, yet those memories evolved inside me. It was like my mind woke up to the fabric's potential."

Today, Walaza is one of a handful of designers credited with putting isiShweshwe on the fashion map, both locally and internationally.

With people from all walks of life embracing this trend, isiShweshwe is now an accepted part of the 'fabric' of South Africa's liberated nation. And the histories implicit in each pattern being retold through its design have guaranteed continual conversation.

Walaza first used isiShweshwe in a third-year design project with an *Afrique nouveau* theme at Natal Technikon. "This fabric was the African thing that I knew the most. The theme made me feel proud. You think of the West when it comes to fashion. I had to make a statement with something that came from South Africa."

But here's the rub. Although isiShweshwe is identified as something African, the fabric's origins lie in Europe, although its roots possibly extend as far back as the early Arab and Phoenician trade routes along the eastern seaboard of Africa before 2400BC. Known originally as indigo cloth, it was worn by slaves, soldiers, African women and Voortrekkers.

As part of the colonial endeavours of the 18th and 19th centuries, indigo cloth was exported to southern Africa by European textile manufacturers. Created using a discharge printing style on indigo cotton fabric, its distinctive characteristics began to evolve, and so did its links to South African identities.

"There are moments in which identity becomes conveyed through dress," suggests Prof. Juliette Leeb-du Toit, who has spent decades studying isiShweshwe. Recognising these moments – from isiShweshwe's role in colonialism in Africa to the wearing of the fabric locally in the decades from the 1960s to the 1990s – is important in understanding the fabric's enduring appeal in South and southern Africa.

It's the real thing

One thing that hasn't changed is how isiShweshwe is made.

"Authentic isiShweshwe looks, feels and smells a certain way because of the manufacturing process," explains Helen Bester, design manager at Da Gama Textiles, the company that purchased the sole rights to own and print the popular Three Cats range of designs in 1992. "We even shipped all the copper rollers used to make the fabric from Britain to the Zwelitsha plant in the Eastern Cape."

Today, Da Gama Textiles is the only company in the world that produces and starches this fabric in the traditional way. After washing, the stiffness disappears, revealing a soft cotton fabric. The origins of the fabric's pre-wash stiffness and smell lie in its history, when starch was used to protect it on its long sea voyage to South Africa.

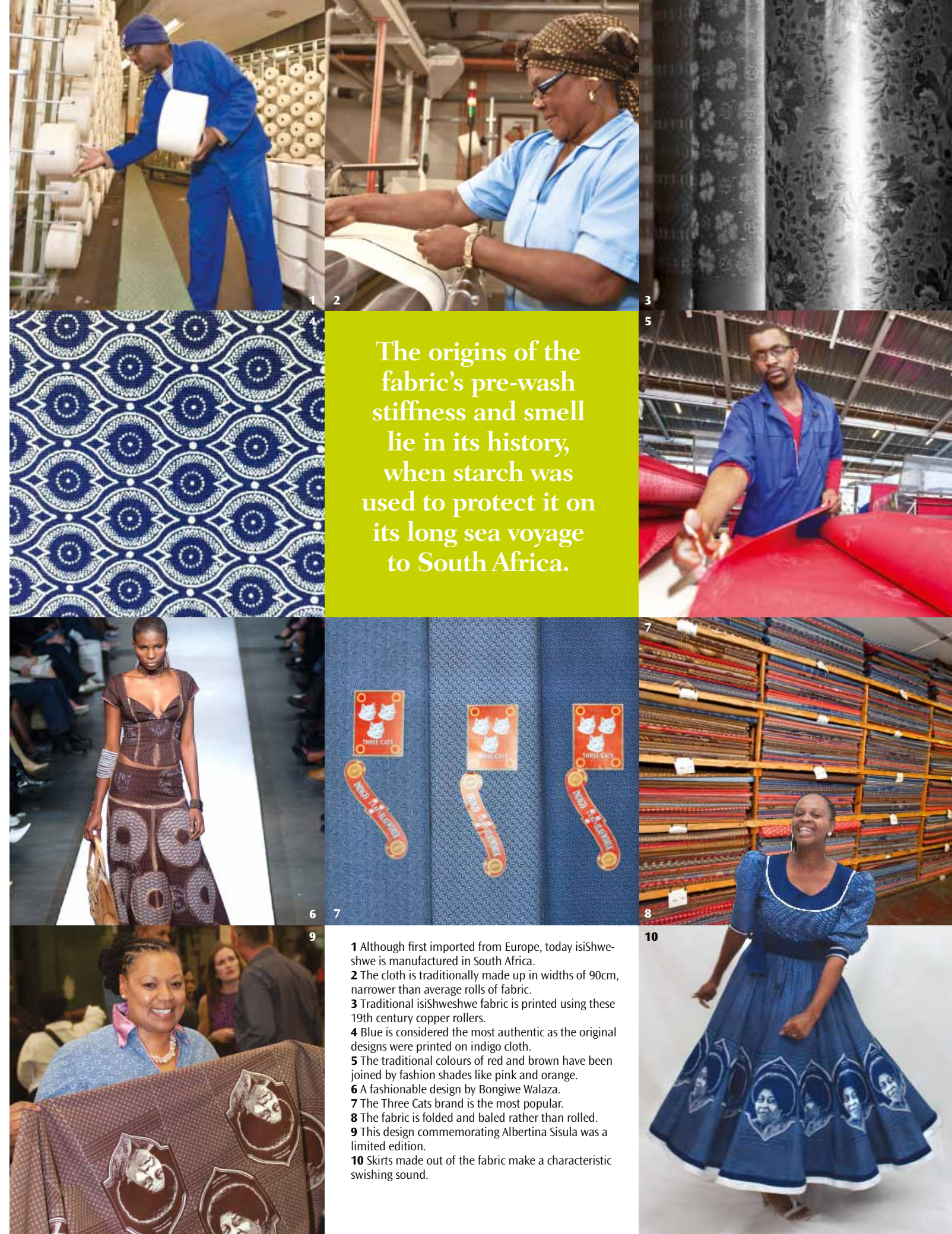
"We tried not using the starch as there is no longer any need, but our customers still wanted to feel it," says Bester. The fabric is also still folded and baled, even though rolls of cloth would be easier to handle.

Da Gama Textiles also uses mainly designs from what they call the Three Cats 'bible', which came over with the copper rollers in 1992. Different designs are added from time to time when an occasion warrants it, including the Nelson Mandela print they did as a once-off.



ABOUT THE NAME

One explanation is that it derives from the name of King Moshoeshoe. In the early 1840s, French missionaries presented the king with a gift of indigo printed cloth, leading to the term 'shoeshoe' or 'isiShweshwe'. Another theory holds that it comes from the swishing sound made by long skirts created out of the fabric.



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- 1 Although first imported from Europe, today isiShweshwe is manufactured in South Africa.
- 2 The cloth is traditionally made up in widths of 90cm, narrower than average rolls of fabric.
- 3 Traditional isiShweshwe fabric is printed using these 19th century copper rollers.
- 4 Blue is considered the most authentic as the original designs were printed on indigo cloth.
- 5 The traditional colours of red and brown have been joined by fashion shades like pink and orange.
- 6 A fashionable design by Bongive Walaza.
- 7 The Three Cats brand is the most popular.
- 8 The fabric is folded and baled rather than rolled.
- 9 This design commemorating Albertina Sisula was a limited edition.
- 10 Skirts made out of the fabric make a characteristic swishing sound.

“As much as it is something old, it’s become timeless. It remains a traditional cloth, but we have liberated it.”

“In about 2003, we introduced pink, orange and purple alongside the traditional indigo, red and brown designs and we haven’t looked back,” says Bester, referring to Da Gama’s decision to increase its range of colours. She says that for events like weddings, the traditional hues still appeal, signifying deeply-held ideas about marriage and propriety. The new colours, however, come out in street wear and high fashion products.

Imitations from China and elsewhere abound because “isiShweshwe is not a copyright name to Da Gama Textiles,” says Rees Mann, director of the Fashion District Institute. “It is a concept in design.” He’s noticed, however, that although customers experiment with different brands, they often go back to the original – “The Three Cats brand is very strong.”

A liberation state of mind

The fabric’s popular appeal is something fashion designers like Bongiwe Walaza can really relate to. “I love how I can mix and match it. It brings out the creativity in me,” says Walaza, who was an engineer before entering the world of fashion. “As much as it is something old, it’s become timeless. It remains a traditional cloth, but we have liberated it.”

While the fabric’s fundamental characteristics are unchanged, this idea of liberation helps explain isiShweshwe’s enduring appeal. It has transitioned from the realm of rural wear into the world of contemporary design, and something new has emerged from this process. “I love seeing the return to a more broad-based use of the fabric. It’s part of my personal history and our national history,” says Prof. Leeb-du Toit.

The success of one print over another is always a matter of personal appeal. “Just sit on Diagonal Street in Johannesburg and watch what the buyers choose. No-one can impose a product on the market without the consumer’s desire and choice determining its success. That’s what’s vested in the use of isiShweshwe now – women’s ability to choose,” she says. Popular designs also get street names like China Eyes, Sweets, CDs and Dreams.

Like Walaza, Prof. Leeb-du Toit’s own interest in the fabric is linked to her childhood. “It’s emotive for me. I was raised by African women. My interest comes from that vision of my caregivers when I was a child. It

is a very complex affinity.” When she discovered that settler, boer and African women all wore clothing made from this indigo cotton at the same time – in a moment of a shared history that gradual unravelled – her fascination with the fabric grew.

“In the present moment, though, isiShweshwe does signify South African-ness,” the professor says. It is linked to various moments in South Africa’s history and to particular places, too. “People all over the country use the fabric in different ways: *makoti* (Xhosa brides) have their traditions, as do Swazi men and the people in downtown Johannesburg.

“In the 1990s, we began to see regional and cultural continuity as high fashion began to look at ‘ethnicities’. There were debates about what messages were being conveyed by the decisions of fashion designers, and isiShweshwe became part of a changing dynamic attached to aspirant nation building. It moved from a rural [identity] to an envisaged national identity,” she explains. The result? Cloth with a deeply rooted colonial history, but which is now considered to be indigenous.

While this is contested by some designers and academics who still recognise oppression in its patterns, isiShweshwe “can be seen as a product that reflects a shift in power and rurality, although many contemporary designers may not be aware of its complex history,” says Prof. Leeb-du Toit. What is indisputable is that isiShweshwe is completely imbedded in South Africa’s design history, “showing incredible shifts, but also incredible continuities.”

These shifts and continuities can be seen in the piles of fabric for sale in general dealers all over southern Africa and in the work of designers like Amanda Laird-Cherry, Palesa Mokubung and Bongiwe Walaza. “It’s about what becomes attached to it – physically, culturally and even spiritually,” says Prof. Leeb-du Toit.

“It has become a classic fabric and it’s popular because of how we use it,” agrees Walaza.

Each intricate print or beautiful panel tells a story, perhaps more than one. They’re Walaza’s stories, Leeb-du Toit’s stories and the stories of the millions of men and women who know and love isiShweshwe.

The fabric that once whispered now speaks louder than words. **H**

How is it made?

Dyed fabric is passed through patterned copper rollers that apply a weak acid solution. This solution bleaches away the dark dye, leaving behind designs in white. To fit the size of the traditional copper rollers, isiShweshwe fabric comes in widths of 90cm – the standard width of cloth when the original rollers were created.

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