

**ISISHWESHWE: A HISTORY OF THE INDIGENISATION OF
BLUEPRINT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

by JULIETTE LEEB-DU TOIT

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JULIETTE Leeb-du Toit succeeds in producing both a textual and visual account of the history of blueprint or *isishweshwe* in southern Africa, tracing its existence from the early eighteenth century. Not only is the book well-written and researched over a long period of time, it also vividly portrays the author's expertise in art history, hence its academic tone. The book touches on the production of *isishweshwe*, the complex European networks involved in its existence in Africa, its subtle imposition to replace 'African' dress, and subsequently its adoption and adaption by different cultural groups and its naming by these communities. Issues of class and race are also brought up in this book, with southern African communities mainly appearing as consumers of things European, rather than producers of preferred goods and services. The book further touches on the patriarchal nature of most southern African communities. This is highlighted by reference to the attachment of *isishweshwe* to rites of passage, especially 'to rites associated with women upon marriage, childbearing and mourning'. This however, does not mean that males do not wear *isishweshwe*, but rather that to them there is no prescribed association.

With examples from diverse groups in South Africa and other southern African countries, the book illustrates

how many southern African cultural groups now associate *isishweshwe* with black culture and *couture*, although many do not appreciate its rich history as a product of European and American companies represented in one way or another in Africa. That *isishweshwe* is now an integral part of southern African *couture* is strongly supported by the many illustrations of modern designs from different South African design houses. Pictures of different *isishweshwe* listed in the appendix provide a window into the many designs in the market and the naming practices of consumers of this fabric, with some being more preferred by certain communities, and subsequently bearing names indicative of these communities. These designs include 'Swazi cloth' and 'Sotho horsemen', which are indeed popular among these two southern African cultures. The book is a must-read for art historians in particular, but it can also be enjoyed by scholars from other disciplines and leisure readers.

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