

# the sacred

## AND THE PROFANE

What do you do when you're confronted with thousands of pilgrims whose traditional ceremonial garb is leopard skins? The people are honourable; the leopards, however, are endangered. Artist and filmmaker **Colwyn Thomas** meets a man who may have the perfect solution: faking it.

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**W**hen it comes to song and dance, the amaZulu have always known how to impress. During the biannual religious celebrations at Ebuhleni, the holy village of the Shembe Church in South Africa, the sight of more than 1 000 male dancers in full traditional regalia, beating drums and singing in a haunting baritone, seems to have originated in another time. Dust rises as thousands of feet stamp the earth in unison; blasts from vuvuzelas fill the air; endless columns of women dressed in white file by on their way to be baptised; and clusters of teenage boys stand around in black or pink kilts, with pith helmets on their heads, taking note of the dances they will one day perform.

Last year the Shembe, or Nazareth Baptist Church, celebrated the 100th anniversary

of the day its founder, Isaiah Shembe, climbed a mountain and heard the voice of God. Since then the church has grown and currently it has more than four million followers.

Everywhere I turned I could see something of interest, but what really caught my eye were the animal skins. Thousands of them were draped across shoulders, tethered to waists and wrists and twisted

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around heads like crowns. The more I looked at them, though, the more my amazement turned to alarm. Historical images reveal that warriors such as King Cetshwayo's *amabutho*, which were deployed to terrify British troops more than a century ago, also wore animal skins. However, their furry outfits had no spots. The skins adorning the modern dancers were definitely spotted; they once belonged to leopards.

Further investigation showed that the use of leopard skins is both distinctly and distinctly not part of Zulu tradition. 'In the old days,' said Jabulani Mkhwanazi, a senior member of Mkhuzo Game Reserve's Anti-Poaching Unit, 'it was taboo for a person other than the king, the *amakhosi* (chiefs) and the "elites" to dress in leopard skin.'

'How long ago do you mean by "the old days",' I asked, expecting his answer to be "In King Shaka's time" or "In King Dingaan's time".' His reply surprised me, 'The '80s.'

By incorporating leopard skins as a key component of ceremonial life for all its members, the church had made commonplace that which was considered taboo less than 30 years ago. The result has been the widespread poaching of leopards across the region, and a decline in their populations across the reserves of South Africa and its neighbours.

One case in particular highlights the severity of the situation. Roughly three years ago, the home of a traditional tailor in the Jozini area of KwaZulu-Natal was raided by wildlife officials. Dozens of leopard skins were confiscated. The tailor received a light sentence, which included an extended period of public lectures, in which he advocated conservation over his former life. Just two years later, it was rumoured that the tailor was again dealing in the contraband. Another raid was conducted. Even more skins were confiscated.

The real shock came later when DNA testing showed that the accumulated parts found in the home of this single individual, over both raids, accounted for at least 150 leopards. Highly optimistic estimates put the total population of the big cats in KwaZulu-Natal, a province with a good conservation infrastructure, at 400. That means one man could account for the deaths of more than a third of these predators. Earlier this year, despite the overwhelming evidence, the tailor was set free on a technicality.

**W**hat makes the trade in leopard skins particularly challenging from a conservation point of view is that it's hard to police. In South Africa, the leopard is a protected species and the possession of a skin should go hand in hand with a CITES permit, failing which a hefty fine should be meted out.

How do you instruct millions of people not to wear leopard skins when music stars, film celebrities and politicians regularly grace TV screens and front pages in the furs? How do you monitor a general populace who believe that the skins form an integral part of their cultural identity? Today the king, the president and other high-ranking Zulu officials are among the

few people legally permitted to possess leopard pelts. 'The skin is a reflection of the king's power,' said Reverend Lucky Mvubu of the Shembe Church. 'It has spiritual significance.' Placing legal constraints on the spiritual is rarely successful.

An absence of awareness, even in the conservation-minded public, exacerbates the problem. We are familiar with news headlines about rhinos being slaughtered for their horns. Leopards, on the other hand, are masters of concealment, so it is difficult to discern when one goes missing. The problem is compounded by the fact that the big cats often stray beyond the relative protection of parks and private reserves.

What's more, images of leopard skinned Zulu elders or 'warriors' on postcards or at inaugurations seem to have earned the custom some degree of critical immunity. A favourite, though perhaps small, example I like to use is that of the opening of the Soccer World Cup in 2010, where for a few minutes a lone praise singer, dressed in a leopard skin, beat his drum in the centre of Soccer City. How many people, I wonder, questioned the origin of that skin or even knew that the animal is a protected species? It illustrates how a cultural spectacle can seduce public sentiment at the cost of critical conservation thinking.

So how do you police a trade in an illegal material that millions of people feel is their historical and cultural entitlement? The answer is 'You can't'. The numbers are simply too large, the practice too widespread and the policing resources too small. 'It's not possible to go into a built-up area, circle it with troops and bring in the helicopters,' said Rod Potter of the KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife Crime Working Group.

I attended the 2010 celebrations at Ebuhleni with one of the few people in South Africa who has suggested

a potential solution. Leopard researcher Tristan Dickerson is the field manager for Panthera's Munyawana Leopard Project in Phinda Resource Reserve. For a man who has dedicated the past six years of his life to protecting the big cats, he displays a surprisingly conciliatory approach to the church's use of the animals.

'After looking into the Shembe religion I do understand that the followers respect nature and it's because they love leopards so much that they use them,' he said. 'You can't just start confiscating skins. [The practice] has been going on for so long that it's now a way of life. We have to look at a different solution.'

OPPOSITE Music, dancing and singing characterise the biannual Shembe religious celebrations. Some of the skins the church members wear are fake; a disturbing number were previously worn by leopards.

BELOW Leopards range widely, if patchily, throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Although the big cats are protected across most of their range, their numbers have declined so severely that they are now classified as Near Threatened.



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Dickerson speaks with authority when it comes to protecting leopards. Believe it or not, the country's leopards were in an even worse state a couple of years ago when they were subject not only to illegal poaching but to unsustainable legal hunting. Panthera's team played a major role in changing the legislation governing leopard hunting. Their efforts helped

of the church and the owner of a flawless real pelt, 'you must settle for second best.'

Dickerson's plan is to make 'second best' a very attractive option. Currently, two popular forms of fake fur skins are available. The most common is made of a synthetic material, produced in China and tailored in Johannesburg, which sells for around R100 (about US\$14). From a distance the print is relatively convincing, but up close it is decidedly garish. The 'higher-class' fakes are made either from goat or impala skin, which are hand-painted with black spots and cost between R350 (US\$48) and R500 (US\$65). Both will suffice, but you only need to place them alongside an authentic leopard fur to see how far removed they are from the real thing. Dickerson hopes to introduce an affordable fake fur that is so realistic that most Shembe men would be happy to use it.

'There's obviously a market for it,' he said. 'If we can create a good version cheaply, it will remove the pressure on individuals who want a skin without spending too much money. Or if they are conservation orientated and don't want to use the skin of a leopard, then they can choose [to buy the fake].'

The key is to strike a balance between affordability and quality. Excellent artificial furs are available overseas, but with a clientele that includes Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell they cost more than a South African original. Now, after months of trial and error, Dickerson has, with the help of designer Greg Lomas, rolled out the first of his lookalike skins. It has been a complicated journey, he says. 'It's very positive. Everything we've done to date will work.'

Few people appreciate what is at stake for the region's leopards like Dickerson does. If he can effect a change here, it will not only be a major victory for leopards, but also for the kind of dynamic approach to conservation that the 21st century seems to increasingly require of us. Dickerson will have to think like an economist, a scientist, a designer and a conservationist, all at once. Most of all, he's going to have to be a diplomat.

'The ideal situation would be to show a fake skin to Shembe (the church's leader) and see if he will accept it. If he OKs it then the followers will do so too,' he said. It may seem a bit of gamble, but as things stand, it's the best bet southern Africa's leopards have.

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## Dickerson (shows) the kind of dynamic approach to conservation that the 21st century seems to increasingly require of us

ensure that hunts are more evenly distributed over the big cats' range and that the females are off-limits.

During the past two years, Dickerson has turned his attention to illegal leopard hunting, focusing specifically on the church, which he suspects is the recipient of the majority of the skins. Now he feels he has a possible solution, a compromise that may support the Shembe culture without compromising leopard conservation: high quality, affordable fake fur.

'The idea came to me when I was investigating the younger Shembe generation,' he said, 'because the skins they wore were fake.' Fake fur is cheaper too. 'A good-quality leopard skin, which includes the head, back and tail of the cat, can cost up to R3 000 (US\$410). That's a significant investment.'

'If you can't afford a genuine leopard skin,' explained Moosa Ndlovu, a member

ABOVE Leopard researcher Tristan Dickerson and designer Greg Lomas believe that their fake skins are realistic enough to be mistaken for the genuine article.

### TO SKIN A CAT

Tristan Dickerson's (right) journey towards saving endangered leopards with fake fur is the subject of an in-progress documentary, *To Skin a Cat*, which highlights the plight of the leopard and the work of this dedicated crusader. The project is being funded by donations that, upon sale of the film, will be paid to Panthera, the world's leading big cat conservation group [www.panthera.org](http://www.panthera.org). If you'd like to find out more about the project, go to [www.toskinacat.org](http://www.toskinacat.org)

