

01/02

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## YES, BUT WHAT DOES YOUR DRESS REALLY SAY?

*Written for The Journalist*

Africa is in fashion. Couturiers are celebrating 'ethnic prints' and 'tribal chic'. Suddenly, it's OK to cash in on our heritage. But it's hard to ignore the fragile line that exists between appropriation and appreciation. It's a blurry one, unsteady with emotions.

*All of a Sunday, it's cool to be Afrikan*

Poet Allison-Claire Hoskins' voice carries across the crowded room.

*Lupita! has become our black Madonna  
they have crucified your sons and daughters and have sold them to the  
highest bidder- Capitalism  
but you forget that all 'isms' are poison to the mind  
but the masses don't mind  
why? cause all of a sunday it's cool to be Afrikan  
Afrikan print shirts  
Afrikan print shoes  
Afrikan print socks  
Afrikan print pillows  
Afrikan print panties!*

*but all those afrikan prints have still not imprinted on your western  
minds but the masses don't mind  
why? cause all of a sunday it's cool to be African.  
Yes, Yes!!! AFRIKA IS FOR SALE! AFRIKA IS FOR SALE!!!!"*

A collection of Capetonians met last Thursday in an event organised by the African Arts Institute, African Textiles and the Stories that they Tell. A small crowd gathered in the African Image Store, surrounded by sculptures, textiles and jewellery.

"Tonight is about discussing African texts, and seeing textiles as texts within this contemporary setting", explains Katlego Shoro, project manager at the African Arts Institute. "We need to think about African textiles and what they mean to us in terms of our own histories".

Debating whether it is problematic to appropriate African textiles, the discussion focuses on authenticity and respect. The diversity of our stories is impressive even in this small gathering of 30 people. Our textiles cannot tell a single history. Our histories are personal and particular.

But we all know a colourful piece of cloth is way more than the sum of its thread. The discussion unpicks the threads of meaning. Textiles in Africa need to be understood contextually. When we acknowledge textile as text, an important discussion starts unfolding.

'Cultural imperialism' and 'appropriation' are buzzwords that heat up the debate with the same fire that 'tribal' lends to fashion.

And then to add to the delightful complexity we look at the histories of the fabrics we're scrutinising. Like the people, textiles in Africa cannot disengage from colonialism. And then we question the 'Africanness' of the modern mixtures. The beloved Shweshwe, that distinctive printed cloth with the fine geometric design, originated in Asia. It became entrenched in South African culture only after its production moved to Germany in the 19th Century.

"I have more Shweshwe in my closet than denim... I have always considered this love to be an aesthetic appreciation... but could I be accused of exploiting or fetishising cultures that I have no right to?" asks theatre designer Merryn Carver. "I will not knowingly make a flippant fashion statement with somebody else's sacred symbol...but is textiles one such symbol?"

There is often outrage when retailers advertise items inspired by different cultures. Fashion has no copyright laws, but strict trademark laws. One can copy a design, but can't mis-label a product. So, it is irresponsible and disrespectful to omit contextual information about an item for sale, yet it is not unlawful.

Greer Valley, a founder of Kushn – known for their finely crafted mixture of leather and textiles – runs her business with fabric from West Africa. The design combines tradition and technology.

"Everyone loves 'tribal' prints at the moment, but the term is so problematic", she says. Things get difficult to navigate when traditions start becoming trends. Words like 'tribal', 'African influences', 'safari', 'exotic', 'warrior' and 'ethnic' are popular in current European and American fashion speak, but become offensive when the outcome is fetishism.

I hope that it is not misguided to believe that some forms of appropriation can be appropriate, because a prescriptive dress code of cultural sensitivity can't possibly be the answer. Just as the cloth I choose has a history, so do I.

*African Textiles And The Stories They Tell was organised by the African Arts Institute in collaboration with 'Journey into African Literature', Palesa Motsumi from Sematsatsa Library, Kushn and Sibabalwa Ndlwana. Performance by Allison-Claire Hoskins from the InZync Poetry Collective.*

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## HONEYGUIDE

*Written for Market Day*

People thought I was saying "Honey Guy" when I was working on the Honey Guide story about Mark Farah. It's quite fitting actually. Mark is The Honey Guy. He loves what he does. It glows in his eyes when he speaks.

Chatting about his bees and the honey they make for him, Mark brings his mountain apiaries into the trading hall of the Neighbourgoods Market. In doing this, he typifies what the market does so elegantly, drawing the city and its surrounds together into a feast for the senses. You can't necessarily see the hives - or trout dams, pastures, olive groves, ovens, stone mills of the vendors - but they are there in spirit.

I wanted to see that spirit world made flesh, and asked if I could spend some time creating a little photo essay with Mark at one of his mountain sites. On the day, we were joined near Constantia Nek by market manager Ben Cox. Ben gets pollen from Honeyguide every Saturday, and just as curious as I about the provenance of Mark's fabulous raw honey, jumped at the chance to see the man at work.

Preparing his equipment in the clearing below the hives, Mark is unhurried but meticulous, patient and attentive. He readies everything for our walk up to the bees where we are transported into his world of buzzing alchemy.

Mark gently scoops up a handful of bees as he prises the lid off a hive. They flow down his arm before he flicks them to the ground. There the mass evanesces and resolves into a roiling, humming cloud.

A bee hatches as we watch. A perfect, delicate creature wriggles its way out of an alveolus, slightly shaky at first. She takes her first few hesitant steps, then she's being fussed over by nearby bees. Soon she is indistinguishable from her countless peers. Not to Honey Guy. He points out the old bees, the hungry ones and the angry ones. 'That guy's just checking you out, he's investigating', he reassures me as my nose becomes a point of orbit.

Bees have personalities, and colonies have moods. Mark knows his bees, and he senses subtle fluctuations. 'Hear that?', he asks as the buzzing near a hive crescendos. 'They're getting a little worried'.

It doesn't seem right to call Mark's processes 'simple', although when he explains what he does it just makes sense. To understand colonies, work with hives, ensure that your bees are healthy, and collect honey without upsetting a natural balance is no small feat.

Ethical farming isn't straightforward when it comes to bees, and bad practice isn't as obvious as with large mammals. This is mostly because we don't understand bees. Mark seems to, though. Bees get manipulated, taken advantage of, and produce honey of an inferior quality, all in the name of lowering costs and increasing yield. Ersatz honey, the stuff we find on supermarket shelves, is made by bees who forage from Eucalyptus or fruit orchards, and whose foraging is engineered and controlled. The bees are manipulated, and the resulting honey is one-dimensional.

The honey, propolis and pollen that Mark collects from his indigenous bees is completely different. His management techniques are eco-sensitive, and his bees forage in uncontaminated environments around the Cape. Mark produces and sells raw, unprocessed honey, beeswax, propolis and pollen under his Honeyguide label. It is one of few brands that sells pollen, which is a little-recognised, complete superfood.

There's a wonderful tale by Roald Dahl called Royal Jelly, a whimsical warning to parents, where a baby is fed too much propolis and begins morphing into a bee-creature. I don't reckon that Ben will sprout wings anytime soon, but deep down, I wouldn't be surprised if Roald Dahl was onto something, and the Honey Guy knows it. There's real magic in bees.