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CHINA'S REPUTATION FOR PRODUCING FANTASTIC FAKES IS WELL KNOWN – AND WIDELY BEMOANED. PUT THIS TALENT TO GOOD USE, HOWEVER, AND IT CAN ACTUALLY SAVE LIVES. **SCOTT RAMSAY** TELLS A CONSERVATION STORY WITH A TWIST



Gallo/Getty Images



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SUNDAY WORSHIP
Church members gather at Ebuhleni, the Shembe religious grounds near Durban. Only married men may wear leopard print attire; unmarried women wear white dresses and carry black umbrellas. The dance performed on Sundays has backing music provided by vuvuzelas, drums and wooden percussion blocks

t's an incongruous sight. Tristan Dickerson has spent his whole life living and working in the southern African wilderness. His eyes sparkle and his speech quickens when he talks of his beloved Zululand. But

right now the stocky wildlife zoologist is standing, sweating, in one of the largest textile factories in the huge city of Cixi in China, just south of Shanghai.

'Man, I'm not loving this place,' he says, 'but this makes me happy! Check this out.'

Fluffy material emerges from the massive textile machine. Roll after roll after roll of fake fur that looks just like real leopard skin. 'We've ordered two kilometres of this stuff,' Tristan explains. 'There is enough here to make 5,000 fake leopard skins. And it's all going to be shipped to Zululand.'



Spot the fake



Tristan is a 37-year-old ranger-turned-scientist who used to fight poachers on the ground. Now he believes he is making a bigger difference to conservation than ever before. For three years, Tristan and his team at Panthera, a conservation NGO, have supplied free fake leopard fur to members of the Shembe Church.

This organisation – also known as the Nazareth Baptist Church – has its stronghold in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The religion is a blend of Old Testament Christianity and traditional Zulu traditions, particularly reverence for ancestors. Close to one million followers belong to the church, founded by Isaiah Shembe (1870–1935), who is believed to be an African prophet of the Christian faith. 'Each one of these one million worshippers is quite fond of leopard skins,' Tristan says. 'Such demand is clearly not so good for the conservation of leopards.'

Back in South Africa, Tristan is attending a major Shembe gathering in KwaMashu, about 20 kilometres north of Durban. Several hundred men come here every January to worship, sing and dance. Almost all of them are wearing leopard skins. Tristan records the procession on his video camera, and later counts the number of skins. There are more than a thousand. 'In this one gathering there are more leopard skins than

there are leopards in the whole of Kruger National Park. And probably twice as many as all the leopards in Zululand,' he says.

The high price of a real skin – about R4,500 – prohibits most church members from owning one. Still, Panthera's research estimates that about 21,000 church members in KwaZulu-Natal wear real skins.

Like elephants, lions and rhinos, the number of leopards in Africa has plummeted in the last 50 years. According to Dr Guy Balme, the director of Panthera's leopard programme, the leopard has disappeared from about 40 per cent of its historical range. As human populations grow, and more land is required for agriculture and development, the natural habitat has disappeared.

'Bear in mind that there are probably an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 leopards in South Africa. So there are more than three times the number of skins in the Shembe Church than the whole country,' says Guy.

The huge illegal demand for leopard skins drives poaching and hunting in South Africa and across the continent. Interviews with traders in the Shembe Church have revealed that skins are being sourced from as far afield as Malawi, Zambia, northern Mozambique and Zimbabwe. ➤

Perhaps paradoxically, given the soaring demand for skins, the Zulus revere the leopard. Zulu monarch Shaka (1787–1828) was the first to issue skins as a reward, but it was probably since King Cetshwayo wore one in the 1870s that it's been considered a great honour to wear a leopard pelt, known as *amambatha*.

'The power of the leopard skin doesn't come from the skin itself,' explains Lizwe Ncwane, a senior member of the church and a key supporter of the Panthera project. 'The power comes from the tradition where the king used to give a leopard skin as a reward. If the king gave you one, you were extremely privileged. Traditionally the king was the only person who was allowed to issue them.'

Today, President Jacob Zuma, King Goodwill Zwelithini and several other high-profile Zulus regularly wear leopard regalia at ceremonies. With the passing of time, leopard skins have become more of a status symbol.

Among the Shembe, wearing a skin confers a sense of belonging and identity within the church. But its roughly 18,000 members who have each paid for a real leopard skin are probably breaking the law: the species is listed on the stringent Appendix 1 of CITES, an international organisation that controls the trade of wild animals and their body parts. And in South Africa, the Biodiversity Act adds an even higher level of protection.

'The law in principle protects leopards. The Act states that it's illegal to possess a leopard skin without a permit.



NATURE BY DESIGN
Tristan Dickerson (left) watches as the jacquard knitting machine creates the pile fabric; (above) the fabric is sewn inside out, but the pattern can be seen on the reverse side. Complete garments are packed into branded suit covers



And even though thousands of Shembe own skins, no permits have been issued to a member in KZN or the rest of SA for the last few years,' says Tristan.

Yet the law means little to a cultural group that has valued leopard skins for over a century. So Tristan and Panthera have to tread lightly. 'We have to work with the Shembe rather than against them,' he says. 'Most of the members don't know it's illegal. The leopard is such a huge part of the Zulu culture. Let's be real. If we went in fighting, this project would collapse and even more leopards would be killed. We have to offer a viable solution.'

And the solution has worked. For three years, since Tristan first attended a Shembe gathering and was shocked by all the leopard skins on display, he and Panthera have supplied more than 8,000 man-made skins to the church.

'It's the fake Rolex concept,' he explains. 'Some members will spend their whole life saving up for ➤

Panthera: Scott Ramsay

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a leopard skin because they feel inferior to other members who have them. It's important to remember that these days leopard skin is worn for aesthetic and status reasons, so that everyone can look the same. The church members don't get power from the skin. If they believed this, then our project would be in trouble. But it's all about aesthetics. So if I can make a beautiful skin and it looks and feels almost identical to a real skin, and I can save someone R4,500, then they'll take it!

Tristan hands me one of the Panthera fake furs. It does indeed look and feel like the real thing. 'We designed these furs based on four real leopard skins. Two male and two female animals. These spots are exactly the same as a real leopard's.' But the true indication of success comes from the Shembe members themselves. More and more of them are wearing the fake skins. At a Shembe gathering in January 2014, Panthera counted 1,125 skins, of which 938 were real and 113 fakes. A year later, 1,140 skins were counted, but this time 772 were real and 343 were fake.

With funding from Peace Parks Foundation, Panthera and the Shembe leadership will be distributing a further 13,000 fake furs in the next two years. Real skins are replaced every five years or so. With all these quality fakes being handed out free, Tristan hopes that most people will choose not to buy new real skins.

There is a small minority of members who remain unconvinced, and some 'smaller factions' who are not getting access to furs yet also say they won't wear them. But overall the uptake has been smooth. 'We can't make the furs fast enough for the demand,' says Tristan. 'It's not important to focus on the dissidents right now.'

The fake skins have several advantages over the real skins, says Lizwe, who besides being a senior leader of the church also heads up one of the dance groups. 'When we dance, we get lots of dust and mud on the skins. So the nice thing is we can wash the skins if they



ABOVE Ally Yang (Tristan's rep in China) with the Cixi factory managers. Pattern, colours, pile polishing direction, pile height and amount of gluing are discussed so there are no mistakes when ordering 2km of fabric

BELOW Tristan conducting market research in rural Zululand to establish which leopard print pattern Shembe Church members prefer. He laid out pictures of all the patterns, and in this way determined the four most popular



FAKING IT

BESIDES FAKE LEOPARD FUR, WHAT OTHER METHODS ARE BEING USED TO CURB DEMAND AND STOP POACHING OF WILD ANIMALS?

RHINO HORN

A San Francisco company has figured out how to use a mix of keratin (yes, that stuff in hair and fingernails) and rhino DNA to 3D-print fake horns. It plans to undercut poachers and sell horns for an eighth of the price (not exactly a sneeze, considering the cost of rhino horn). Conservationists are wary, as they fear producing synthetic horn will just increase demand – and wider acceptance of the product.

TORTOISE SHELL

Julius Caesar gloated over the warehouses full of tortoiseshell he sacked in Alexandria. CITES banned the trade in 1977, but artisans in Japan's *bekko* industry haven't converted to synthetic shell. In Madagascar, conservationists looking after the world's last 500 ploughshare tortoises have now been driven to defacing their shells with serial numbers and the letters MG to stop poaching.

SAIGA HORN

Populations of the long-nosed antelope are down 95 per cent, but their horns are still in demand for traditional Chinese medicine. Conservationists have analysed the contents of the horns (yup, keratin again, plus collagen) in the hope of producing a synthetic alternative – as has been done with bezoar (bovine gallstones) and musk.

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get dirty, the fabric lasts longer than the real skins, and it dries quickly and without changing shape. It's more comfortable to wear, because it's very soft.'

The only thing Lizwe would like to be reviewed is the size of the skins. 'The size of [human] stomachs is a serious challenge,' he says. 'You see, a big stomach projects out from the skin. The stomachs are too visible.'

Big stomachs aside, Lizwe emphasises that the uptake of the fake furs by members aligns with the church's teachings. 'We are taught to take care of all animals and even plants and grass. We are taught this from a very young age. This project fulfills the teachings of our church. We as a church are very proud that we can contribute to this project to save wild leopards.'

The reputation of the Furs for Life project has now spread across Africa. Other churches in other countries have contacted Panthera, asking for advice and help on how to replace real animal skins with fake ones.

'I don't think you get a better indicator of success than that,' says Tristan. 'I believe the main reason we've been successful is because we have never forced anything on anyone. We've listened to the church's needs, conducting over 2,000 interviews with members. And we've simply offered something for free that satisfies those needs.'

Tristan and Guy believe Panthera's project has implications for conservation in the rest of Africa. 'If we're hoping to be successful we can't just be field biologists anymore,' says Guy. 'We need a multi-disciplinary approach. We need to be economists. We need to be politicians. We need to be social scientists. But what I didn't know is that we'd also have to be fashion designers!'

For Tristan, leaving Zululand to visit that noisy textile factory in China is worth it. 'This is a unique project. And it's saving wild leopards. For me, the best thing would be if the price of real leopard skins drops. That would show that we're killing the illegal hunting.' ■



SPOTTED...
DESTINATION: ZULULAND

Zululand is north of Durban (240km to Ulundi). Find leopards in SA in the Sabi Sands Reserve near Kruger Park, where densities are highest, & Beyond Phinda in KZN, where they are tracked daily, and the Kgalagadi, where the leopards in the south-west have enormous ranges. British Airways flies to Durban from Johannesburg, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Visit ba.com.

TO SKIN A CAT

Since 2009, independent filmmakers Greg Lomas and Colwyn Thomas have worked with Tristan Dickerson. Greg used his illustration skills to help Tristan design the first synthetic pelt, and he and Colwyn went to China when the first fake fur rolled off the machines. Now their new 80-minute documentary about the project is due for release.

To Skin A Cat tells the story from the very beginning – when Tristan worked as a leopard researcher in Phinda Game Reserve – up to now, when the Shembe's senior leadership endorsed the artificial furs.

'We've filmed almost everything,' says Greg. 'Leopards, rangers, poachers, huge Shembe gatherings, interviews with Zulu leaders like Mangosuthu Buthelezi. The documentary is an integral part of creating awareness about leopards in Africa, and it's been great to help Tristan establish good relationships with the Shembe Church.'

The most challenging aspect for Greg and Colwyn was the long production time and the patience required. 'It's been six tough years of filming and editing, but that's a blessing in disguise because otherwise we wouldn't have been able to tell the whole story.'

• The documentary is due for SA release in November. To watch the trailer and for more info, visit toskinacat.org and panthera.org.



Scott Ramsay