

A SPOT OF BOTH

Treading the line between culture and conservation is never easy — but with leopard numbers dwindling, it's time to stop using their skins as status symbols, writes *Oliver Roberts*

It seemed fitting, the blood. First I saw it on the ground, little drops of it making the sand darker. Then it was on the stones. Red specks. It wasn't until we stopped at the sewing centre — everyone staring at these two white boys limping around their village — that I realised the blood was coming from my feet.

Just before we drove into Ebuhleni, a Shembe village in KwaZulu-Natal, Colwyn Thomas, at the wheel, turned to me and said: "If you could just take off your sunglasses, your cap and your shoes." Going barefoot here is a mark of reverence for the Shembe and a way of binding all its believers together. It's great. Unless you have the soft, sheltered feet of a white man.

At first it's liberating, a novelty to feel the hot tar beneath your soles. Then it starts to hurt.

So by the time Thomas and I and our gentle guide, James Hlope, begin walking the uphill path that leads to Shembe's official residence, it feels a bit like a pilgrimage. Like purgatory. And when we finally get to the gates, we are told that we cannot enter. Shembe won't see us today. Make an appointment.

Thomas has come here hoping to tell Shembe

that his people can't wear leopard skins anymore. He's come to tell him that unless they start using something else — kudu fur made to look like leopard, or imitation skin — in about 30 years there will be no leopards left.

And the Shembe love leopards. Not for the same reason the Zulus do — for their symbols of power — but because they love nature.

Ebuhleni is like a paradise. It is peaceful and quiet and everyone walks around smiling. Cordoned off in a garden is a tall white statue of Isaiah Shembe, the man who founded the church — whose members now number four million — about a hundred years ago. And there are trees everywhere you look, all shimmering with weavers and bulbs darting around and singing sweetly inside them. Hlope tells us that whenever a tree is cut down to be used, another one is planted in its place.

"A few days ago," he says, "someone found a snake here and wanted to kill it. But some of us came and said, 'No. Don't kill the snake.' And so we set it free." Nature is sacred. Nature is divine.

So why, then, did Thomas go to a gathering here in January and see more than 600 worshippers wearing leopard skins? And why was a KwaZulu-Natal man arrested earlier this

year for being in possession of 92 leopard skins poached and destined for a people who have such a deep veneration for God's design? How do we make them see this blatant dichotomy and how do we reach a compromise where these wonderful, holy people can continue their worship without being partly responsible for wiping out every leopard we have left in the country?

That is a challenge Thomas and a handful of others are trying to mount. Their proposal for a documentary on the issue, entitled *To Skin a Cat*, has been accepted by the organisation Kickstarter, which is a funding platform for creative projects. They have until next Sunday to raise the money to shoot it.

"One thing we need to get straight," Thomas

says, "is that we're not blaming the Shembe for being solely responsible for the threat to leopards. Illegal hunting and poaching is also a huge factor. We're not demonising anyone. It's just that some people don't realise we're dealing with a finite resource. We want to try to strike a balance between culture and conservation. We want to document this process and create dialogues and debates; bring it to everyone's attention."

When we are introduced to Hlope, he's just laid down in his shop to have a midday nap. Thomas explains why we're here.

"Ja. I see. Okay," says Hlope, wiping his eyes. "Getting everyone to stop wearing the skins will be a problem. Most people, from the leaders to the churchgoers, want something genuine. In our culture, we have always used the skins, no fabrics. When Shembe came here, his God told him we must go back to skins. He said we can't go to church in trousers and shirts."

Hlope readily declares that he owns a skin; it's at home, he says. In the shop there's a head



PICTURES: OLIVER ROBERTS AND GREG LOMAS

dress hanging on a hook above the rows of Lucky Star pilschards and Sunlight soap. He takes it down for us. A wreath made of leopard fur with two tails hanging from the back of it.

If a good fake fur was made, would people wear it, Thomas asks.

"If it was cheaper, they're gonna use it," replies Hlope. "Ja. I am sure they will buy it."

There are already fake furs available. We find some for sale in the village. Kudu hide dyed with black dots. You're looking at a few hundred rand for these imitations. Real skins can cost R6 000. And, actually, that's part of the problem — it's seen as status symbol.

And so Hlope contradicts himself by alluding to the idea that, yes, there will always be those who want genuine fur, even if cheaper, fake ones are readily available. Not because God dictated to Isaiah Shembe that it must be so, but because it makes you look like you have a bit of money to throw around. And the people buying the fake furs are doing so not because they're worried about killing off leopards, they buy the fakes because it's all they can afford.

Thomas and the *To Skin a Cat* boys are after three entities in their quest to resolve this issue amicably. The leader of the Shembe church, Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini and President Jacob Zuma. "They have influence over people who wear the skins," figures Thomas.

He almost got somewhere with one of Zwelithini's sons. This prince, born out of wedlock, is the only member of the royal family who is Shembe.

There were discussions, hopeful signs and phone calls. And then, according to Thomas, the guy "vanished on us".

"This whole issue is hard to deal with; hard to read," Thomas says. "So much is said between the lines."



FOLLOWERS: James Hlope in his shop, above, and a group of Shembe people in traditional dress, top

I get an understanding of what Thomas is talking about an hour or so later when, after walking the village with Hlope, discussing the subject, him being open and forthright and full of wisdom, we meet Shembe's son, MT. He's the only one I see wearing shoes around here. Hlope says MT does whatever he wants because he is Shembe's son.

A discussion ensues in which there's agreement that something needs to be done about the dwindling leopard population, but a lot of what's being said rides on the back of blatant untruths. MT claims only the Shembe leaders and chiefs are allowed to wear skins. Hlope then jumps in and denies that he owns a skin, having told us earlier that he does.

When Thomas disputes this and says he saw 600 people wearing leopard skins in this village in January, everything comes to a halt. MT no longer wants to speak with us and Hlope, realising MT is probably going to tell his father that Hlope took these two nosey guys around the

village, abruptly tells us it's time to say goodbye.

"Did you see that?" Thomas asks me as we walk back to the car. "The whole mood shifted. They weren't willing to discuss it anymore."

I couldn't help feeling that part of the unwillingness comes from us being white. And it is understandable, to some degree, that these happy, peaceful people take issue with a couple of white guys who walk in with their cameras and notebooks and tell them they need to change their cultural practices.

"I'm almost too conscious of being an outsider, of being imperial when I come here, but it shouldn't be like that," Thomas says. "There's an issue that needs to be addressed and I don't want it to get mixed up with politics or race; the issue is just too important."

Besides Thomas and his three fellow filmmakers, Tristan Dickerson is also heavily involved in the project. Dickerson is the field manager of the Munyawana Leopard Project, a conservation organisation based in KwaZulu-Natal.

"I would say at least 90% of the population don't even know that leopards are in trouble," says

Dickerson. "But, to put it in perspective, even if a quarter of the Shembe leaders acquired skins, there wouldn't be a leopard left in the world."

"The alternative is fake fur and education and, considering the Shembe are so conservation-orientated, it should seem like a simple solution; but unless the order comes from Shembe himself, they won't stop using them. They see him as a scientist, they will only listen to him [followers believe the Shembe leader has supernatural powers and can create more leopards]. It's a huge challenge. The only thing we can do is expose the problem to as many people as possible."

Which is the aim of Thomas and his cadre. "At the moment, we're taking the peaceful approach, hoping that it works," Thomas says. "But it might not. And then a very hard line will have to be drawn. We will have to get the police involved and make a big uproar."

● For details on the project visit www.toskinacat.org or kickstarter.com