

Section 2

Doeks: mark of a good woman – or a bad hair day?

The politics of the fashionable African turban take some unravelling, writes **Rea Khoabane**

CALL it a turban, a headscarf or a doek. It's a cultural symbol that has grown in style and become one of the most fashionable pieces today.

It has symbolic significance in African culture, but we've also seen celebrities such as Bonang Matheba, Thembi Seete, Nomzamo Mbatha and Terry Pheto wearing a doek as a fashion statement.

And in the past few months we've seen the resurgence of it through the #FeesMustFall movement among students around South Africa.

Matheba says a doek is traditionally a sign of respect and gives a woman her social clout.

Wearing a doek gives an African woman a layer of confidence and strength, she says. "The headpiece is also associated with being an important expression of your heritage and its always befitting to grace traditional events wearing one."

"On the other hand, we all have bad hair days, and to keep it hidden away we just bring out the doek as our fashion piece or statement, making it a fashion convenience as well," she says.

Matheba says African fashion has had a huge influence on global fashion

trends, even on designers such as Michael Kors and most recently Louis Vuitton.

"It was fashion stylist to the stars June Ambrose who revolutionised the doek back in 2009, when she rocked it like it was the greatest accessory."

Matheba says the louder and bolder the doek, the better for her as it matches her personality. "I love the dramatic effect that it has."

She wears a Maasai scarf in one of her most popular photos on social media. It is tied in the Gele style mostly seen on Nigerian women.

According to Yoruba tradition, the way a Gele is tied can indicate a woman's marital status. An end leaning to the right indicates a woman is married and end leaning to the left indicates she is single.

Professor Hlonipha Mokoena of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research says the current vogue for head wraps and scarves is strongly influenced by

Afro-soul and neo-soul artists such as Erykah Badu and India Arie.

African women (or, more broadly, women of colour) may feel they are empowered by wearing a headscarf — but they may also be making the choice because they don't want the in-



A HEAD FOR FASHION: Bonang Matheba

The covering of the hair was therefore a tool of white colonial culture

appropriate attention that natural hair often elicits, she says.

Historically the doek or headscarf was imposed on black women in many colonies by convention or by law as a way to control the sensuality and exoticism that "confused" white men.

"The covering of the hair was therefore a tool by which white colonial culture attempted to erase the differences between black women while accentuating the differences between white and black women."

Asked if the doek is then a symbol of oppression, Mokoena says she believes the question should be whether the headscarf has a place in modern society — and the answer is yes and no: "No, at least not in our context of Southern Africa and yes, it has a place if it is understood as an aesthetic or fashion choice."

"There is no cultural pre-



RESPECT: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela as a young woman with her signature turban
Picture: PETER MAGUBANE

scription that makes the wearing of doeks mandatory. Southern African women mostly wear doeks as a sign that they are betrothed, married or be-reaved. But these are modern cultural innovations and expectations and not an expression of authentic African culture.

"Our Southern African ancestresses wore headdresses and what anthropologists call 'bonnets' (that is, detachable and decorated headdresses) and not headscarves."

Writing on his travels in the Cape colony in the 18th century, Swedish botanist CP Thunberg remarked that slaves, "as a token of their servitude, always go barefoot and without a hat". Slaves would wear a turban.

There is an even longer history of blackamoor images or icons dressed in turbans. These are mostly found in Spanish and Italian art and involve black figures, usually male. In decorative sculpture the full body is depicted, either to hold trays, as virtual servants, or bronze sconces for candles or light fixtures.

Last year, fashion house Dolce & Gabbana caused an outcry when it dressed models in blackamoor earrings and sent them sashaying down the runway.

In traditional Zulu culture, a married woman is supposed to wear *iduku*, a head wrap, when she's around her in-laws to show respect. Xhosa women always wore some form of headdress, as a sign of respect to the head of the family — either their father or husband. Older Xhosa women wore more elaborate headpieces because of their seniority.

Various ethnic groups had

their own forms of traditional dress and the colour of their garments and the adornments they wore denoted their origins.

In my language, Sotho, it is a *tuku*. The culture raises women to wear the *tuku* as a sign of respect to others and herself. During a Sotho cultural wedding when the newly married woman is welcomed to the family and home by her in-laws, she is given a doek to wear as a sign that she has been accepted into their family.

Wearing her signature turban, Nompndulo Mkatshwa, president of the student representative council at the University of the Witwatersrand, inspired sisterly camaraderie as she and other student leaders stood at the forefront in the struggle for education during the #FeesMustFall protests last year.

Mkatshwa has been described as *imbokodo* from the Nguni word for rock, and this rock has certainly struck government nerves.

At the 2015 Feather Awards Mkatshwa was seen wearing an ANC-branded doek.

Asked about its significance, she said initially she wore it to cover up a bad hair day. However, when she realised its impact in the media, she began to embrace it as her crown as a young black female in a leadership position.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela made headlines for wearing full Xhosa attire complete with the doek when she went to support her then husband, Nelson Mandela, during the Rivonia Trial.

Mkatshwa says women still have to overcome many obstacles and the best way they have found to signal their unique place in this modern-day struggle is by wearing the doek.



THE DOEK ABIDES: South African singer Miriam Makeba, above, performing at the Olympia in Paris in 1964, and, below, Wits SRC president Nompndulo Mkatshwa
Pictures: AFP and IHSAA HAFEEJEE



A doek by any other name

THE name used in South Africa for a turban is an Afrikaans word which can also be translated as cloth or fabric. Across our borders different cultures use different names for the doek:

- **Botswana** — *tukwi/tuku*
- **Malawi** — *duku*
- **Zimbabwe** — *dhuku*
- **Zambia** — *chitambala*

FAMOUS DOEKS: Clockwise from top left, US writer and activist Maya Angelou, 1974, Bonang Matheba and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma



HEADRESS: A model at the Slava Zaitsev Spring/Summer 2013 fashion show in Moscow
Picture: GETTY IMAGES

