

Quilted Links? South African Kappies and French Boutin

by Lucille M. Chaveas

During the 19th century in South Africa, Afrikaner women were making elaborately quilted and corded sunbonnets for everyday wear. The majority of these were made of layers of white cotton or linen material and bear a striking resemblance to French white work of the 17th and 18th centuries. This study deals with the history, construction methods, styles, and designs of these sunbonnets and a comparison is drawn between them and the French white work. A possible link between these two needlework traditions is suggested via the Huguenots who arrived in South Africa in 1688.

Between 1835 and 1845 groups of Afrikaan-speaking farmers ("Boers"), migrated from the Cape Colony into what is now the northern part of South Africa. These Boers, mainly of Dutch descent, had become dissatisfied under British rule, imposed on them in 1806. When their slaves were emancipated by British law in 1833, followed by the return of annexed land on the eastern border of the Cape Colony to the African tribes, Boer families began moving north to escape British control. This migration is known as The Great Trek and the Boers who undertook it are called the *Voortrekkers*, or pioneers. The Great Trek has come to symbolize the independent spirit of the Afrikaners and it is regarded by them as one of the most significant events in their history.

The Great Trek was not one cohesive migration, but a series of departures of different groups, in different directions, at different times. When they left the Cape, the Voortrekkers were wearing the fashionable styles of the time. Because of distance and poor communication, these styles lagged behind what was considered current in Europe.¹ One of the most distinctive articles of clothing made and worn by the Voortrekker women was the white, quilted and corded *kappie* or sunbonnet.

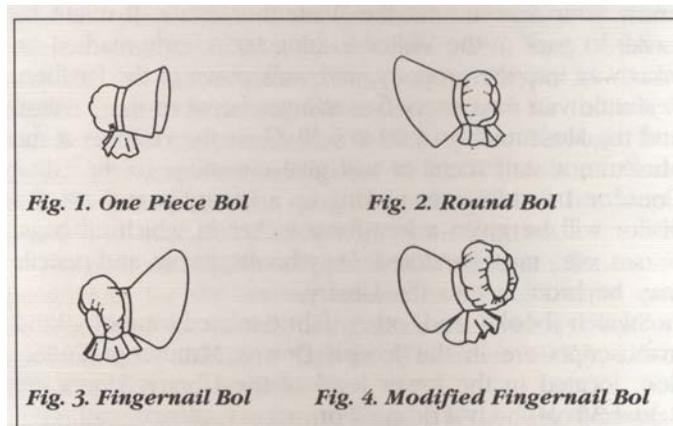
Whitework Voortrekker Kappies

The kappie was an adaptation of earlier styles, and its origin was in 17th century white linen hoods worn in Europe and particularly in Holland. The Dutch women who came to the Cape in the late 1650s to marry early male settlers and establish a true colony, were generally country women, and many would have had these hoods in their wardrobes.¹ The style died out in Europe, but never completely in South Africa as it proved practical for the Cape Colony's climate. Such a large, hood-like bonnet was essential to protect women's complexions from the sun. Strings were added because of the wind on the Cape.

In the early 19th century classical styles became fashionable, with a general return to simplicity of line and function. Clothes as well as accessories followed these classical lines, and the "Grecian bonnet" appeared.³ This bonnet had a wide brim to frame the face, a deep crown that stood out behind the head to allow for the hairstyle of the time, a short cape-like portion at the back to protect the neck, and ribbons that tied under the chin. These were known as country bonnets in Europe and sunbonnets in the United States. The Voortrekker women adapted their clothing to reflect the new styles of the 19th century and their kappies closely resembled these bonnets.

White kappies had four basic shapes with minor differences within these overall patterns: the *pofbol*; the *driestukkappie*, the two piece round bol; and the *tuitkappie*.⁴

The oldest style was the *pofbol kappie* or puffed crown bonnet, whose design easily accommodated the high bun or chignon that was fashionable early in the 19th century. There were minor variations within this style: the one piece bol (Fig. 1), the round bol (Fig. 2), the fingernail bol (Fig. 3), and the modified fingernail bol (Fig. 4).



The *driestukkappie* or the three-piece bonnet takes its name from its basic construction in three distinct parts and it also had variations within the general form: three piece round bol (Fig. 5), and three piece long bol or fingernail bol (Fig. 6). The three piece kappies were popular during the Great Trek, though their height of fashion in Europe was during the 1820s and early 1830s.

As hairstyles changed at the end of the 1830s, so did bonnet styles. Hairstyles became smoother, hair was worn closer to the head and buns dropped lower on the back of the head and neck. The crown section of bonnets began to



Fig. 5. Three Piece Round Bol

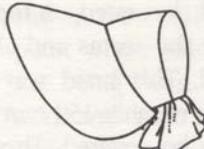


Figure 6. Three Piece Long Bol or Fingernail Bol

disappear as a separate part of the construction and was replaced by a circle or oval shaped piece of fabric (the bol) at the back. The brim now went straight through in a line from front to back. This fashion change is reflected in the third and fourth shapes used in kappie designs: the two piece round bol (Fig. 7) where the overall shape varied with the size of the circle at the back, and the *tuitkappie* or poke bonnet (Figs. 8 and 9) with its exaggerated brim.

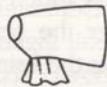


Figure 7. Two Piece Round Bol



Figure 8. Tuitkappie (or poke bonnet)



Figure 9. Tuitkappie (or poke bonnet)

The *tuitkappie* proved to be especially suitable when the Great Trek took the Boers into a hot, dry part of South Africa. The long poke behind, finished with a small bol, created an air pocket, and the bonnet stood away from the ears when worn untied; this made it cooler. The large brim acted like an umbrella over the face, and many measured over 15 inches long. This style was sometimes referred to as the Dopper or conservative bonnet because when a young woman wore one it was difficult for a young man to kiss her; the poke got in the way.⁵

Patterns were not standardized within these four basic shapes. Museum collections indicate that many pattern variations existed for each style. Part of the explanation for this comes from the fact that the Great Trek was actually several different migrations over a ten year period and these Trekparties were essentially independent of each other.

These bonnets were worn primarily to avoid sunburn, and all four basic shapes served this purpose.

Construction and Designs

What makes the white kappies so remarkable and precious are the designs worked on them in extremely fine quilting and cording. This is the major difference that separates the Voortrekker kappie from similar bonnets made elsewhere during the 19th century. The quilting and cording replaced all other trimming and the work was done entirely by hand (Plate 1).

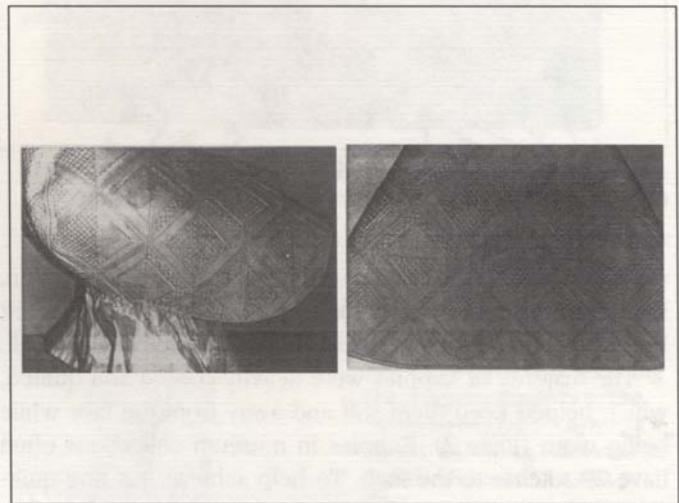


Plate 1. Two kappies in the collection of the National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria, South Africa. Photograph by Lucille Chaveas.

The material used was white or light colored linen or cotton which was purchased from shops in the Eastern Cape or from traveling salesmen. The Voortrekker women did not weave their own cloth.⁶

The kappies were made of three or four layers of material with designs for the cording marked on the layer just beneath the top." These designs were either drawn free-hand, or traced from patterns cut from leather or, when possible, paper. Tradition has it that the handle of a tin spoon was used to make the markings.' A tin spoon leaves a mark on cloth similar to a pencil line. Sometimes slate or some other "drawing stone" was used to transfer the design.

Once the design had been carefully marked, the lines were followed with cotton cord twisted from frays of other clothing, most often from socks, because commercial thread was rarely available.' This layer was then sandwiched between the other layers and the cording was outline with tiny running stitches through all three or four layers. It is not clear how the cording was kept from slipping out of place during the quilting. Only one reference could be found that described it being tacked into place before assembly, but no clear details were given.¹⁰ A few references describe

continued on page 22



Plate 2. Detail of a piece of 19th century French boutis. Collection of Lucille Chaveas, photograph by the owner.

the cording as being inserted with a thick needle or bodkin. One even described the bodkin as being made of steenbok horn." Most references do not mention this technique at all.

The majority of kappies were heavily corded and quilted, which helped keep them stiff and away from the face while being worn (Plate 2). Kappies in museum collections often have 29 stitches to the inch. To help achieve this fine quilting some women used a *naairing*, or sewing ring, when they worked. This was a ring for the thumb with a shield on it and it was used like a thimble.¹²

Some kappies were made without cording. In this case, either the bottom layer of fabric or the thread used had not been pre-shrunk. Once the quilting was completed and the kappie assembled, it was dipped in water and the thread or fabric shrank so that the design stood out. These kappies were not nearly as stiff as the corded ones, the patterns were not as pronounced, and they did not stand away from the face very well. Although they were less time consuming and difficult to make, they were not as popular.

The designing, cording and quilting were done on the individual parts of the kappies before they were assembled. To best appreciate the designs, kappies must be thought of as they would look if flattened out. Once assembled, it is not as easy to see the marvelous symmetry and proportion of the designs (Fig. 10). The kappies were assembled with the same care and patience used in designing the separate



Fig. 10. "Flattened out" Kappie detailing symmetry and proportion of the design

parts. The seams were meticulously joined, any excess fabric was cut away and a binding was worked around the edges. In cases where binding was not used, the separate parts were joined and decorated on top with a handmade, ric-rac like braid over the seams and along the line where the frill was attached. This braid was made of matching material cut into strips roughly 150 mm wide and twice the length of the seam to be covered. These strips were gathered with basting stitches sewn in three zig-zag rows and then pulled tightly to create a ric-rac effect that has sometimes been described as resembling the teeth of a saw.¹³ Today this kind of braid is called gathered ruching or shell trimming. This finished ruching was sewn over the seams with nearly invisible stitches and it added to the overall beauty of the finished kappie (Fig. 11).

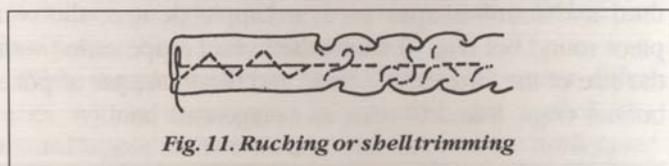


Fig. 11. Ruching or shell trimming

Some women took this added step even farther by using box-pleated ruching over the seams and occasionally between rows of cording on the brim, and by box-pleating the frill (Fig. 12). Single box-pleating requires material three times the width of the space to be covered by the pleats. There are a few examples of double box-pleating on the frills of kappies and this requires material five times the width of the covered area. Box-pleating and/or ruching added extra time and expense to the finished kappie, but the Voortrekker woman clearly thought it was worthwhile to judge from the examples in museum collections today.

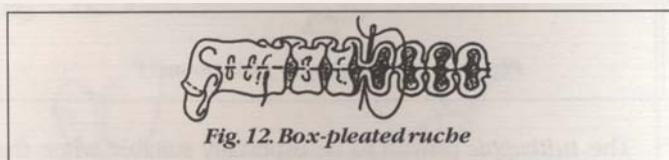


Fig. 12. Box-pleated ruche

All styles of kappies included a frill or *kraag* which covered the neck and some part of the shoulders for further protection from the sun. The frill was either gathered or box-pleated before it was attached. A special crimp block or gathering board with adjustable reeds was used to make these pleats. The gathering board was a wooden frame with openings on the longest sides in which reeds could be shifted. The material to be gathered was woven to and fro and then moved up and fastened. The size of the gather or pleat depended on how the reeds were set and how the material was woven; i.e., whether it was through one, two, or more reeds. After a few days the material was removed and it was beautifully gathered. These frills were finished off just as neatly and finely as the rest of the kappie. Some kappies had double frills, one shorter than the other. The frills could

be pinned to the back of a little girl's dress, or even occasionally to her braid, to prevent them from being lost during play. Frills on children's kappies sometimes have an extra piece of material on the inside at the back of the neck to strengthen the point where stitches or pins were used when the kappie was being worn.¹⁴ White kappies represented months of work and were too precious to lose.

Voortrekker art was essentially decorative, and designs are found on most everyday objects. Almost every utensil of wood, horn or leather was decorated in one way or another. These decorations show a pure feeling for style, beauty, and symmetry. There is a clear preference for certain motifs, namely geometric patterns, animal figures, and plant designs.¹⁵ Designs for kappies also show the variety of inspiration and artistic creativity of the Voortrekker women. No two designs were ever exactly alike. What similarity exists is usually explained by the fact that some designs were handed down in families. Designs were rarely traded and never sold, and there is no record of individuals being known for their special drafting abilities. It is clear that the women made up their own designs.

Geometric patterns outnumbered other designs, and these were usually done in straight lines along the brim or as zig-zags, checks or diamonds covering the surface (Fig. 13). Plant motifs were second in number to geometric designs and these were the individual woman's interpretation of local flora. Flower designs varied from the most simple, stylized patterns to relatively difficult, realistic versions (Figs. 14-18). Very few of these designs have come down in history with names. Only "wandering Jew" (Fig. 17) and "pineapple" (Fig. 18)¹⁷ are specifically listed in collections, although various stylized flowers are recognizable, such as proteas, fuchsia, daisies or cosmos, tulips, and carnations, even if they are not recorded as such.

Circles and parts of circles are used to create overall patterns on some kappies (Fig. 19). Hearts were used on children's kappies (Fig. 20) and curved lines with simple flowers were common (Fig. 21). A floral motif combined with geometric designs was also popular (Figs. 22, 23). Often, there is a unique border pattern around the edge of the kappie even if this is not a separate piece of material used in the construction. This edge design will usually be repeated in the bol. No matter how many design elements were used on the various parts of the kappie, there is usually one element common to all sections. Inspiration for some of the geometric designs may have come from designs on imported lace, very popular at the time of the Great Trek.

The kappies were starched to add extra stiffness to keep them from falling into the faces of the women who wore them. Starch was usually made from potatoes or corn, but some references mention sugar or honey. Because they were



Fig. 13. The zig-zag pattern shows the effect of the combination of dense and widely spaced running stitches. (Drawing after D. Strutt, *Clothing Fashions in South Africa 1652-1900*, 0. 235).



Fig. 14. Leaf design used on brim of kappie. (NMB: G2339)



Fig. 15. Creeper design used on brim (NMB: G4202)



Fig. 16. Detail of leaf design used on brim. (NMB: G338)



Fig. 17. Brim design showing the creeping tendrils of the "wandering Jew." (After D. Strutt, *Clothing Fashions in South Africa 1652-1900*, p. 234).

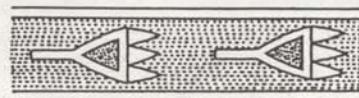


Fig. 18. Stylized pineapple design displayed in sixteen rows across the brim. (NMB: G732)



Fig. 19. Detail of crown showing the curved clam shell design. (NMB: G1130)



Fig. 20. Detail of the double heart design taken from the brim of a child's kappie (VMP: 131)



Fig. 21. Designs on brim showing curved lines and simplistic flowers. (NMB: G2751)



Fig. 22. Floral design showing the combination of floral and geometric designs. (NMB: G491)

Fig. 23. Floral design with corded, curved and straight lines. (NMB: G12640)



continued on page 24

white, they needed to be washed fairly often, and they were difficult to iron. The kappie was pulled over a special wooden block as it dried to help retain its shape and make it easier to iron.¹⁸ The starch also helped to keep the kappies clean; dirt collected on the starch and was washed out with it.

The importance of these white kappies is illustrated by two interesting facts about them. First, special wooden boxes were made to hold them when they were not in use. The Voortrekkers traveled by ox wagon and space was at a premium; nevertheless, a place was made for these boxes and some were beautifully painted. Secondly, kappies were never sold,¹⁹ although on rare occasions they were traded for needed items or services. There is a magnificent kappie in the Voortrekker Monument Museum in Pretoria that was traded by the woman who made it for a milk cow for a baby whose mother had died.

Kiskappies and Smouskappies

Not all kappies were white or made of linen or cotton. Another popular style was known as the *kiskappie* or formal bonnet. These were usually worn by older women and were sometimes exact copies of fashionable bonnets worn in Europe. *Kiskappies* were made of colored fabrics, plain or striped, and silk or shot silk was commonly used. Because this material could not be washed and starched, the bonnet was constructed and decorated differently from the white kappie. Without starch to support it, the colored kappie needed considerable body to keep the stiff shape of the brim. It was padded with wadding or flannel and even thick paper was sometimes used between the layers of

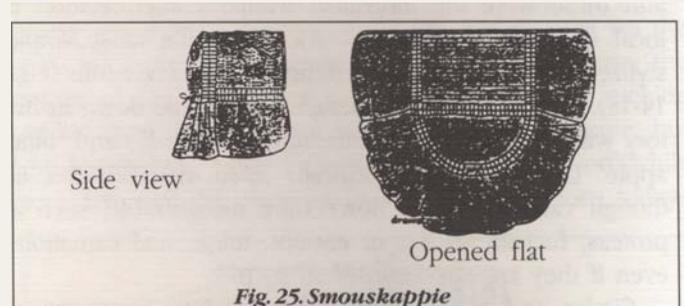
These bonnets were also corded but not in the elaborate patterns of the white kappies because the rich material being used did not require intricate designs to show it off. The cord was inserted in the same way, but it was much thicker, or two or three cords were sewn next to each other in sets to appear thicker. The rows of cording on the *kiskappies* were always straight and followed the line of the edge of the brim. Space was left open between the cords, or sets of cords, and the whole process was repeated until the entire brim was covered with cording and spaces (Fig. 24).

The top layer of material in the spaces between the cord-



ing was not stretched as tightly as the bottom layer, so puffed bubbles or puckering that gave a ruched effect was formed. This puckering could be exaggerated by slightly gathering the top layer as the quilting stitches were being done." These colored kappies were less time consuming to make than the white ones and the silk ones were popular with adults. Matrons wearing blue silk *kiskappies* were not an uncommon sight into the 1900's. *Kiskappies* show a marked resemblance to the European drawn bonnets made with cane hoops in the 1840's. One feature that was quite different, however, was the extreme length and fullness of the neck frill, which often covered the shoulders. Even when this style kappie was made for children in cotton rather than silk, the frill was very long. Examples in the Voortrekker Museum in Peitermaritzburg, South Africa, show the long frill being lined with net to stiffen it.

Peddler's bonnets or *smouskappies* were sold by itinerant merchants generally after 1880. they were usually made in black or floral patterns material and were never very popular. *Smouskappies* were entirely machine made, with a minimum of machine stitched decoration on the brim." They had a drawstring in two pieces that tied in the back and created the shape of the bonnet. When untied the bonnet would lie flat which made it easier to wash and dry (Fig. 25).



White Kappies and French White Work

The resemblance between the white kappies of 19th century South Africa and French white work of the 17th and 18th centuries is remarkable. There is no written record that definitively connects these two traditions but many Afrikaners have Huguenot, as well as Dutch, ancestry. A small group of Huguenots arrived in the Cape Colony in 1688, not long after the Dutch, and they had a marked influence on many aspects of Afrikaner life and culture.

French white work, also called Marseilles quilting²³ or *boutis* work, has a long history in the Provence region of France; records of quilted white work from the city of Marseilles date back to the 16th century. *Boutis* work was done on a very fine, strong, white linen or cotton cloth for the top and a poorer quality white cloth for the bottom. The two pieces of fabric were joined by very close quilting in

either a back stitch or a running stitch which retraced a premarked pattern with parallel lines. The spaces between the parallel stitching lines were filled with long cotton cord twisted around a tool called a *boutis* that was inserted from the back between the stitching lines. The number of strands of cotton cord depended upon the width of the space between the quilting. Ideally this space was filled completely so that the design was shown clearly. The *boutis* was skillfully removed from the back and any excess cord was cut off and the loose ends worked between the two layers of fabric.

This *boutis* has been variously described as a long but supple needle with a blunt end and a large eye, or as a flexible metal rod. These tools were made at home by the individual doing the cording and were produced as needed. Individual workers had their own preferences for materials used and the size would vary with the width of the cord being inserted. Although the finished work takes one of its names from the tool that was used, the tool itself was not standardized or highly valued.

Boutis work was primarily used for white blankets, counterpanes, baby clothing and women's petticoats, but there are a few examples of it on bonnets for women and babies.²⁴ These articles were heavily adorned with very intricate designs that included a wide variety of flowers as well as birds, hearts and fruit (Fig. 26). Often the background space between the cording was filled with geometric patterns. Cross hatching was the most common, but semicircles and zig-zags were also used. These designs and the overall appearance of the Marseilles quilts is strikingly similar to the work done on the kappies.

These two white work traditions share a high degree of technical perfection and suppleness of design. They both required great skill and time to accomplish. This was never a type of needlework that had wide popularity and its documented tradition is both chronologically and region-

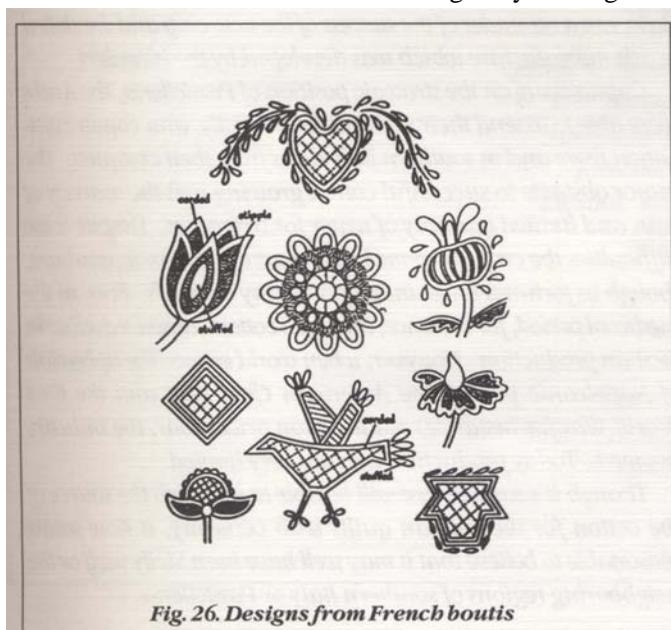


Fig. 26. Designs from French *boutis*

ally limited. The likelihood therefore of a Huguenot connection to the Voortrekker kappie is highly possible. More research needs to be done linking known examples of *boutis* and kappies to specific families in their respective countries then looking for family connections between France and South Africa.

Whatever the connection or origins, it is plain to see in these kappies that Voortrekker women were making a statement about themselves through their needlework. The high degree of workmanship and artistic sensibility seen in these kappies tells a great deal about their skill, patience, and ability to endure. The kappies add to the overall understanding of this part of South African history as experienced by women.

Lucille Chaveas has participated professionally in many areas of quilt-related activities. Her quilts have been exhibited in a number of exhibitions abroad, and one hangs permanently in Chateau Chauveniac-Lafayette, birthplace of the Marquis de Lafayette. She has a teacher's certification from the National Quilt Association, and has taught quilting, lectured on quilts and arranged exhibitions in France, Niger, Nigeria, South Africa and Malawi. Her review of the Renwick Gallery (Washington) installation of the exhibition, "Who'd A Thought It?" Improvisations in African-American Quilting appeared in the Fall, 1992 journal of American Folklore. Ms. Chaveas received a BA from Syracuse University and an MA in Museum Studies from The George Washington University. Her time abroad has been spent with her husband, a foreign service officer, who is currently Ambassador to Malawi.

Endnotes

- ¹D. H. Strutt, *Clothing Fashions in South Africa 1652-1900* (A.A. Balkema, Cape Town-Rotterdam, 1975), 223.
- ²Ibid., 224.
- ³A. Holden, *Elegant Modes in the Nineteenth Century: From High Waist to Bustle* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1935), 19.
- ⁴Strutt, 225.
- ⁵Hans Rooseboom, editor, *The Romance of the Great Trek: A Collection of Authoritative Articles on the Life and Times of the Voortrekkers* (South Africa: CNA Ltd., 1949), 156.
- ⁶G.S. Preller, *Voortrekkerense* (Deel 1 & 2. Kaapstad: De Nationale Pers, 1918), 237.
- ⁷J.D. Weilbach and C.N.J. du Plessis, *Gebiedenis van de Emigranten-boeren en van den Vrijheids-oorlog* (Kaapstad: Saul Solomon Drukkers, 1882), 23.
- ⁸Ibid., 23.
- ⁹Ibid., 24.
- ¹⁰A. Carlsen, "Die Voortrekkerkappie," *Museum Memo*, vol. 16, no. 4 (November 1988), 24.
- ¹¹K. Roodt-Coetzee, "Die Dekoratie in Die Voortrekkerkleredrag," (The Voortrekker Memorial Album of the University of Pretoria, 1938, 125. A steenbok is a type of antelope found in southern Africa.
- ¹²Dr. C. J. Pretorius, Curator, National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria, South Africa, Personal Interview, October, 1989.
- ¹³Roodt-Coetzee, 126.
- ¹⁴T. van Niekerk, personal interview at the Africana Museum, Johannesburg, RSA June 19489.
- ¹⁵Roodt-Coetzee, 127.
- ¹⁶Ibid., 128.
- ¹⁷Myra Briedenhann, curator, National Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa. Personal Interview, June 1989.
- ¹⁸Roodt-Coetzee, 39.
- ¹⁹While living in South Africa between 1988 and 1990, I tried very hard to buy a *kappie* but could find no one willing to sell one at any price.
- ²⁰Strutt, 239.
- ²¹Ibid., 239.
- ²²T. van Niekerk, curator, Africana Museum, Johannesburg, RSA. Personal interview, November 1989.
- ²³Sally Garoutte, "Marseilles Quilts and their Woven Offspring," *Uncoverings*, Vol. 3, 982, 115-134.
- ²⁴Museon Arlaten, 29, rue de la Republique, Arles, France.