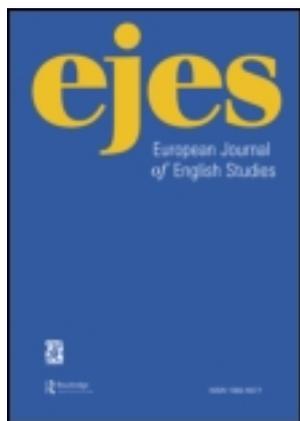


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### The Sociogenic Imperative of Typography

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# Kurt Campbell

## THE SOCIOGENIC IMPERATIVE OF TYPOGRAPHY

### A 'face' for the new South Africa

*The Corporate Identity and Branding Guidelines of the Republic of South Africa (2005) regulates the visual communication protocol of the new Republic of South Africa. The Guidelines were symptomatic of the profound political shift that came into effect with the end of the Apartheid era. This article analyses the fonts officially selected for the new visual identity as it pertains to the country's 'Great Seals'. It will argue that, in contrast to the other visual elements of the design, the policy on fonts works against the stated aims of the Branding Guidelines to produce a 'visual symbol . . . [t]hat distinguishes us from other countries' and 'reflects a unique history in addition to embracing the future'. Central to the argument is the importance of viewing typography as a sociogenic object, symbolically and ideologically potent as it performs both history and culture. The article concludes by introducing alternative approaches by South African designers to typographical design that seek to respond to the challenge of a 'face' for the new South Africa.*

**Keywords** branding; national identity; coat of arms; typeface; South Africa; Timbuktu

### A branding strategy for a democratic South Africa

The first democratic elections in South Africa that concluded on 29 April 1994 brought to an end centuries of racial oppression, stemming from the earliest years of colonial occupation in the 1600s by Portuguese, British and Dutch settlers and culminating in the Nationalist Government of 1948, which entrenched the Apartheid regime. The South African state originated from a small settlement in the Cape occupied by Dutch farmers funded by the Dutch East India Company to provide food and drink for passing merchant ships. It was formalised as a colony of the British Empire in 1815 and progressed to Union status in 1910, ultimately growing to independence in 1948 under Afrikaner Nationalist rule. The traces of this history were expressed in the Union coat of arms of 1910 (Figure 1), which remained largely unchanged when South Africa moved from Union to Republic status.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Coat of Arms of the Union of South Africa (1910).

The final blazon for the coat of arms read:

Quarterly per fesse wavy First Quarter Gules a female figure representing Hope resting the dexter arm upon a rock and supporting with the sinister hand an Anchor Argent Second Quarter Or two Wildebeesten in full course at random both proper Third Quarter Or upon an Island an Orange tree Vert fruited proper Fourth Quarter Vert a Trek Waggon Argent And for the Crest On a Wreath of the Colours A Lion passant gardant Gules supporting with the dexter paw four staves erect alternately Argent and Azure and banded Or And for the Supporters, On the dexter side A Spring Buck and on the sinister side An Oryx (Gemsbuck) both proper together with the Motto EX UNITATE VIRES

(Berry, 2008)

Both a colonial and a distinctly South African genealogy are visually evoked by the arms and the blazon. The first quadrant contains an illustration of a white female figure draped in flowing Grecian robes, grasping an anchor. This figure personifies the ideal of Hope and refers to the Cape of Good Hope, so named by John II of Portugal in anticipation of its benefits on the newly discovered trade route to and from India. Further local meanings are mobilised by the symbolic use of fauna and flora. The second quadrant is assigned to the colony of Natal, symbolised by its indigenous wildlife: two leaping wildebeest positioned side by side. An orange tree represents the Orange Free State in the third section, alluding to both the abundance of citrus crops and the Orange River itself. The final quadrant representing the colony of the Transvaal contains the Trek Boer Wagon. The wagon was a symbol of agency and

independence, referencing the 'Great Trek', the exodus of Boer farmers from the Cape Colony in 1830 in response to British colonial rule. Tempering these symbols of an independent South African identity, the red lion sits above the four quadrants, making a visual link to the British and Scottish crests that recall the Union's colonial genealogy.

A link to the figure of the colonist was a defining feature of early South African governance, not simply in symbolic terms but as a fundamental part of legislative logic. The Superintendent-General of Education, Langham Dale, illustrated this in his famous address to the South African government in 1889:

The first duty of the government has been assumed to be to recognise the position of the European Colonist as holding the paramount influence, social and political, and to see the sons and daughters of the colonists should have at least such education as their peers in Europe enjoy, with such local modifications as will fit them to maintain their unquestioned superiority and supremacy in this land.

(Rasool and Van Bever Donker, 2007: 42)

It was against this backdrop of colonial supremacy that a new coat of arms was issued in 2000, signifying the change in national politics inaugurated by the post-Apartheid elections of 1994. Thus, for example, whereas the motto on the 1910 coat of arms used the language of empire (Latin), rather than either of the official languages of the Union (English and Dutch), this was replaced in the post-Apartheid coat of arms by the extinct language of the Khoi San, a minority people who had been the first victims of systematic genocide in 1700.<sup>2</sup> 'Ex Unitate Vires' ('unity is strength') became '!ke e:/xarra//ke' or 'diverse people unite'. In contrast to the imperial reference of the Latin, the affirmation of an extinct indigenous language directs the viewer to the 'first voice' of the first people of South Africa.

The strategy was embodied in a national branding guide published by the South African Department of Arts and Culture in 2005. The Guidelines consist of 162 pages detailing appropriate and inappropriate uses of the coat of arms (Figure 2) and the use of colour and typography in visual communication for printed and electronic media at the national and international level. They serve both as a regulatory device and as a statement about the values and meanings of the newly deployed visual branding, with detailed accounts in the foreword regarding the distinct role the new identity was to play. The strategy outlined in the Guidelines is essentially aimed at a uniform visualisation of selected points of cultural reference as defining features in the imagining of a new South Africa. As in the earlier coat of arms, indigenous fauna and flora play a key role as symbols of national identity. South African wildlife is represented by images of elephant tusks and the secretary bird. In addition, an indigenous flower, the Protea, is placed at the top of the design, and ears of wheat encircle the bottom of the shield. The centre is reserved for two human figures symbolising the Khoi San people, whose language features in the motto.

This is the only instance in the branding concept where human beings are directly referenced and testifies to the socio-political values of the 'African Renaissance' in the design logic of the coat of arms. The concept of an African Renaissance first emerged in Nelson Mandela's 1994 address to the Organisation of African Unity in Tunis (see Bongmba, 2004: 292). When President Thabo Mbeki articulated his understanding of



**Figure 2.** Coat of Arms of the Republic of South Africa (2000).

the concept on the occasion of the adoption of the South African Constitution in Cape Town in 1996, the Khoi San were a central reference:

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape – they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence. . .

(Mbeki, 1998: 31–32)

Although the branding Guidelines for the Republic of South Africa do not explain the inclusion of the figures in such overtly political terms, the choice of the Khoi San as the central focus of the new coat of arms is clearly linked to the precepts of the African Renaissance – the acknowledgement of the colonial tyranny of the past and the revival of African-centred cultural paradigms as both a form of redress and inspiration.

The introduction to the corporate identity explains how the focus on a particular people and geo-political location displayed by these visual options informs its idea of nation:

National symbols are those symbols adopted by the people in a particular country to express its values and aspirations. These symbols are key to social cohesion. Some of the roles of the national symbols include nation-building, national

identity, unification and land-marking history. The national Coat of Arms is thus the highest visual symbol of the State. It is the singular identity that spans all spheres of national government, and its communication with its stakeholders.

(South African Department of Arts and Culture, 2005: 2)

As the Guidelines gloss the various visual elements comprising the coat of arms, the rhetoric of the descriptions draws out their power as symbols of national identity. The secretary bird, for example, is described in these terms:

The secretary bird is characterized in flight, the natural consequence of growth and speed. It is a powerful bird whose legs – depicted as the spear and the knobkerrie – serve it well in its hunt for snakes. It is a symbol of divine majesty. Its uplifted wing is an emblem of the ascendance of our nation, while simultaneously offering us its protection.

(South African Department of Arts and Culture, 2005: 4)

Similarly, the presence of the rising sun is explained as follows:

An emblem of brightness and splendour, the sun symbolizes the promise of rebirth, the active faculties of reflection, knowledge, good judgment and willpower. It is the very symbol of the source of life, light and the ultimate wholeness of humanity.

(South African Department of Arts and Culture, 2005: 4)

The Guidelines next introduce the two important symbols of office known as the Great Seals: the President's Seal and the Seal of the Republic of South Africa (Figures 3 and 4). The ancient device of the seal is used to authenticate the voice of the individual or institution in a written communication. Although seals are now largely digital, their symbolic importance has not diminished, and the Guidelines recognise them as important visual devices for the national brand:

The Great Seal is traditionally considered to be the highest emblem of the State. Absolute authority is given to every document with an impression of the Great Seal on it, implying that this has been approved by the President of the Republic of South Africa.

(South African Department of Arts and Culture, 2005: 2)

Given this political purpose, verbal elements play a large role in the Seals of State and draw attention to the importance of the textual components in the national brand and how the choice of typeface is an integral, not to say a prominent, aspect of the design. However, in contrast to the careful attention given to the symbolic value of the other visual elements, the presentation of the official choice of fonts is remarkably superficial. No reference is made to history or cultural heritage; the text dealing with typography does no more than state, in one-sentence paragraphs, which fonts are to be used and to regulate their use:

Gill Sans Regular is used for acronym and functional naming structure and it may only be used in lower case.





Republic of South Africa's  
national Coat of Arms  
Corporate Identity and Branding Guidelines

**3.8 Seal of the Republic of South Africa**

**3.8.3 Typography**



Seal of the Republic of  
South Africa descriptor

Arial Narrow

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz  
1234567890 !?£%&\*

Note: Arial Narrow is  
used for the Seal of the  
Republic of South Africa  
descriptor.



**Figure 4.** The Seal of the Republic of South Africa (2000).

other visual elements within the coat of arms and the branding strategy as a whole. There would appear to be an assumption here that typefaces perform a merely utilitarian function, rather than playing a central role in performing specific heraldic and symbolic functions in the Seals as an integral part of the visual representation of the nation. The choice of fonts and their exclusively technical descriptions thus mark a

point in the Guidelines where cultural specificity is effectively written out of their symbolisation practices, as the visualisation of the verbal is rendered as if it were exclusively instrumental.

## The sociogenic performance of graphemes

In order to fully comprehend the conceptual discord evident in the officially selected fonts for the Presidential Seal and the branding of the Republic of South Africa, we need first to recognise the foundational aspects of the fonts selected by the Guidelines and their standing in relation to the stated design strategy of the national branding exercise.

Gill Sans has its origins in the typographical renaissance of the first half of the twentieth century and was to acquire strong associations as a British brand. It was designed by the letter-carver, engraver, and sculptor Eric Gill in 1928 for the window of the bookshop of his friend, Douglas Clevedon. Prototypes were used for signs around the former Welsh monastery of Capel-y-ffin, where Gill and his family lived in the 1920s (Garfield, 2010: 49). Following its acquisition by the Monotype Corporation in 1928, Gill Sans was aggressively marketed and became the company's premium typeface for a long period. It was extensively used by the British railways, particularly in timetables, and was a major influence on the distinctive typeface of the London Underground. In 1997 the BBC made Gill Sans its official corporate typeface, with the BBC logo establishing itself as an internationally recognised symbol. The association with Britain was intensified in 2003 when Gill Sans was adopted as the official typeface for all corporate communications, logos and standard publications by the British government. The popularity of Gill Sans owed much to its highly readable qualities as well as its classical hand-carved aesthetic. On the other hand, the associations that Monotype Gill Sans developed with the British state and its modern systems of communication are ironic outcomes of Gill's craft-based and anti-capitalist aesthetic ideology.

If Gill Sans suggests the transformation of a local aesthetic into something between an ideal of universal readability and particular national associations, the second primary font selected for the South African brand strategy has been unambiguously associated from the start with modern multinational systems of communication. Arial was commissioned from Monotype by IBM in 1982 and has become a standard typeface for texts produced in Microsoft Windows. The primary aim of the face Arial was legibility and readability; as Robin Nicholas, a designer on the project, commented: 'It was designed as a generic sans serif; almost a bland sans serif' (Nicholas, 2005: 20). This blandness enabled an exceptionally wide application of the face. Yet the ubiquity it enjoys would seem to contradict the stated desires of culturally specific visual elements in the branding of South Africa. In sum, in both cases, the choice of typeface displays a conceptual poverty in relation to the sociogenic qualities of typefaces.

What I mean by 'sociogenic' is the unavoidable social qualities at play in the use, design and reception of graphemes. This is foregrounded here by the mismatch of brand-concept and type choice. The role of typography in a bureaucracy is often rendered as a problem-solving function, responding to the challenge of printed matter

or the digital screen in a way that ensures maximum clarity when communicating information. The ideal is for the type to become in a sense ‘invisible’. However, this conventional formulation of the role of typography as primarily a neutral servant of utility does not survive a recognition of the viewer’s role in the reception of the face. The idea of the ‘viewer’ as an active and situated meaning-maker of the letterform and not simply a passive ‘user’ can no more be ignored in the realm of heraldry and identity design than in any other context of reading. At the same time, as suggested in the brief notes on Gill Sans and Arial above, typefaces emerge and circulate within specific historical and cultural contexts. We therefore need to consider the historical context of typographical options in South Africa.

### **The bibliographic genesis of typography in South Africa**

Print in South Africa was heavily influenced by the Christian missionaries from Britain and other European countries who were active during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Cape was seen as an important space for spreading the word of God to a people who had not been exposed to the teachings of the Bible. The multitude of languages spoken by the indigenous population of the Cape and the interior made the translation and printing of the Gospels vital to the goals of the missionary agencies. The decision made by the missionaries to use Roman graphemes to constitute the African-language bibles can thus be seen as foundational in the textual relationship between the Western canon of typography and the languages of South Africa.

Robert Moffat was the first missionary to translate and print a Bible in a vernacular language of South Africa. He published the Gospel according to Luke in Tswana in 1829, and supervised the printing of a complete Bible in 1872. Further revisions of Moffat’s Tswana Bible were made in 1907 and as late as 1970. By 1850 full-length Bibles had been translated into the remaining indigenous languages of South Africa including Xhosa, Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, Tsonga and Zulu. Missionaries brought presses to South Africa with pre-cast type to print the Bibles locally, or on occasion had them printed abroad. In keeping with the European Bibles, the Roman Serif was the default choice of letterform to be used on the press in the form of movable type, being the most expedient in terms of cost. As a result, the Roman Serif, the letterform of the Colony, established itself in the bibliographic imagination of South Africa relatively early.

Although this appears to be the result of merely pragmatic choices, the printing of the texts was inevitably preceded by the imaginings of what could, or what should, be the typographic form of a Bible in an indigenous language. Such choices are thus fundamentally conceptual ones, as Landislav Mandel (1993: 9) has argued in his critique of the false logic of technocratic or economic explanations for the Renaissance shift from Carolingian script to the Humanist script. The prime result of the foundational choice regarding Bible translations was that the diverse influences constituting the 11 official languages of South Africa and their geo-social genealogy were not reflected in the writing system first used to cast these languages into a visual form. Instead they were compressed into a single system of Western representation which was able to facilitate the colonial desire to establish a bureaucracy as rapidly as

possible. The neglect of writing traditions from broader Africa manifested itself in the limits of the typographic canon in South Africa, which remains to this day a country that, despite its rich diversity of spoken languages, educates students only in the Roman alphabet – the same alphabet we see displayed for example on the slavery Seals, indenture contracts and Dutch East India Company cutlery and ceramics contained in the social history museums of Cape Town.

## The material heritage of Timbuktu

The role of Bible printing in establishing a typographic culture in South Africa is complemented by the idea entrenched in early Western research on Africa as the 'oral' continent.<sup>3</sup> Yet the innovations and inventions revealed in the genealogy of alphabets and writing systems in South Africa and beyond challenge this idea of the letter-less continent and position the people of Africa as active agents in the genealogy of textual production. Innovations embrace both a number of African alphabets and a variety of substantive adaptations of Arabic.<sup>4</sup> The depth and complexity of the former are quite stunning, from the earliest Hieroglyphs originating in Egypt to scripts such as Vai from Liberia (the oldest autochthonous African script), Ge'ez from Ethiopia, and the Tifinagh script used for the Tuareg language – to name a few examples still in use today. Most of these African scripts were developed in the northern part of the continent and did not have a presence in South Africa. More characteristic of practices here are the unique syncretic forms that emerged from the imported writing system of Arabic and the changes it underwent in accommodating spoken African languages.

In this sense, the Timbuktu Project has produced a monument to the fallacy of the exclusive existence of a 'white writing' in Africa represented by the Roman alphabet and Roman grapheme. The Project, established in 2002, is a collaboration between the governments of South Africa and Mali and the University of Cape Town with the purpose of recovering the writing traditions and scholarship of Mali and South West Africa. Manuscripts collected in the Timbuktu archive include examples of adaptations of Arabic scripts as diverse as Maghribi, Mashriqi, Naskhy, Saharawi, Sudani and Suqi from Mali, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Mozambique.

Adaptations of Arabic script were first introduced into South Africa by Asian slaves brought to the Cape by the Dutch East India Company. Although diverse in their groupings (slaves were imported from India, Indonesia, Madagascar and Malaysia), these communities, united under the religion of Islam, used the Arabic alphabet for written religious instruction and communication. Madrasahs were established in Cape Town to teach the writing and reading of Arabic as early as 1795 (Jappie, 2011: 375). While the first students in these schools could understand Afrikaans, they were only able to read and write Arabic. This resulted in the development of *ajami* scripts (Arabic scripts used to write non-Arabic languages) unique to South Africa such as the Arabic-Afrikaans script known as 'Kitaab-Hollandsch' that was initially a form of Jawi script, an Arabic form used to write Malay. Typically of such adaptations, the Kitaab-Hollandsch script was not merely a perpetuation of the Arabic alphabet, but contained new graphemic combinations and phonological inventions (see Dangor, 2008: 124). This script can be seen as a response by Cape Town Muslim scholars to the colonial education dominated by English and the Roman alphabet (Stell, 2007: 95). Kitaab-Hollandsch is thus a unique,

symptomatic development in Cape Town that used the Arabic letterform to respond to specific socio-political needs of a South African community.

However, the English-based educational programme in South Africa expanded into a mandatory, state-enforced system that included the Muslim community. In time, then, the Roman alphabet resisted the development of alternative scripts and established itself in the Cape as the default option not only for official education, but for all local literature, including those religious works which up to that point were almost exclusively printed in Arabic script. The publication in Roman type of the Muslim text *Kitâb Tarajomatarrīyaadil Badīati* by Imam Abdurakib ibn Abdul in 1898 can thus be seen as representing the unchallenged ubiquitous adoption of the Roman grapheme in printed form in South Africa (Stell, 2007: 95).

### Innovation in post-Apartheid South Africa

Without themselves providing a direct visual language, the tradition of adapting Arabic script to accommodate local languages, along with the neglected background of African alphabets, offered designers in post-Apartheid South Africa a number of alternative principles to those informing the Western canon. Thus, for example, as Moulaye Hassane explains, the process of using Arabic script to capture spoken African languages resulted in an inventive process of graphic hybridisation:

At first each scholar would have had his own method of transcription, and because some letters – like the ‘ayn, sad, sin, dad – did not figure in certain African languages, not all letters would have been retained. Other letters – such as g, p, mb, nd, nh, nj, c, yh – existed in the African languages but not in the Qur’anic set. It was necessary to invent them by adopting similar letters and integrating distinctive markings.

(Hassane, 2008: 114)

As a consequence, then, the process of interlinguistic transcription facilitated a ‘derangement’ of alphabetic principles, that is to say, a manner of disruption of the normal order and functioning of the Arabic script to bring about new creations.

A second legacy illustrated by Timbuktu is a commitment and reverence for calligraphy which is thematised, for example, in the text of Manuscript 776, initially written by Ahmed Baba in the sixteenth century (Figure 5). As the catalogue of the Iziko Museum of Cape Town’s exhibition on the Timbuktu Project describes it:

this work is about the virtues of scholarship. It encourages the quest for knowledge over waging war, and contains the famous lines that on the Day of Judgment, the ink of the scholars will be measured against the blood of the martyrs and found to be weightier.

(Meltzer, Hooper and Klinghardt, 2008: 64)

In addition, as the example of Manuscript 165 (Figure 6) demonstrates, the calligraphic traditions recovered by the Timbuktu Project also provide a legacy in which ornamentation and decoration can be an inextricable part of the textual.



**Figure 5.** Manuscript 776 by Ahmed Baba, sixteenth century; Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Research in Timbuktu, printed with permission from the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project.

Despite the institutional suppression of many of these alternative systems and cultures of writing in the twentieth century, their recuperation in initiatives like the Timbuktu Project has changed the terms of debate for South African typography designers. Rather than being constrained to a single narrow ‘alternative tradition’ and the consequent risks of a nostalgia for ‘authenticity’, the plurality and hybridity of



devoted to type design trends inspired by the new political order in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> *I-Jusi* achieved professional respect and popular appeal within the design community in South Africa in the late 1990s, showcasing experimental illustration and design from a wide range of artists with the explicit aim of wrestling with what a national visual trajectory might mean after the defeat of Apartheid. These initiatives positioned the magazine as the leading showcase for work that addressed issues of representation and identity. Finally, we will look at an earlier, commercially viable design by Jan Erasmus for a distinctively South African font. While the experimental fonts presented in *I-jusi* are symptomatic of the liberating effects an awareness of the alternative traditions opens up for typeface designers, Erasmus's commercial product demonstrates that a realistic alternative was available at the time that the new Seals and their lettering were being designed.

The formal rules that comprise the canon of typography propagate taxonomies which describe letters in terms of their physical appearance (serif or sans serif) or reference a particular historic genealogy (gothic, humanist, modern, etc.). In contrast, the alternative practices referred to above and reinvented in the experimental pages of *I-Jusi* embody a range of alternative epistemic trajectories. Many of these, like the syncretic tradition discussed above, incorporate an inherited system of writing in the process of creating new graphemes and script variations able to respond strategically to a specific set of social requirements. Others look outside formal writing systems entirely to generate new typefaces with recognisably South African graphemes.

The radical typographic creations displayed in the pages of *I-Jusi* are thus able to stand outside the categories of the Western typographic canon, as contributors create their own terms of engagement. Criteria that are conventionally held as important in typeface design, including readability and legibility, were rendered secondary to an unfolding political narrative that responded to the newly democratic South Africa by referencing existing letterforms from diverse uncanonical sources or new designs based on evocative visual texts.

Sheila Dörje created a hybrid script that directly comments on the epistemic genealogy of letters in the form of 'Halaal' typeface (Dörje, 2000: 16; Figure 7). In this case, the calligraphic strokes constituting the typeface are derived from Arabic script contorted into legible Roman graphemes so as to make an English reading of the words possible. Sections of the text from the specimen sheet are rendered vertically, a direct reference to East Asian reading practices. This creation is a homage to the diverse and syncretic traditions of letter crafting. But the text at the centre of the layout – 'In the beginning was the word' – ensures that it also functions as a celebration of a universal shared heritage of language. The citation of the Gospel according to St John in a font identified by the Muslim term for what it is permissible to consume draws attention to the cultural politics of the inter-textual methodology the typeface performs.

A second example of the displacement of existing typographic forms in the pursuit of a culturally significant face is 'Afro Alphabet' by Shani Ahmed, which draws on Black-owned barbershop signage and hand-made street signs (Figure 8). Afro Alphabet is a celebration of popular informal writing systems, an area of typography that was marginalised if not ignored in the formal design arena. Sean Harrison's much more sombre typeface, 'John Vorster Square', illustrates the



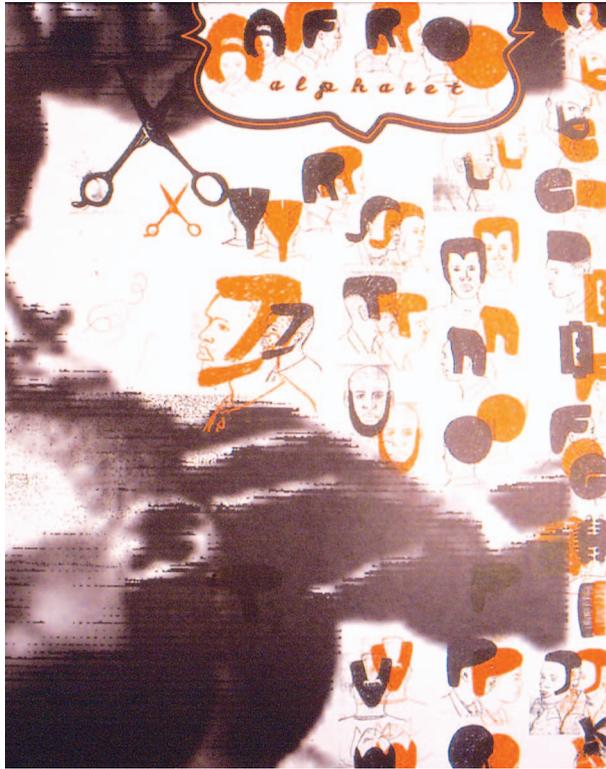
Figure 7. Sheila Dörje, 'Halaal'.

graphic sensibility of South African type ideation by referencing the traces of the headquarters of the secret services of the apartheid government (Figure 9). The typeface invokes the austere and banal environment of the buildings of the square, as well as the windows and staircases down which so many individuals who underwent interrogation allegedly fell.

These issues of *I-Jusi* stand, then, as examples in the short history of the democratic South Africa of the direct relationship between the political moment and the products it offers visually. They display a malleability in the discipline of type design beyond the ossifying effect of disciplinary canons. As Garth Walker declared in the introduction to the first issue: 'We are Africa. We are the "New South Africa". We are the Rainbow Nation. We are the future of Graphic Design. We are now free: Typographically' (Walker, 2000: 1).

### An alternative face

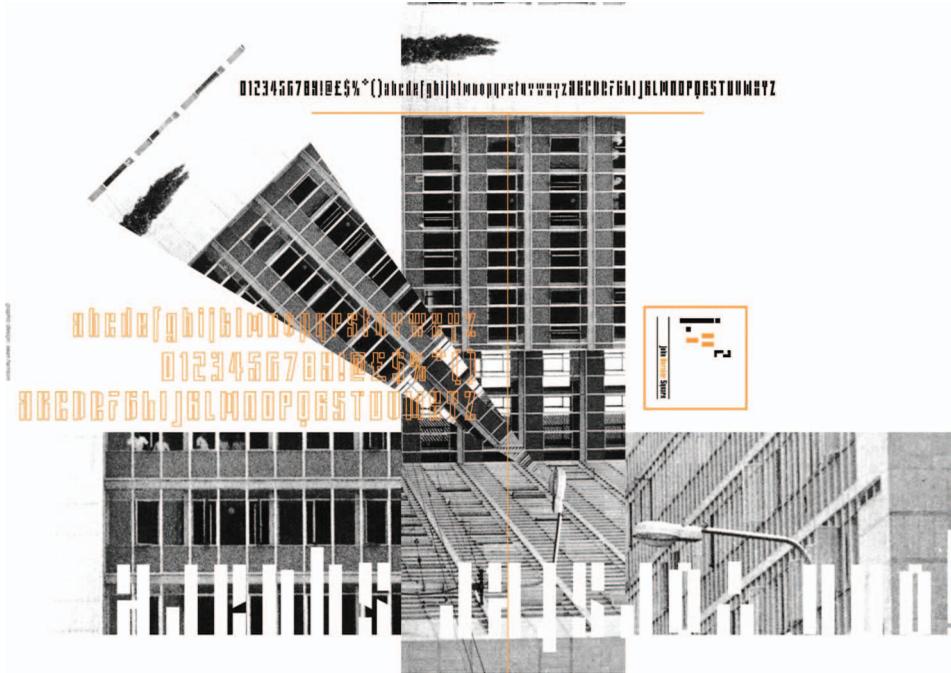
*I-Jusi*, with its issues of 2000, 2002 and 2011 all devoted to 'National Typografika', illustrates the on-going vitality and inventiveness of South African typography. However, the sort of ideas explored in the magazine are not merely aesthetic experiments without practical potential. To demonstrate this, I want to conclude this article with a discussion of a commercially successful example of a typeface which was specifically designed to address the question of the newly democratic South Africa and that actually pre-dates the *I-Jusi* designs: 'Thornface' by Jan Erasmus (Cybergraphics, n.d.).



**Figure 8.** Shani Ahmed, 'Afro Alphabet'.

Erasmus is a commercial typographer and the distributor of the catalogue of digitised Emigre fonts, itself a long-standing company that introduced many original typefaces at the dawn of the digital revolution. Erasmus's work has thus been influenced by the ideas regarding typography as both product and cultural event expressed by Emigre's innovative designers Zuzana Licko and Rudi Vanderlans (Erasmus, 2007: 48). Erasmus identified an absence in the market for a font that positioned South Africa in a geo-political context which he set out to fill with a typographic creation of his own. The Thornface family of fonts was officially released in South Africa in 1997 and accepted into the Creative Alliance 9 collection for global distribution in 1999. The face achieved a measure of critical acclaim in the international typographic press. The most important local accolade came in its selection and use for the book cover of the South African Design Centre's *Thirty Years of Design Excellence* publication in 1999 (South African Bureau of Standards Design Institute, 1999), which was used internationally to promote the best designers and locally designed products commercially available in South Africa. Erasmus has since been responsible for the typeface used by the Nando's restaurant chain and also for Menyaka, the font adopted for the World Cup hosted by South Africa in 2010.

Thornface's spikey exuberance contrasts readily with the smooth international face of the sans serif fonts mandated by the Guidelines for the South Africa brand that we discussed earlier. Its significance is visible in the way in which its characters and elements extend foundational themes of fauna and flora seen in the national coat of



**Figure 9.** Sean Harrison, 'John Vorster Square'.

arms into the rendering of a new set of legible glyphs. The return to a typography informed by the visual language of local ecology creates a trajectory that, by selecting and foregrounding a different body of indigenous animals and plants, engages their political dimension in the mind of the type user. For example, as Erasmus explains:

the partial legalisation of trade in ivory came to mind when I designed the letters A, U, and W . . . Drawing the letter E reminded me of the problems we have with rhino slaying for their horns. Depending on which thorny issue you address with the face, I want it to amplify that issue through its implied meaning.

(Erasmus, 2007: 71)

If the letter E offers a telling alternative to the elephant tusks of the coat of arms, the set of additional ligatures and symbols (Figure 11) includes a strident political alternative to the latter's use of the secretary bird:

Fiscal Shrikes, also known as Jacky Hangman birds (and apparently used for 'green' pest control) find thorns useful as storage places for bugs, which they eat in times of drought. This was the inspiration for the alternative exclamation mark.

(Erasmus, 2007: 68)

Similarly, in contrast to the citrus fruits of the 1910 coat of arms and the ears of wheat in the current design, Erasmus's thorns invoke an alternative and highly specific vision

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQR  
 STUVWXYZABCDEFGHIJKL  
 MNOPQRSTUVWXYZ01234  
 56789¾¼½!-!#&'()\*+,-./  
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**Figure 10.** Commercial typographic specimen sheet of Thornface typeface, reproduced by permission of Jan Erasmus.



**Figure 11.** First digital drawing of Thornface typeface printed on paper, reproduced by permission of Jan Erasmus.

of the African landscape, inscribing the succulents from the Karoo desert region in South Africa across his letter forms: ‘The semi-serif finish is based on what a thorn looks like when you pull it off a branch and a little bark remains’ (Erasmus, 2007: 71).

In sum, the diacritics, letters, ligatures, numerals and punctuation marks that comprise Thornface exploit the limits of a conventional display face of Roman proportions without compromising legibility – indeed, by giving it an added dimension. The letters become images, the thorns detaining the eye as something to be engaged and considered afresh as textual objects. Thornface, when used as a series of consecutive letters, offers a reading greater than the sum of its parts. As a textual form that is designed to link a specific *visualisation* to the rendering of a verbal language, the typeface reintroduces cultural specificity into text as a symbolic expression of identity. Thornface thus aligns with the stated objectives of the national branding of South Africa, in stark contrast to fonts like Gill Sans and Arial that have transparency as their ideal.

## Conclusion

The unresolved question of South Africa's 'national face' is forced into a sharp light by the use of Gill Sans and Arial as the official typefaces for the Great Seals of the Republic. These visual symbols are obliged to perform a culturally explicit role as part of international communication protocol and yet their ubiquity and pretended transparency are at odds with official claims about the need for a visual identity that conveys the distinctiveness of the nation's identity. The typefaces of *I-Jusi* magazine and the innovative work of Jan Erasmus embody alternative ways of thinking about the role of type in the national branding of South Africa. The faces I have referred to embrace the inspirational heritage of various African alphabets and their shared *ajami* calligraphic traditions in constituting letters through creative agency and typographic syncretism that directly reference aspects of South Africa, its ecology and its society. It is therefore a disappointment that the state should have preferred the blandness of international corporate typefaces rather than employ Erasmus's Thornface, expressive as the latter is of an ideation focused on creating a cultural specificity within the physical and conceptual space of the typeface.

## Notes

- 1 A revision of the initial coat of arms was proposed by the British government in 1911. A technical objection was raised, as it was felt that the inclusion of all four elements on a single shield and not as four separate shields undermined the idea of the four separate provinces. As a result, no change was made to the original arms (see Berry, 2008).
- 2 For an in-depth discussion on the genocide of the Khoi San see Adhikari (2010).
- 3 The first conference on African orthographies was held in London in 1854 by the Christian Missionary Society (see Pasch, 2012: 75).
- 4 Pasch (2012) provides a survey of these scripts; for an in-depth study, see Mafundikwa (2004).
- 5 *I-jusi*, Issue 11 was edited by Garth Walker (2000). The fonts from this issue discussed below can be viewed at <<http://media.withtank.com/400bff48bf/ijusi11.pdf>>.

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