

The blood-sucker bird: A woven narrative of exploitation and dependency

> **Philippa Hobbs**

Postdoctoral research fellow with the South African Research Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture at the University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa.

phobbs@uj.ac.za (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0797-9533>)

Abstract

One of the most renowned tapestry ventures in South Africa is the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift, initiated in 1963. Less well-known is the subsequent centre started by its Swedish founders, Ulla and Peder Gowenius, in neighbouring Lesotho. Thabana li Mele, as this initiative was called, opened in 1968, and within two years, 200 villagers wove a range of textiles, including pictorial tapestries. However, this thriving operation would be short-lived, forced to close in 1970, by an ally of white South Africa, Lesotho's Leabua Jonathan regime. Apartheid-era writings have offered limiting representations of these events, and Thabana li Mele's weavers and their works are now all but forgotten. As the author shows, *The blood-sucker bird* (1969), a tapestry from this centre on which some material has survived, suggests that Thabana li Mele was destined to be more than just a poverty-alleviation initiative. Woven by an unknown woman, this bold artwork articulates Lesotho's subaltern status as a land-locked labour reserve for South Africa's mines. Reminiscent of oral art forms, its symbolic language interrogates the hegemonies that engineered the lives of Basotho communities forced into migrancy and economic dependency on South Africa. The tapestry also yields insight into the creative agency of a marginalised community.

Published by



Keywords: Weaving, tapestry, apartheid, Thabana li Mele, Lesotho, migrancy.

Original Research

Themed section on Material narratives: Public and private histories in cloth

Introduction

During The Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift (Figure 1), was initiated in KwaZulu-Natal in 1963 by two Swedish art graduates, Ulla and Peder Gowenius, who established an ambitious tapestry-weaving¹ workshop at this remote rural hamlet (Figure 2). Intended as a means of funding their other training courses at the centre, this would become an income-generator and creative outlet for local isiZulu-speaking women (and a few men) who worked at the looms. Within four years, the impact of this tapestry-weaving venture would be felt at other centres in Southern Africa.²

One of these was Thabana li Mele,³ Rorke's Drift's little-known sister initiative in Lesotho (Figure 3). Founded by the Goweniuses in 1968, it aimed to provide a subsistence for destitute communities in this landlocked, peripheral country, where poverty compelled nearly 30 per cent of its men to work on the mines in neighbouring South Africa. Similarly, increasing numbers of women left their children in search of illegal work as menial labourers on white-owned farms (Bardill & Cobbe 1985:105). But Thabana li Mele's success would be short-lived. It was abruptly closed as a result of the *Qomatsi*, or State of Emergency, following Chief Leabua Jonathan's seizure of power in 1970. In the meanwhile, a figurative tapestry made at the centre, *The blood-sucker bird* (1969), was sent to Sweden for public display (Figure 4). This all but forgotten work, which I argue is loaded with political inference, is the focus of my study.⁴

Evolutionist and evasive readings

Representations of Lesotho, or 'The Mountain Kingdom' as the popular media puts it, tend to portray its weaving industry in picturesque terms. Little has been written on the post-independence political context in which it was fostered. As Leroy Vail and Landeg White (cited by Coplan 1987:414) point out in the context of labour and consciousness studies, it is the human specificity of communities that is so often disregarded in historical formulations. Although the broader historical events of the 1970 Lesotho coup are well-travelled terrain by political writers, none appear to have considered Thabana li Mele's involvement in them. This community venture is largely unremarked in social and political writings, other than a reference in Gabriele Winai-Ström (1986:149) and a brief outline by Colin Murray (1981:38).

Those who wrote about Thabana li Mele's tapestries mostly suppressed any meaningful representation of the centre and the work of its artists. In her dissertation on weaving on the sub-continent, apartheid-era historian, Maria van der Walt (1979:225), skirts around the uncomfortable events in which the South African government was complicit, stating



FIGURE **Nº 1**



View of the Mission at Rorke's Drift from Shiyane Hill, c.1966. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of PGCAA.

rather evasively that Peder Gowenius was deported from Lesotho 'for political reasons'. The writer explains figurative tapestries made by rural black women in Southern Africa as the outcome of non-logical thinking (Van der Walt 1979:93). In support of this claim, she cites the ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's theory of two human mindsets, a primitive form and a modern form, advanced in his book, *Primitive mentality*, in 1922. However, such perspectives on tapestry art by black women were not limited to white supremacist readings. Even in socialist Sweden, Bengt Olvång, who was a vociferous art critic known for his anti-colonial views, nevertheless characterised tapestries at Rorke's Drift and Thabana li Mele as the products of naïve thought processes. Discussing these works in remarkably similar terms to Van der Walt in '*Kulturbilder från skilda länder och miljöer*' (Cultural images from various countries and environments), in *Aftonbladet* on 23 April 1970, Olvång collectivised them as a 'true-heartedly naïve' reflection of the 'ignorant and oblivious children' who made them.

Nor did Swedish and South African readings accord significant creative agency to the men, and later women, who sat at Thabana's looms. Names of weavers and other workers, such as Ntja, Frances, Anna and Lebaka, surface only in Peder Gowenius's



FIGURE **Nº 2**

Ulla and Peder Gowenius. Unknown photographer. Reproduction in 'Afrikanska visioner i färg'. Unidentified newspaper clipping, c.1966. Courtesy of PGCAA. Article in the public domain.

writings, and even so they are mostly identified by their first names (Figure 5). About the only published source on Thabana li Mele and its works is Gowenius's 2006 memoirs.⁵ However, as this is written in Swedish, a valuable dimension of Southern African cultural history remains inaccessible to art historians in Southern Africa. The few surviving photographs of the centre's pictorial tapestries are in Swedish media of the day and Gowenius's personal photographic archive⁶ (Figure 6). None of these woven works seem to have been acquired by public collections, as was the case with tapestries from Rorke's Drift.⁷



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Thabana li Mele in the late 1960s, with the twin-peaked mountain from which it took its name in the distance. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.

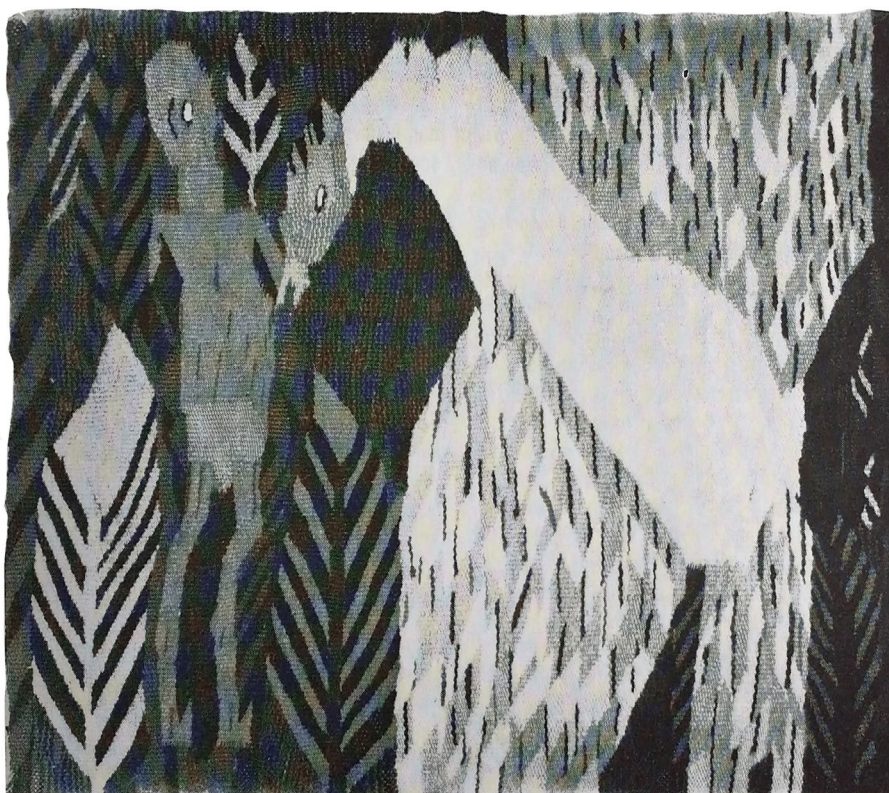


FIGURE **Nº 4**



Artist unknown, 1969. *The bloodsucker bird*. Mohair tapestry (whereabouts unknown). 86 x 122cm. Photograph taken from Made in Africa exhibition catalogue, National Museum, Sweden, 1970. Photo: Christina French.



FIGURE **Nº 5**



Community at Thabana li Mele, late 1960s. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.



FIGURE **Nº 6**



Tapestry weavers at vertical looms, 1969. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.

In uncovering a backstory of the Thabana li Mele weaving initiative from interviews, unpublished documents, Swedish reviews and Peder Gowenius's memoirs, I show that, by taking cognisance of voices "from below",⁸ events ordinarily held to be obscure may be uncovered. As this new reading also demonstrates, this venture, and Lesotho's loom-weaving industry generally, can be more fully understood in the context of the country's political economy and its social effects. More particularly, I argue that *The blood-sucker bird* drew on bodies of shared knowledge of verbal art forms in order to interrogate Lesotho's institutionalised dependency on apartheid South Africa and the human exploitation it resulted in.

Expanding the reach of Rorke's Drift weaving

Given Rorke's Drift's acclaim, it was inevitable that its founding committee back in Sweden, Svenska kommittén för stöd åt afrikanskt konsthantverk (Swedish Committee for the Support of African Art and Craft), should attempt to duplicate its achievements elsewhere. Rorke's Drift had already extended its operations by setting up some regional district workshops at Appelsbosch and Amoibe, for example. Once the centre's reputation grew in Swedish and United Nations development circles, independent Swedish ventures became more ambitious and some staff and graduates from Rorke's Drift went to work at them. Thabana li Mele was made possible after Lesotho's formal independence from Britain in 1966, when the small country qualified for support from the United Nations Development Fund and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the latter having been established in 1965 to facilitate Sweden's philanthropic commitment to newly-independent countries.⁹ SIDA's support to Lesotho aimed to help the country retain its political and economic independence from South Africa.

The plan to establish a poverty-alleviation project involving weaving developed from a visit by a Lesotho-based couple, Paul and Margaret Devitt, to Rorke's Drift in late 1966. Margaret and her friend Linnea Lowes, wife of Peter Lowes, the newly-appointed Deputy Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme, had recently opened Thabong, a weaving workshop in Masianokeng, the latter having gone from house to house raising money (Lowes 1967). The venture aimed to provide opportunities for Basotho women who had received weaving training at a weavery at Teyateyaneng but lacked resources (Devitt 2019).¹⁰ When the Devitts experienced technical challenges, they and the Lowes took a short training course at Rorke's Drift in late 1966, after which Peder Gowenius offered to help them for six months in Lesotho (Lowes 1967). But in the event, the Goweniuses decided on a more permanent move. Some months earlier, Special Branch police had paid Rorke's Drift another of their unwelcome visits, Peder having already been trailed and even abducted on other occasions. Tired of harassment

by apartheid police and the social constraints of a Lutheran mission, where they had to conform to life as a “missionary” couple, they hoped to apply their pedagogic learnings in what they believed would be an independent environment (Gowenius 1967).¹¹

Follow-up discussions with Paul Devitt envisaged a more ambitious centre; under the aegis of the Village Industries Development Organisation (VIDO), a state-owned association for co-operatives and other enterprises Paul had established under Lesotho’s Ministry of Economic Development (Devitt 2019). After he and Peder successfully applied to SIDA for R107,850 in funding,¹² the Goweniuses’ official employer, the Church of Sweden Mission (CSM), agreed to second them to the new project. The couple’s salaries would be financed by SIDA, but paid out through the CSM. In turn, the Lesotho government granted land for the new centre, 50 kilometres south east of Maseru, below twin mountain peaks known as Thabana li Mele, after which the centre would be named. The valley below was fertile, and the two rivers that converged nearby flowed continuously (Figure 7). Less auspicious, as later events would reveal, was that Lesotho’s Minister of Justice, Benedict Letsetedi, resided at Chere village nearby.



FIGURE N° 7



Blanket woven at Thabana li Mele with Masiza Gowenius in the foreground, and a view of the river valley beyond, late 1960s. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of PGCAA.



FIGURE **Nº 8**



Thabana li Mele's modernist buildings designed by Hans Hallen, captured by Peder Gowenius's camera in the late 1960s. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.

Building commenced in September 1967, and by year's end the Goweniuses' living quarters and a weaving room were complete. Soon after their arrival in January 1968, Peder wrote that,

[w]e are at seven thousand feet and a little more. We are so far away that one can still hear God breathing and possibly, we hope, the beginning of man can come close. Maybe far enough back and far [enough] away to see where it all went crazy ... (Gowenius 1968) (Figure 8).

Despite his inspiring description, this was an impoverished region with few employment opportunities, apart from missions and some small stores. People's lives were complicated by extremes of temperature and poor agricultural conditions. Once a plentiful granary that exported surplus foodstuffs to South African mines in the late-nineteenth century, Lesotho could no longer feed itself. Basotho people lost over half their arable land following conflicts with Boer whites in the 1860s, and in 1868 King Moshoeshe I sought British annexation as a means of protection. However, with the Land Act of 1913, thousands of Basotho sharecroppers from the Orange Free State, now landless at a stroke and facing cattle losses or alternatively serfdom on white farms, were forced to migrate elsewhere. The resulting influx to Lesotho resulted in overgrazing, erosion and overcrowding, compounded by drought and rinderpest (Bardill & Cobbe 1985:28). As this small country's shrinking territorial base proved unsustainable, so its economic survival depended on the export of its male workforce, and labour migration to South African mines grew accordingly.¹³ With wool and mohair being the only other consistent exports, Lesotho was effectively a labour reserve structurally and economically dependent on its neighbour, ranking as one of the world's most dependent of independent states. Although it appeared to offer the Goweniuses an escape from the apartheid regime, this small enclave country was hardly free of its influence.

Lesotho's formal independence from Britain had also unlocked economic opportunities for South African capital. Around the end of 1966, a wealthy industrialist, Anton Rupert, who had been nominated by the South African government to establish the Lesotho National Development Corporation (LNDC), asked the Goweniuses how to set up a weavery in Lesotho (Gowenius 1967). Rupert did not intend Rorke's Drift's left-wing staff to actually manage the venture, nor were the Goweniuses likely to have worked for an organisation backed by apartheid interests. Instead, the LNDC recruited a Swiss weaver, Vreni Schmidli, for the job (Van der Walt 1979:189).¹⁴ However, this development alerted the Swedes to the prospect of South African monopolisation of Lesotho's cultural industries, and the need to establish their envisaged venture as quickly as possible (Gowenius 1967). In early July, Peder informed SIDA's Southern African representative, Thord Palmlund, that they were racing to prepare, for fear that new weaveries could open up 'in their shadow', as he put it, and undercut them by using cheap black labour

(Gowenius 1967/07/02). Perhaps they were also aware that the LNDC enjoyed various advantages, such as access to South African capital and tax concessions (Leys 1974:3).

In early January 1968, the Goweniuses and their young child moved into their living quarters and recruitment and training started within days. At first, they spun and dyed mohair bought directly from local farmers of angora goats, but it proved more cost effective to re-import ready-washed and carded material from Port Elizabeth (Figure 9). This, in turn, enabled them to pay higher salaries. Within the first six months of operations, the spinning and weaving workshops had employed nearly 40 people from the surrounding villages (Gowenius 2002:2) (Figure 10). By October 1968, two further groups had been recruited and their training period reduced from three to two months, as the original intake helped Ulla Gowenius to teach them. By June 1969, over 100 villagers had been trained (Bonnier 1969). As had been the case at Rorke's Drift, Ulla managed the technical aspects of the work and Peder the design development.

The yarn was spun at different thicknesses, from which local women and men produced blankets, carpets, bedspreads and lengths of cloth (Figures 11a-c). A clothing workshop was introduced by a Swedish arrival, Birgitta Karlsson, in September 1968. It turned out ponchos, jackets and trousers from the woven cloth (Gowenius 2002:8) (Figure 12). Karlsson and her husband, Owe Thorsén, who were graduates in ceramics at Konstfack in Stockholm where the Goweniuses had studied, also built a kiln and wheels for throwing. A local man, Anthony Sello, was taken on as a book keeper and translator. Within a year, the workshops were self-financing, despite a high degree of experimentation (Gowenius 2002:9). Chief among the Gowenius's objectives was to counter poverty in mountain villages by increasing employment, developing crafts, facilitating access to markets, and helping groups establish workshops in their villages, according to the centre's brochure in the late 1960s as seen in Figures 13a and 13b (Thabana li Mele Art Craft Centre: late 1960s). The weavery also targeted men, hoping to incentivise them to stay with their families, rather than go to the mines (Figure 14).

Within two years, the centre had established six further village co-operatives: two for spinning yarn, one for dyeing it, and the others for crocheting various products with it. Women in some villages were reportedly spinning to collect money to buy a loom (Bonnier 1969). New ideas were sought for saleable products that remote village co-operatives could make, such as balaclavas, mittens and socks. Each member contributed a small deposit for the purchase of raw material, or else bought it with a loan (Gowenius 2002:11). By paying more than a migrant labourer's wage, the Goweniuses hoped to provide a viable alternative for their members – although they dared not pay too much at first because of competition on the Swedish market from products made in other poor countries (Gowenius 2002:11). A co-operative market garden and a chicken farm were



FIGURE **Nº 9**



View of a workshop with hand-spun and dyed wool skeins, late 1960s. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.



FIGURE **Nº 10**



Women at a village workshop, late 1960s. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.



FIGURE **Nº 11a**



Blanket, late 1960s. Ingrid Berglund collection. Photo: Philippa Hobbs.



FIGURE **Nº 11b**



Bedsread, late 1960s. Whereabouts unknown. Courtesy of PGCAA. Photo: Peder Gowenius.



FIGURE **Nº 11c**



Bedsread, late 1960s. Peder Gowenius collection. Photo: Philippa Hobbs.



FIGURE **Nº 12**



Making woven sections into various products, late 1960s. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.

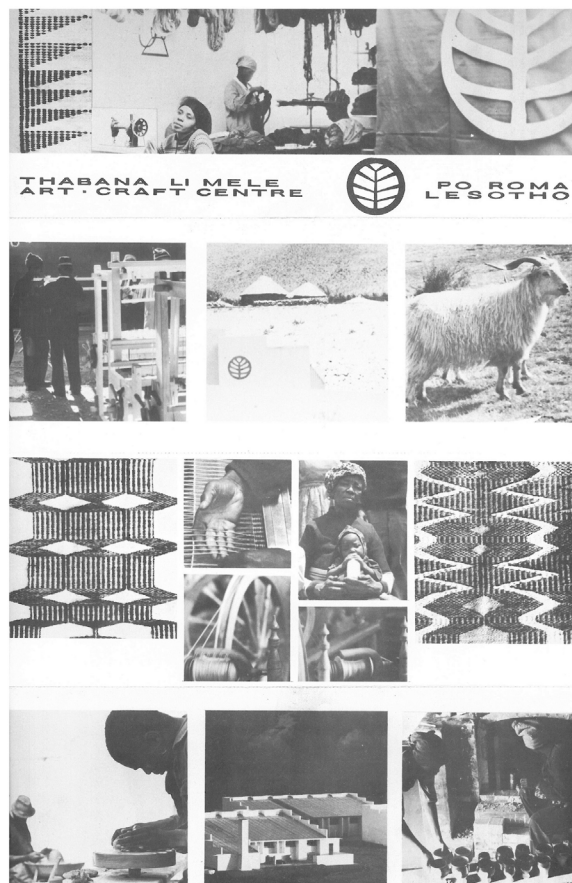


FIGURE **N° 13a**

Front face of the centre's brochure, late 1960s. Photo courtesy of PGCAA.

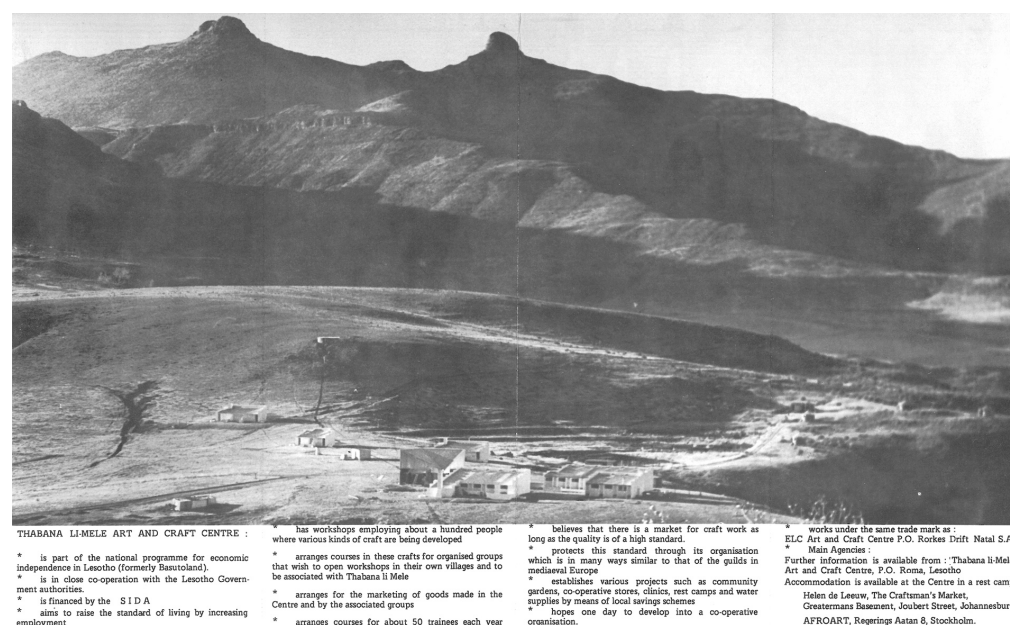


FIGURE **N° 13b**

Back face of the centre's brochure, late 1960s. Photo courtesy of PGCAA.



FIGURE **Nº 14**



Unidentified man weaving a tapestry on an upright loom. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.

also initiated (Figure 15). A *Daily News* reporter announced in ‘Swedish style weaving’ on 22 March 1969, that a company had placed an order for everything the centre could make over the next year (Figure 16). By early 1970, Thabana li Mele was Lesotho’s biggest employer (after the government),¹⁵ with 248 people in eight workshops (Gowenius 2017). Their livelihoods were secured by a contract with a French firm to supply woven products for ten years. Visiting Swedes, Anneli Forsman and Bengt Arne Runnerström, took over the publicity for both Thabana li Mele and Rorke’s Drift, and a joint course was mooted for May 1970, designed to attract Scandinavian interest in their works. Joint initiatives were planned for the marketing and expansion of opportunities, such as fine art and tourism (Minutes of the Art and Craft Centre Board Meeting 1969). The centre held at least one exhibition in South Africa, at the Natal Society of Arts Gallery in Durban. By now, Thabana li Mele could afford to sell blankets to local buyers at cost, and in due course the Goweniuses would request a lower salary, commensurate with the earnings of their local assistants and paid from the project earnings (instead of from Sweden), for the sake of greater social parity between them and the members (Gowenius [sa]).

Given its promise of sustainability, it was hoped that the centre would serve as a development model when the time came to combine all Lesotho’s craft businesses under one management, thus positively influencing other weaveries whose taste was ‘too bad



FIGURE **Nº 15**



Ulla Gowenius with members of the village co-operative at Thabana li Mele, c.1967. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.



FIGURE N^o 16



'Swedish style weaving', *Daily News*, 22 March 1969. Article in the public domain.

to build a sustainable future' (Bonnier 1969). This comment by the Swedish Committee's Jytte Bonnier was probably a reference to the quaint scenes of village life produced at weaveries such as Setsoto Design Gallery (Figure 17); or to Rupert's Royal Lesotho Tapestry Weavers (RLTW). Once the latter project was up and running in 1969, women at RLTW wove up Schmidli's photographs of cave paintings, 'Zulu love letter' motifs, historical scenes, and *litema* designs inspired by wall murals of village homes (see 'Royal Lesotho Tapestry Weavers hand-woven signed mohair rug geometric design' 2020). RLTW would also weave facsimiles of works by European artists, such as Alexander Calder, which they produced in editions of 50 each (see 'Royal Lesotho Tapestry Weavers, Alexander Calder' 2020). This high-profile project was the outcome of Rupert's connection, through his Peter Stuyvesant Foundation, with Dr. Willem Sandberg, former director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Van der Walt 1979:195).



FIGURE **N° 17**



Tapestry from Setsoto Design Gallery, Lesotho, 1970s. Private collection. Photo: Philippa Hobbs.

Ntja's 'new age' blanket

Thabana li Mele's trainees started out by weaving mohair blankets for the European market; many loosely worked in vivid oranges, pinks and reds, and decorated with repeat motifs. Others were reminiscent of the animal-skin karosses people once wore, their mohair "pulled" with carding brushes on one face, the teased-out fibres providing extra warmth (Figures 18a & b). Woven by a man remembered as Ntja, the centre's very first blanket was also the first ever woven in Lesotho, Peder believed (Gowenius 2002:6) (Figure 19). At the time, almost all local people wore imported "Basotho blankets" (or *seana marena*), fastened at the shoulder with a safety pin (Figure 20). King Moshoeshoe I is said to have arranged for their importation after he was presented with a blanket by Donald Fraser, son of a Scottish wool merchant. In 1877 the Frasers formed a company at Liphiring to import these decorative blankets and other products into Lesotho. Thereafter, together with other white traders, they set about blocking the extension of trading licences to Africans (Maliehe 2015:59). Despite the expediency of their *modus operandi*, Fraser's blankets would be popularly adopted as Basotho cultural symbols and markers of ceremonial events.

One might have expected Ntja's design to emulate these familiar imported motifs, but he chose to invent a personal visual language, expressing himself in colour and shape with assurance as he laid the weft strands into the warp; the teachers did not discuss visual possibilities with him before he started out either. As Gowenius (2002:5-6) puts it, Ntja explained his symbolic imagery 'as if it was the most natural thing in the world', revealing an abstract visual language that articulated the hopes of local villagers whose economic aspirations were yet to be realised,

The square shapes are the women of Lesotho and the triangular ones are the men. Pink is the colour of peach blossom in the spring, and spring stands for a new age. The black is the past, the colour of burnt fields, and represents humanity. What the blanket says is that the women and men of Lesotho are on their way into a new age (Gowenius 2002:5)

He also recalls that Ntja associated the colour red with 'the changes', or revolution (Gowenius 2017). In his search for a design precedent that Ntja might have appropriated, he eventually came across similar visual motifs at the South African Museum, on a basket woven in Lesotho in early-twentieth century (Gowenius 2002:6). This suggested that Ntja's abstract motifs could have been informed by longstanding symbols invested with inference.

In drawing out design ideas from weavers, Peder worked from the premise that artistic quality cannot be pressed upon people, but needed to evolve from personal cultural



FIGURE **Nº 18a**



Weaver unknown. Blanket with 'pulled' mohair surface resembling an early local kaross, late 1960s. Collection unknown. 205 x150 cm. Images reproduced by permission of © Copyright Stockholms Auktionsverk (<http://online.auktionsverket.se/1905/641988-matta-lesotho/>).

experience. However, conventions also needed to be challenged with new ideas to be creative. There is no doubt that he had in mind the pivotal tapestries that had helped consolidate his teaching methodology at Rorke's Drift. Some of these had explored symbolic images, referencing shared oral knowledge to interrogate imbalances in social and political power relationships. One such tapestry was *The hungry lion* (c.1966) by Elizabeth Mdluli and Rose Xaba, a work of pedagogic significance, in which the image of a devouring beast signified apartheid greed (Figure 21).¹⁶



FIGURE **Nº 18b**



Weaver unknown. Blanket with 'pulled' mohair surface resembling an early local kaross, late 1960s. Collection unknown. 205 x 150 cm. Images reproduced by permission of © Copyright Stockholms Auktionsverk (<http://online.auktionsverket.se/1905/641989-matta-lesotho/>).

Signifiers of greed and conquest

From around June 1969, a number of figurative tapestries were made on the upright looms at Thabana li Mele, using an improvisational *modus operandi* reminiscent of both Ntja's approach and the improvisational "free weaving" convention at Rorke's Drift (Figure 22). As was the case at the latter centre, the figurative tapestries were regarded as unique images and therefore not repeated. One of them, *The blood-sucker bird*, depicts a giant white raptor devouring a frail black figure. Visualised as an inversion of the actual scale relationship between human and raptor, the enormity of its greed and the vulnerability of its human prey is suggested. As the brutal act fills the work, displacing almost all else,



FIGURE **Nº 19**



'Ntja'. (1968) Hand-woven blanket. Size and whereabouts unknown. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.

the setting of the slaughter is indeterminate of time and place. Although the whereabouts of this provocative tapestry are now unknown, the weaver's intentions have survived – at least in part – in Swedish writings of the day. It attracted considerable media attention when it was shown on the Made in Africa exhibition at the National Museum in Stockholm in April 1970. Reviewers such as "KW" (probably Katja Waldén) in the design journal, *Form*, revealed that the bloated bird represented apartheid South Africa sucking the blood out of its neighbour (KW 1970:181). Another writer, Gösta Fridemar, drew attention to the anger this transgressive image conveyed, observing that *The blood-sucker bird* was a 'reflection of the mood of coloured people towards the white dictatorship' in '*Äkta afrikansk konst genom svenskt initiativ*' (Genuine African art through Swedish initiative),



FIGURE **N° 20**



Women and men wearing 'Basotho blankets' at Thabana li Mele, late 1960s. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of Peder Gowenius.



FIGURE **N° 21**



Elizabeth Mdluli and Rose Xaba. *The Hungry Lion* (c.1964) Tapestry. 135 x 332 cm. Whereabouts unknown, Sweden. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of PGCAA.



FIGURE **N° 22**



View of tapestry artists at work improvising designs on upright looms at Thabana li Mele (1969). Whereas horizontal looms were used to weave lengths of cloth and blankets, upright looms were used for tapestry. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of the PGCAA.



FIGURE **Nº 23**

Clipping from a newspaper review, 'Konst från Afrika' (Art from Africa), in *Uppsala* (sic) *Nya Tidning*, 14 May 1970. Article in the public domain.

Folkbladet Östgöten, on 27 April 1970. According to Alf Liedholm in 'Konst från Afrika' (Art from Africa) in *Uppsala* (sic) *Nya Tidning* on 14 May 1970, the white shades of the woven bird were achieved by alternating different textures in the weaving process (Figure 23).¹⁷ Ironically, by fashioning the gormandising raptor as a conqueror in embellished garb, the enormity of apartheid may seem as much eulogised as interrogated.

Like the iconic *The hungry lion*, *The blood-sucker bird* is a "swallowing" image informed by a body of shared oral knowledge. References to birds of prey, especially eagles and vultures, appear regularly in the metaphorical languages of Sesotho performance practices. As Daniel Kunene (1971:114) pointed out in *Heroic poetry of the Basotho* at the time, white power was often expressed in laudatory praises, or *lithoko*, by the wings of a giant bird sometimes referred to as a 'carrion lover'. Similarly, poetic 'eulogues', as he called the associative references in *lithoko*, describe legendary warriors, such as Chief Maama Letsie, as vultures, conferring the name 'devourer' on them (Kunene 1971:15).

Signifiers of greed and conquest have also been associated with the experience of working on the mines, in which concepts such as devouring or swallowing suggest containment or imprisonment (Kunene 1971:103). Such narratives appear in *lifela*,¹⁸ popular Sesotho word-music chanted in the first-person singular, articulating the identities and experiences of migrant workers. Their allusions to cannibalism often referenced the bloody chaos of military conflict and the voracious 'bloodsuckers who await the [illegal] migrant in South Africa' (Coplan 1989:7). Also implicated in *lifela* is the collaborative relationship between mining houses, the South African government and Lesotho's bureaucracy. David Coplan (1987:415-416) cites a poem referencing the oxen given to

Jonathan by his South African counterpart, Hendrik Verwoerd. When those on the way to the mines see trucks of cattle railed in the opposite direction, they realise they are victims of an exploitative exchange.

Such events increased the unpopularity of the ruling Basotho National Party (BNP), which was widely considered a “white” organisation and proxy for the apartheid government. Conceived and funded by South African and western powers as a ‘friendly’ party in the 1950s, it depended on the resources of South Africa, the Frasers, the Catholic Church, West Germany, Israel and the Adenauer Foundation. Verwoerd presented Jonathan with further gifts, such as 100,000 bags of grain to distribute at his discretion before the 1965 election (Khaketla 1972:119-120). The regime funded Lesotho’s Mobile Police Unit (PMU) and a police-dog unit. In turn, the BNP government appointed white South Africans in key positions in Lesotho. Wealthy industrialist, Anton Rupert, became Jonathan’s economic advisor and Wynand van Graan, who oversaw Royal Lesotho Tapestry Weavers from 1967, his advisor on industrial development (Khaketla 1972:120).

The opposition, Basotho Congress Party (BCP), enjoyed a less lucrative support base, comprising teachers, civil servants, wage labourers and the unemployed. Party leader Ntsu Mokhehle opposed the large-scale exploitation of water and diamond resources that benefitted South African mining monopolies, as had been the strategy of the colonial government and subsequently the BNP. At the time *The blood-sucker bird* was woven, there was a nationwide boycott of the BNP. Officially Thabana li Mele was non-aligned, as prescribed by its Swedish funders (Gowenius 2002:11). Nevertheless, the centre’s development objectives were congruent with those of the BCP, which urged small-scale, labour-intensive projects that met the needs of communities.

As an unprecedented source of employment, Thabana li Mele inevitably became a focus of local party politics. Minister Letsetedi tried to coerce the Swedes into hiring BNP supporters, demanding the dismissal of 22 members of the BCP who, he claimed, were ‘dangerous criminals’ plotting to burn down the centre (Gowenius 2002:21). When his wife, who was also employed at the centre, became a disruptive influence there, Peder outlawed political activity in the workshops. Letsetedi repeatedly drove past in a loudspeaker van, promising to give all the centre’s jobs to those who voted for him in the next election. This, he announced, was his role as Minister of Justice. However, the man was generally disliked and whenever he drove through a village people would disappear indoors.

Qomatsi

When voting took place on 27 January 1970, the BNP anticipated another victory, and before all the results were in, Jonathan declared the election peaceful and fair, despite

many reports of registration irregularities and ballot rigging. Thabana li Mele's staff saw Minister Letsetedi's drunken security guards using machine guns to prevent BCP officials from checking on the ballot boxes, which were taken to his house overnight. The next morning people awoke to see the valley below littered with discarded ballot papers (Gowenius 2002:23). Subsequent election results nevertheless showed a dramatic swing to the opposition. Before the outcome was formally announced, two hardline BNP ministers and Fred Roach, a former British army officer and now Officer Commanding of the PMU, persuaded Jonathan to annul the results and declare a State of Emergency (Khaketla 1972:212). Many BCP leaders were subsequently detained without trial. It is generally believed that this coup was orchestrated by Roach on the orders of his paymasters, the notorious South African Bureau of State Security, or BOSS.¹⁹

Some days prior to this, Roach had also informed Peder that he would be expelled from Lesotho within the week (Gowenius 2002:25). The officer had a grudge against the Swede for having complained to Jonathan about his treatment of a Swedish weaver, Sassa Sandberg. VIDO had hired her to help local crafters adapt their products to the market at the Basotho Hat in Maseru (Svenson 1967; Devitt 2019). She had also helped set up a weaving workshop next door to it. Roach had informed her that she would be expelled from Lesotho for failing to produce a work permit, but that night he tried to force his way into her quarters at Thabana li Mele and seduce her. She managed to shut the door on him and escape out a window. Jonathan had reprimanded Roach about this incident in front of Peder (Gowenius 2002:25-26).

The PMU, together with the BNP's so-called "youth brigade", embarked on a course of wanton brutality, rounding up and torturing BCP sympathisers (Khaketla 1972:281). Even though Letsetedi's wife was employed at Thabana li Mele, he repeatedly broadcasted his intention to tie Peder up and 'personally slaughter him like a pig' (Gowenius 2002:24). The PMU twice tried to arrest Peder, and on one occasion the weavers formed a living wall around him. One weaver spat at a policeman, whereupon she was stabbed on the spot, apparently to death (Gowenius 2018). Deciding he was unable to work for an illegal regime, Peder resolved to leave Lesotho as soon as he could hand the centre over to two local assistants. In the meanwhile, he sent his family and other Swedish teachers to Rorke's Drift. That night the BCP decided to guard the centre to prevent BNP supporters from destroying it and subsequently blaming them for it. Anticipating an armed attack, he and some BCP villagers prepared to defend themselves with sticks and a few guns belonging to his friends (Gowenius 2002:24).

Eventually, the Swedish Bishop, Helge Fosseus, persuaded him to leave Lesotho, and his deportation to South Africa was reported in an article titled 'Lesotho expels mission worker' in the *Argus* on 14 February 1970. But he would be no safer over the border.

Once in Johannesburg, he was picked up by security police and taken to Special Branch headquarters at John Vorster Square for interrogation, where he was threatened with torture if he did not ‘talk’ and the prospect of his body being driven over by a truck afterwards. He was finally returned to Sweden, where his disappearance had made headline news. But the presence of South African agents would be felt even in his home country. A letter from Lesotho’s King Moshoeshoe II in exile sent that July reveals that the information on PMU atrocities Peder had tried to forward him was intercepted on more than one occasion (Moshoeshoe II 1970).²⁰

In the meanwhile, SIDA petitioned the Lesotho authorities to grant Peder a few weeks to hand over the management of Thabana li Mele, but this was declined (Losell 1970:16). During the coming months, Anthony Sello and others at the centre would be assaulted. It was later reported in the Swedish press that the woman who had woven *The blood-sucker bird*, whose meanings were readily understood, was punished with flogging and imprisonment (*Svenskar invävd i Afrika* 1970).²¹ When the tapestry was exhibited at the National Museum in Stockholm that April, Peder showed footage of Thabana li Mele, informing the audience that ‘everything you see is no longer there. Sixty-two people have been arrested and two beaten to death. Our spinning wheels and looms were considered politically dangerous’ (Wikblom 1970).

The fortunes of Anton Rupert’s showcase project, Royal Lesotho Tapestry Weavers, turned out quite differently. Around the time of the arrests and beatings at Thabana li Mele, the venture would be celebrated in South Africa, winning a gold medal at the annual government-sponsored Rand Easter Show in Johannesburg. In time, Van der Walt (1979:185) would claim that the RLTW had ‘brought about an industrial revolution’ in Lesotho. But as Sean Maliehe (2015:109,113) has pointed out, the LNDC’s senior personnel were sourced from South African corporations, excluding skilled local candidates from this new bureaucracy and doing little to encourage indigenously-owned businesses.

Interrogating readings

My findings show that, although weaving might not have been a socially-recognised medium of expressive action, as it was in *life/a*, at least one woven Thabana work appropriated the complex symbolism of Sotho oral culture to articulate the social effects of political greed and dependency. Through a narrative relationship in which weaving borrowed from orality, *The blood-sucker bird* mobilised cultural knowledge encoded in some of the existing “master” metaphors of oral arts. By engaging transgressive references, this disruptive work, and arguably Ntja’s earlier blanket, interrogate economic encroachment, holding to account white hegemony and its beneficiary,

Jonathan's subaltern bureaucracy. Drawing from untapped sources, my study demonstrates that tapestry weaving for a subsistence did not preclude the voicing of deeply ideological attitudes. The woven testimony of *The blood-sucker bird* reveals how the loom might be deployed, not only as a means of articulating self-perception, but as a means of contestation, in which strand-by-strand action interpreted economic and political relations.

The creative agency evident in this work challenges the uncomplicated ways in which tapestry practices have been represented by writers such as Van der Walt. As my new reading shows, alternative, less picturesque, understandings of Thabana li Mele and more broadly, weaving practices in Lesotho, are made possible by uncovering the otherwise erased experiences of, for example, practitioners and marginalised people, and not just public figures. As in oral texts, textiles such as *The blood-sucker bird* can give substance to histories impoverished by their previous tellers, or altogether untold.

Disclaimer

The author gratefully acknowledges permission to reproduce copyright material in this article. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders, but if any copyright infringements have occurred, she would appreciate information that would enable any omissions or errors to be corrected.

Notes

1. A "weft-faced" form of weaving tapestry typically involves the interlacing of thick, coloured "weft" strands through thin "warp" threads set at ninety degrees, in order to create selected shapes of different colours. Each weft strand is pressed snugly against the last, creating a dense, thick weave in the finished product.
2. The Swedish Mission was not the first to host a weaving initiative in Southern Africa. The German Catholic Mission at Mariannhill near Durban, for example, offered weaving for local women almost from its inception in 1949. However, Rorke's Drift and other centres they started were more or less unique in that they employed trained artists who did not wish to evangelise weavers (see Hobbs 2019:95).
3. The spelling of the centre's name varies. It is spelled "Thabana Li Mele" on the Centre's stationery and "Thabana Li'Mele" on the product tags. Elsewhere the name is written "Thabana li-Mele", while Peder Gowenius writes it as "Thabana li Mele" in his 2016 memoirs. I have adopted the latter version for the sake of consistency.
4. I have traced images of nine pre-coup Thabana li Mele tapestries, mostly photographed in progress on the loom; as well as four separate titles, *The blood-sucker bird*, *Agriculture*, *Wedding* and *It happens in our village* (all made in 1969 or early 1970). Those images of tapestries in Maria Van der Walt's (1979) thesis date from a later period, when the centre unsuccessfully reopened under Danish management.

5. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Peder Gowenius's writings are to the English version of his unpublished memoirs written in 2002. His reworked Swedish version, *Blå jakaranda: Mitt tack till Afrika* (Blue jacaranda: My thank you to Africa) eventually went to press in 2016.
6. Some of this material is now in the Power, Gender and Community Art Archive (PGCAA), held at the University of Johannesburg: Special Collections.
7. Tapestries were acquired by Swedish museums from the mid-1960s and by South African museums from 1967.
8. This methodology was first theorised by Edward Palmer Thompson in his essay 'History from Below', in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 7 April 1966, after which the phrase became prominent in historiography
9. SIDA's funding was generally channeled through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
10. Van der Walt (1979:217) notes that Thabong was opened in 1967, following a donation from a 'Mrs David', by which she almost certainly meant Mrs Devitt.
11. In a collaborative arrangement with the centre's committee in Sweden, he had been hired as an unordained "missionary", as were the numerous builders, doctors, technicians and teachers appointed by the Swedish mission.
12. This followed discussions in Maseru between Peder Gowenius, Peter Lowes, Thord Palmlund of SIDA, Jytte Bonnier of the Swedish Committee, and David Biggs of the Ministry of Economic Development.
13. A survey by Roger Leys (1974:4) records that by 1970, imports amounted to R3,716,000 and exports to R22,876,000. However, remittances from the mines only partially filled Lesotho's growing trade deficit.
14. In the event, Schmidli initiated production only in March 1969, and by 1970 there would be 22 women at work.
15. This figure is cited in various sources, such as Irene Losell (1970:16) in *Utblick*.
16. For a fuller discussion of this tapestry see Hobbs (2019:180-181).
17. Although the work was reproduced in the exhibition catalogue and attracted considerable media coverage, its whereabouts are unknown to me, despite my efforts to locate it between 2016 and 2020. It was loaned from a private collection for the Made in Africa exhibition.
18. Singular form *sefela*. In the nineteenth century this term referred to Christian hymns. It was later adopted by migrant labourers to refer to their own improvisational poems.
19. See, for example, Scott Rosenberg and Richard Weisfelder, *Historical dictionary of Lesotho* (1977:473).
20. Although the King had already been under house arrest, Roach declared that his exile from Lesotho was a necessary measure for the restoration of peace (Khaketla 1972:258). This followed Moshoeshoe's end-of-year prayer gathering at Thaba-Bosiu on December 27, held in defiance of a government ban, where ten people were shot by the PMU (See Khaketla 1972:146-147,254).
21. It is likely that Letsetedi's wife, who wove at the centre, informed the BNP of the weaver's intentions in this tapestry.

References

- Bardill, J & Cobbe, J. 1985. *Lesotho: Dilemmas of dependence in Southern Africa*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Bonnier, J. Reserapport från Afrika. Stockholm, June 1969.
- Coplan, D. 1989. In the time of Cannibals: Basotho Working-class Aurature and the Meaning of Sesotho. Unpublished manuscript. Cape Town: University of Cape Town, Centre for African Studies.
- Coplan, D. 1987. Eloquent Knowledge: Lesotho Migrants' Songs and the Anthropology of Experience. *American Ethnologist* 14(3):413-433.
- Devitt, P. 1967. Arts and Crafts Centre: Programme for the first stage. Operational plan and budget, 29 July.
- Devitt, P. 2019. Email correspondence with the author, paul.devitt01@icloud.com, 9 June – 8 December.
- Fridemar, G. 1970. Äkta afrikansk konst genom svenskt initiativ. *Folkbladet Östgöten*, 27 April.
- Gowenius, P. Letter to an unknown recipient, Rorke's Drift, 1967 (undated).
- Gowenius, P. Letter to Thord Palmlund, Rorke's Drift, 18 March 1967.
- Gowenius, P. Letter to Holge Benettsson, Rorke's Drift, arrival stamped 18 April 1967.
- Gowenius, P. Letter to Thord Palmlund, Rorke's Drift, 2 July 1967.
- Gowenius, P. Letter to Holge Benettsson, Rorke's Drift, 20 July 1967.
- Gowenius, P. Letter to Berta Hansson, Thabana li Mele, January 1968.
- Gowenius, P. Letter to Holge Benettsson, Thabana li Mele, undated.
- Gowenius, P. 2002. Personal memoirs (unpublished), section 2, numbered 1-72.
- Gowenius, P. 2017. Interview with the author, Vaxjö, Sweden, 25 April.
- Gowenius, P. 2018. Interview with the author, Vaxjö, Sweden, 8-9 June.
- Hobbs, P. 2019. Ideology, imagery and female agency in tapestry at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift, during the Swedish period 1961–1976. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Johannesburg, Johhannesburg.

- Khaketla, BMM. 1972. *Lesotho, 1970: An African coup under the microscope*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- KW. 1970. Made in Africa. *Form* 4:181.
- Kunene, D. 1971. *Heroic poetry of the Basotho*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Liedholm, A. 1970. Konst från Afrika. *Upsala* (sic) *Nya Tidning*, 14 May.
- Losell, I. 1970. Går Lesotho mot inbördeskrig? *Utblick* 954:16.
- Lowes, L. 1967. Extract of a funding appeal to Church of Sweden, Maseru, Lesotho (transcribed by Eva Lind).
- Leys, R. 1974. *Lesotho: Non-development or underdevelopment. Seminar paper at the African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand*. [O]. Available: <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10539/9042/ISS-250.pdf?sequence=1>
Accessed 6 November 2019.
- Lévy-Bruhl, L. 1922. *Primitive Mentality*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Lesotho expels mission worker. 1970. *Argus*, 14 February.
- Maliehe, SM. 2015. A History of Indigenously-owned Business in Post-colonial Lesotho: Politics, Constraints, Marginalisation and Survival, 1966-2012. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- Minutes of the Art and Craft Centre Board Meeting, Rorke's Drift, 24-6 May 1969.
- Moshoeshe II (King). Letter to Peder Gowenius, Den Haag, Netherlands, 7 July 1970.
- Murray, C. 1981. *Families divided: The impact of migrant labour in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olvång, B. 1970. Kulturbilder från skilda länder och miljöer. *Aftonbladet*, 23 April.
- Rosenberg, S & Weisfelder, R. 2013. *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho*. Plymouth: Scarecrow Press.
- Svenskar invävda i Afrika. *Dagens Nyheter*. 1970. 17 April.
- Svenson, E. Letter to Jytte Bonnier, Rorke's Drift, 26 July 1967.
- Swedish style weaving. *Daily News*. 1969. 22 March.
- Thabana li Mele Art Craft Centre (sic). Brochure. Late 1960s.

Van der Walt, M. 1979. Weefkuns in Suider-Afrika: Met besondere verwysing na tapyte en tapisserieë. MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.

Wikblom, U. 1970. Viktigare lära afrikan överleva än att väva. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 April.

Winai-Ström, G. 1986. *Migration and development: Dependence on South Africa: A study of Lesotho*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies.

Royal Lesotho Tapestry Weavers hand-woven signed mohair rug geometric design. 2020. [O]. Available:
<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/royal-lesotho-tapestry-weavers-hand-45700899>
Accessed 17 April 2020.

Royal Lesotho Tapestry Weavers, Alexander Calder. 2020. [O]. Available:
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/after-alexander-calder-wall-hanging-tapestry-africa>
Accessed 10 April 2020.