

SPBH SPACE PRESENTS

MOT

The Visualization of Landscapes

LAT

and Rituals

AOUMM

SI

Giovanna  
Silva

on Basotho Blankets.



## MOTLATS VISUALIZATION OF LANDSCAPE AND RITUALS ON BASOTHO BLANKETS

**Motlatsi: Visualization of Landscape and Rituals on Basotho Blankets**, a collaborative project between architecture studio AOUMM and photographer Giovanna Silva, focuses on the complex history of the Basotho blanket, a national emblem in Lesotho that remains central to every rite of passage, from childbirth to marriage to burial ceremonies, and everything else in between. Each blanket is decorated with stylized drawings taken from a palimpsest of petroglyphs, architectural motifs, and historical events, which take on life when folded and wrapped around people's shoulders. In Lesotho, to wear a blanket is to wear a fragment of the country's landscape and history.

In spring 2023, architects Luca Astorri and Matteo Poli, travelled with photographer Giovanna Silva through Lesotho, to gather information and evidence about the blankets used by the Basotho people on the plateau from which the Senqu, the sixth largest river in Africa originates. Crossing the land-locked country during their 2,500-kilometre trip, the authors encountered the different meanings that water holds, from the colossal scale of global infrastructure that are dams to the local reality of the Basotho's lands where water scarcely flows to the immaterial visualization of water in the traditional rituals and garments of Lesothan culture.

Over the past century, the blankets' designs have transferred to textile industry property, presently hibernating in one aesthetic layout that is not necessarily able to convey the origins and roots of these items.

The complex and intricate web of histories, traditions, colonial heritage, economic and political changes and environmental issues can be read through the design and production of the Basotho blankets.

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## EXCERPTS FROM AN UNPUBLISHED TEXT BY LINEO SEGOETE AND SELLO MAJARA, MORIJA

In principle, the blanket is a symbol that eliminates divisions by class or wealth because, under it, all people are respectable and recognized as part of the greater Basotho family.

In the early days, the lifespan of a design or brand was dictated by market reception. It was dropped if it did not meet the public's taste.

The Wormald and Walker blanket mills, which produced the Victoria England brand, for example, went out of business in 1983, and another UK company, called AW Hainsworth, took over production. While AW Hainsworth holds the rights to the Victoria England brand name to this day, Aranda textiles in South Africa has a licensing agreement with it to manufacture and sell the Victoria England from South Africa. Other designs, such as the Seana-marena, are solely produced by Aranda.

According to Aranda, Queen 'Mamohato Bereng Seeiso approached the company in the early 1990s as part of a campaign to revive traditional culture among the Basotho. The royal family then granted Aranda new designs derived from Sesotho motifs, such as the corn cob and the **mokorotlo** hat, and essentially declared the firm the official producer of what is now known as "Basotho heritage blankets". Since then the protocol has been that the royal family must first authorize every new design introduced.

A fascinating characteristic of Basotho's relationship with the blanket is its acculturation. Despite the colonial history, modes of production and in some cases, designs, the Basotho's relationship with the blanket remains strong and widely accepted.

As the meanings of objects tend to change over time, Basotho blankets are no exception; in fact, the value placed on the blanket is so high that for some people the history is irrelevant.

Despite the colonial influence on their origins, blankets have reached new owners and developed new forms of significance; the names or symbolism have evolved in some scenarios depending on the social setting.

Herders have unique ways of tying blankets around their shoulders, while many go as far as modifying their blankets by embroidering their own customized designs. In that same spirit of innovation, young Basotho fashion designers have created differentiated products from either the blanket itself or aspects of it. This, in turn, is developing a more diverse value chain and adding new chapters to the history of the Basotho and their blankets.

✳ The blanket is ascribed a meaningful role thanks to its use in all rites of passage and as a status symbol. When a boy used to go on his retreat for initiation to prepare for his circumcision - called *Lebollo la banna* - he wore a special blanket called the *Moholobela*. After the ceremony, he was entitled to another blanket called the *Lekhokolo* as proof that he had reached manhood. Next, he might need a wedding blanket as a gift to his bride. Another custom demanded that both parties' families be similarly dressed. Lastly, he would need a *Serope* blanket to present to his first wife on the birth of her first child. A blanket also mediates other milestones in his life.



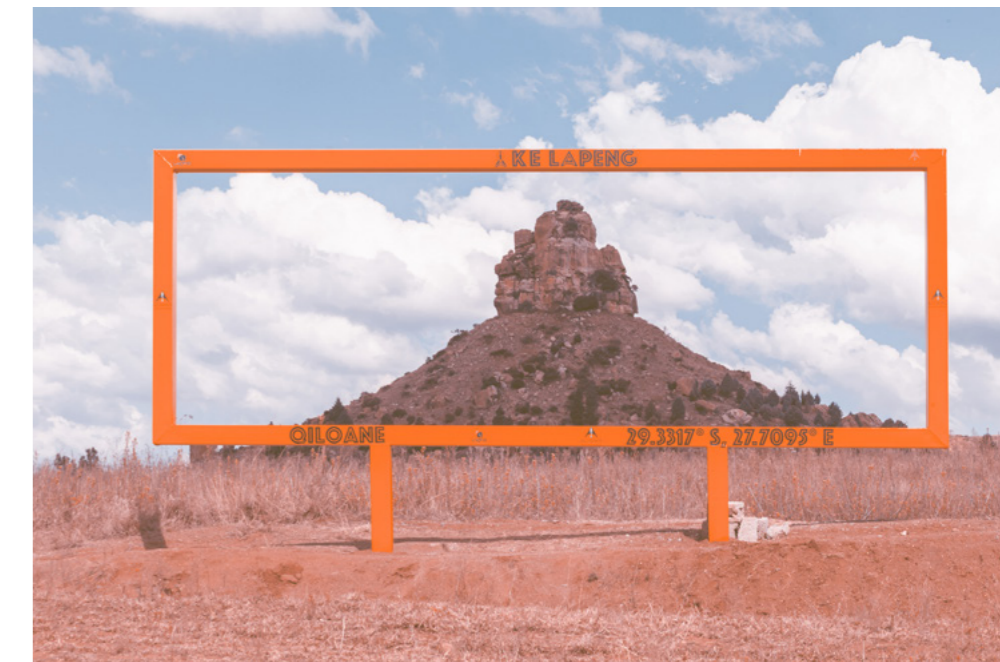
## EXCERPTS FROM A CONVERSATION

WITH CHERE MONGANGANE, DESIGNER, MASERU, 1 APRIL 2023

We like creating stories, new stories. We just say, "Uh, there's a guy who can do poetry; let's push him. Let's tell his story." That's why we say that our brand sells stories, not necessarily fashion. If you get this idea, you still walk away happy even if you can't afford the product. I'm a telecoms engineer; I was in the industry for about ten years. Then I started working with Bonono on fashion. I love technology, and I also love fashion. I love telling stories.



This one for example was a custom design for the chief in Mafeteng, where one battalion was stationed in 1881 when the Basotho fought the Gun War. We fought to keep the weapons that the British wanted to seize and launched a rebellion in Mafeteng, where this yellow colour comes from. After that, we were not made part of the Cape Colony and became independent from the other tribes and not part of the Union of South Africa, now the Republic of South Africa. So a chain of events from the Gun War to today. What would have happened if we had given up our guns? Would we be free today? We really want to tell these stories, magnifying a little bit of what's already there. The design comes out from the requests of the community – we take maybe three options and then continue working on the one we prefer until we get the final product.



\* Blanket designs are always reversible, with one side displaying more vibrant colour than the other. A standard narrative is that one side is meant to be feminine and the other masculine. While it is perfectly acceptable for men and women to wear either side, the brighter side is typically associated with the feminine. In all colours of blankets, you choose the colour and the pattern. That means you can have the same design in all colours.

In Lesotho, we have more than 40,000 farmers producing mohair wool; we get this mohair from these mountains, turn it into the material, and finally into a blanket. Now that would be a complete circle, an ecosystem that could exist without having to work for someone else. It would be a form of resistance enabling people to find synergies that we can magnify into woven stories. But now Lesotho exports 100% of its wool, and I have to repurchase it in South Africa. Still, we should be processing all that, creating weaving studios nationwide to produce embroidery and wool carpets. As a country, we rank number three in Africa for textile exports: when you come to Lesotho, and you expect to see fashion. If there are textiles at that level, there should be something related to fashion, but there are no structures right now.



We have a principle in the villages called **Letsema**; it's like crowdfunding. You have someone with a cow, someone with a planter, and someone with boys. So, they get together, come and plough my fields, and at the end of the day, we can all afford to plough, even though I don't have everything. Our production works in the same way. We started in 2017, we were wondering why we needed to have production when we have about 1,500 production houses in Maseru. It felt like a waste of resources, so we said, "Let's go out there and identify people who can produce certain things with us." We created a sort of production ecosystem. We don't have a main factory, but make things through distributed production. If I want to do something that needs an illustration, I will find someone who's part of the ecosystem. If I want corporate work, I know the perfect guy for that. Once we put out the job, it's a collective effort.



**EXCERPTS FROM A PRESENTATION**  
BY MASETHO LETSIE, SEMONKONG

The blanket is a fundamental property in our culture, one needed in all life stages, from the beginning to the end. As the baby is born, a blanket will be required. A girl should have a blanket when she's getting married, and the in-laws welcome her. When she returns with a baby, there is another blanket, and from there, there will be blankets, blankets, blankets. On some blankets we also have the spiral aloe; that is the plant that can be used for purifying ourselves after bearing someone to the grave.



We can keep our heritage because these blankets were not made to abolish our culture, but to upgrade it – from animal skins to wool.

Until 2015, traditional blankets were 90% wool and 10% cotton. Then when the world went dry, they switched to wool and cotton, 50% each. That worked until the pandemic when there were problems with getting cotton, and they decided to make blankets 50% wool and 50% acrylic. In South Africa, they couldn't get cotton for the blankets.

✿ Legend has it that the first industrially produced blanket in Lesotho was a gift given to King Moshoeshoe I in 1860 by a trader, possibly a man called Mr. Howel. The King was so pleased with the item that he began wearing it on his shoulders, as he had done with his kaross leopard-skin cloaks. Blankets took another step to acceptance when, in 1897, karosses – animal-skin coverings – became increasingly hard to produce due to an outbreak of rinderpest in cattle. The disease wiped out massive populations of domestic and wild bovines south of the Zambezi. The blankets were also adopted more widely after a series of droughts and heavy snowfalls in 1902.



This one was designed in 2007 to welcome the boy who will be the next king. The fourth son after three sisters, he filled the gap of those who had passed away. The blanket was named Motlatsi, meaning "filling the gap" in Sesotho. For the prince, we had this pattern to celebrate his birthday in July 2007. Everybody wanted the same design, but unfortunately, they were finished everywhere in the shops. There was no Motlatsi pattern. I promise everybody wanted the same in different colours, which was terrific.

Basotho ladies like to mix and match, and I need a yellow blanket because I have a yellow dress.



Records are kept about the blankets, and history is on the blankets. This is the Victoria England pattern with the crown. It shows you the times of war. There is an English cross in the middle, and you can see the bombs, the Supermarine Spitfire, and a propeller. You can see the feathers of Wales. There is NZ for New Zealand, Australia next to it, South Africa, the Royal Navy, and the symbol for Ghana. We also see the shields on the blankets forming an English cross.

