

A nation wrapped in tradition: Over 160-years' legacy of the Basotho blankets

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ABSTRACT

Blankets have been an important part of the cultural and national identity of the Basotho for over 160 years. They are an integral part of the Basotho culture as reflected in the sayings “*bochaba ba Mosotho ke kobo*” (the nationality of a Mosotho is the blanket) and “*kobo ke bophelo*” (the blanket is life). The Basotho have successfully adopted this foreign item and incorporated it into their way of life. They assigned important meanings to the blankets, which represent different milestones and stages of life. In recent years the blankets have also become widely known outside the Sotho culture, because of their appearance on the fashion scene, both locally (Lesotho and South Africa) and globally, as well as in the film *Black Panther*. The National Museum in Bloemfontein, South Africa, houses an impressive collection of Basotho blankets. The first blankets were acquired in 1991 as part of expanding the Basotho material culture in the National Museum's Anthropology Collection. More blankets, 40 in total, were later given to the museum on loan for 25 years by the Robertson family. The Robertson collection includes a variety of blankets such as the *Batho ba Roma* that was made to commemorate Pope John Paul's visit to Lesotho in 1988, *Badges of the Brave* that was made to honour those who fought in World War II, and the *Seanamarena* blanket. This paper explores the blanket tradition within the Basotho culture, highlighting how it endures as a symbol of identity and cultural pride.

KEYWORDS: Basotho, blankets, culture, garment, *kobo*, Lesotho, textile, tradition.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This study examines the cultural significance of Basotho blankets as enduring symbols of the Basotho heritage, identity and their reinterpretation across traditional and contemporary contexts. The analysis employs a descriptive and interpretive approach, drawing primarily on secondary literature and supplemented by correspondence with key informants, notably Myrtle Karstel and Tom Kritzinger.

Karstel's research in Lesotho during the early 1990s, and her seminal publication *The Basotho Blanket: Borrowed but Traditional* (1995), provide critical grounding for understanding the interplay between tradition and identity. Tom Kritzinger's industry expertise shaped by his work with Aranda Textiles¹ and Frasers Ltd., and informed by intergenerational knowledge and ties to the Lesotho Royal Family, offers further insight into symbolism and design preferences.

The Robertson Collection, currently on long-term loan to the National Museum through the generosity of the Robertson family, offers a valuable body for analysis. Encompassing both historical and contemporary blanket designs, the collection includes examples from now-defunct textile producers such as Frasers Ltd., as well as current designs manufactured by Aranda Textiles. Aranda's extensive design archive, including the Young Designers Collection, highlights processes of innovation

and continuity, while also illustrating how younger Basotho artists engage heritage motifs within shifting socio-cultural landscapes. Visual documentation from these collections informs the discussion throughout.

TRADITIONAL CLOTHING OF THE BASOTHO

The original clothing of the Basotho, much like those of other indigenous groups across southern Africa, consisted of animal skin cloaks (mantles/blankets²), loincloths, skirts, aprons and hats made from the skins of domestic (e.g. cattle, sheep and goats) and wild animals (e.g. leopards) (Secheho n.d.³; Laydevant 1952; Ashton 1967; Hammond-Tooke 1993). The cloaks were mostly made from the skins of domestic animals, particularly tanned ox hide. Examples of the Basotho cloaks, or mantles, include *setipe*, *lebusa* and *sehogo*, which according to Karstel (1991) were only worn by men. They served various functions as they could be worn during the day or used at night for sleeping. The *setipe* is described as a large neatly trimmed, shin-length cloak, which was fastened in front with strings of leather that were sown onto it (Secheho n.d.: 2; Karstel 1991: 18). It could be worn around the shoulders or waist (Zaverdinos 1997). The *lebusa* was crafted from an entire ox hide folded over a central *riem*, or thong, and secured at the front. The *sehogo* was styled similarly to a poncho, featuring an opening in the middle for the head. These pieces were

¹ <https://www.aranda.co.za> (accessed 5.04.2026)

² The terms 'cloaks', 'mantles' and 'blankets' are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to various animal skin garments that formed part of the clothing of the Basotho and were mostly worn for protection against the cold.

³ The exact publication date of *The old clothing of Basotho* by Justinus Secheho (187?–1938) is unknown (Haliburton 1977: 158), but it is sometimes cited as '1904' (Pheto-Moeti 2020) or 'c.1910' (e.g. Conz 2020) [Editor's comm.].



Figure 1: *Thethana* made from *tsikitlane* plant (left) and skirt made from animal skin (right). (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

considered luxury items due to their costly production and were not commonly worn by all. The *letata*⁴ was, therefore, a prevalent choice for many Basotho during winter evenings, because it was made from more accessible sheep or goat skin (Sechefo n.d.).

Certain garments were specially made for women and children such as the women's *morepo*, which was usually made from sheepskin (Gill 1993; Riep 2011). Young girls wore skirts known as *thethana* that were made from fibres of a plant of the genus *Gazania* (Asteraceae), which is known as *tsikitlane* in Sesotho (Riep 2022; Fig. 1). Only after initiation into womanhood did they start wearing a skirt, made from the skin of a cow (Mokorosi 2017). Blankets for children, including the *thari* and those worn by herd boys were mostly made from sheep or goat skin. The cloaks or mantles worn by royalty or warriors were made from the skins of animals such as leopards that symbolised royalty, strength and bravery (Karstel 1995; Kurkertz 2000).

Hideworking among the Basotho was done by men, as all activities related to animals were their responsibility (Eldredge 1993; Hammond-Tooke 1993). They usually worked in groups, because the scraping and tanning of skins, particularly of big animals, was a long and gruelling process that took several days for each one (Laydevant 1952; Kuckertz 2000). The hides were kept each time an animal was slaughtered and then prepared to be used for various purposes. For example, when a woman became pregnant with her first child, a sheep was slaughtered and the skin with the fleece intact, was used to cover her belly. The sheepskin, like her womb, was believed to provide heat essential for the growth and protection of the unborn child. Laydevant (1952), Ashton (1967) and Bosko (1981) mentioned that this ritual was

held at her parents' home, where she would return to deliver her first child. After the birth, an animal, usually a sheep, was slaughtered. However, if the newborn was the son of a chief, an ox would be chosen instead (Laydevant 1952: 32). This ceremony served both as an expression of gratitude to the ancestors for granting the child safe passage into the world of the living and as a plea for their continued protection (Ashton 1967: 29). The skin of this animal was used for wrapping or carrying the child on the mother's back (*thari*). A bride or bride-to-be was welcomed in the same manner with the slaughtering of a sheep indicating her social birth, and she was not allowed to eat anything or start her marital life until the animal was killed (Ashton 1967: 74). When a person died, an ox, or *mohoha*, was slaughtered and the hide was used to wrap the deceased (Phafoli & Zulu 2012: 248). This ritual was done immediately after death, while the skin was still soft and pliable. Maintaining warmth around the body was considered vital, as it was believed to assist in the soul's transition from the realm of the living to that of the ancestors (Bosko 1981: 26).

The skins were usually soaked in a mixture of animal fat and red ochre (*letsoku*), which not only kept them soft and durable⁵, but were also intended for aesthetic and religious purposes. Some traditional clothing was decorated with beadwork. For example, the top seam of the *morepo* was bordered with beadwork and fringes (Mokorosi 2017). Ellenberger and Macgregor (1912) mentioned that some groups marked their clothing with unique tribal emblems, but did not provide further details about the patterns. Nonetheless, it is evident that the Basotho placed great emphasis on their outward appearance, which influenced the way their clothing was designed and decorated.

4 Riep (2011: 146) and Laydevant (1952: 12) describe *letata* as a kind of garment made from different skins.

5 Rifkin (2011: 131) mentions that "prehistoric societies may have used red ochre to preserve or tan animal hides as it has antiseptic properties and can inhibit bacterial production".

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FACTORY AND PRODUCTION OF BLANKETS

Basotho blankets, as they are known today, were introduced through contact with Europeans during the 19th century. Europeans arrived in Lesotho and surrounding areas during the 1830s (Walton 1958; Eldredge 1993). They provided the Basotho with a variety of imported goods in exchange for commodities such as cattle, grain and wool, which was in high demand in Britain (Ashton 1967; Lye & Murray 1980; Eldredge 1993). Then in 1860, King Moshoeshoe I was gifted a blanket by a British trader named Howell (Danzinger 1979; Karstel 1995). This event marked the start of the blanket-wearing tradition, as blankets quickly gained popularity among the Basotho people. The widespread adoption of blankets by the nation signified not only a shift in material culture, but also the symbolic resonance of royal endorsement.

The rise in formal employment opportunities, especially within the mining sector, enhanced the purchasing power of the people. Following the diamond rush in Kimberley during the 1870s, early traders distributed or sold blankets to workers, including the Basotho. This led to a notable change in attire, as animal skins were replaced by Western clothing and blankets (Walton 1958; Eldredge 1993; Zaverdinos 1997). Among these traders were brothers Donald and Douglas, sons of William Fraser, a wool merchant from Ipswich, England, and the owner of a successful business William Fraser & Company (Danzinger 1979: 18). As their enterprise grew, the brothers formed a company called D. & D.H. Frasers Limited⁶, which played a pivotal role in the design and supply of what became known as Basotho blankets (Van Wyk 1998a: 141). The first Frasers store was opened in 1877 in a village called Liphiring, Lesotho, by Donald Fraser where he traded blankets and other goods (Walton 1958; Danzinger 1979). The blankets were manufactured by Wormalds and Walker Ltd Mills in Dewsbury, Yorkshire, England, and then exported to the Frasers and other traders. Among the most iconic brands was the *Victoria England*, which is still popular today along with the *Seanamarena*.

Following the closure of Frasers in the early 1990s, Aranda Textiles, established in 1953 by the Magni brothers, emerged as a key player in the manufacture of Basotho blankets. Today, Aranda holds a manufacturing and distribution agreement with A.W. Hainsworth & Sons Ltd.⁷, secured after the cessation of operations at Wormalds and Walker Mills, enabling the continued production of the *Victoria England* range in South Africa.

In addition, Aranda holds the exclusive rights to the iconic *Seanamarena* design, originally introduced in the

1930s by Charles Henry Robertson who had a trading store in Leribe, Lesotho. Notably, these blankets have never been produced in Lesotho, but in South Africa and England. Many of the designs considered traditional such as the *Seanamarena* and the majority of *Victoria England* patterns have remained unchanged over time (Karstel 1995).

FROM ANIMAL SKINS TO PATTERNED BLANKETS

The natural disasters that occurred between the late 1880s and early 1900s, such as the rinderpest outbreak of 1888–1897, prolonged droughts from 1894–1898 and the severe winter of 1902 that wiped out most of the livestock, made it difficult to secure animal skins in great numbers (Eldredge 1993). Thus, Western clothing, particularly blankets, became perfect substitutes and were accepted by the Basotho. The blankets provided protection against the elements in the Mountain Kingdom. Furthermore, as Zaverdinos (1997: 233) noted, the blankets did not hinder the transfer and preservation of symbolic values that were attached to skins and were essential to Basotho identity.

The blankets have become an integral part of the Basotho culture as reflected in the sayings “*bochaba ba Mosotho ke kobo*” (the nationality of a Mosotho is the blanket) and “*kobo ke bophelo*” (the blanket is life). They are used in almost every aspect of life (i.e. as everyday clothing, to keep out the cold, and for the rites of passage, namely birth, childhood, initiation, marriage and death) and are important in the construction of social identities.

In the context of male initiation rites, the wearing and exchange of blankets serve as significant markers of the transition from boyhood to manhood. Traditionally, young men undergoing initiation are clothed in a blanket at the outset of the ritual and receive a new one upon its completion, symbolising their altered social status. The blanket most commonly associated with the early stages of initiation is the *Moholobela*⁸ (Fig. 2), while the *Lekhokolo* is reportedly bestowed upon initiates at the conclusion of the process. Karstel (1995: 206) asserts that the *Moholobela* blanket was originally designated exclusively for male initiation ceremonies and did not possess any broader social connotation. The blanket’s association with initiation is supported by Van Wyk (1998a: 142), who links its name to sounds made by initiates during circumcision and suggests the blanket’s bud motifs may symbolically represent the circumcised phallus. However, Karstel (1995: 206) believes the name may have originated from an old saying “*moholobela wa dithota*”, which was used by a person after a long journey. The term “*lekhokolo*”, on the other hand, remains somewhat obscure, with limited information

6 D. & D.H. Frasers Limited was the original name (Danzinger 1979: 21), which became *Frasers Company* in 1920 when other traders of British descent were invited to join (Maliehe 2021: 58) or merely *Frasers* thereafter until their closure in 1991 (Pietilä 2022: 129).

7 <https://www.awhainsworth.co.uk> (accessed 5.04.2026)

8 Sampson (2006: 11) believes the *Moholobela* might have been the first blanket designed by the Frasers.



Figure 2: *Matlama* (left) (source: Aranda Textiles) and red *Moholobela* (right) (source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum).

available about its historical origins or broader cultural significance beyond the context already outlined.

Although the *Moholobela* blanket is often linked to the initial stages of the initiation rites, contemporary practices reveal a broader usage. Initiates usually wear various blankets at both the commencement and conclusion of the rites. Preference is usually given to blankets like *Seanamarena* that has been traditionally reserved for boys from affluent families due to its status symbolism. The fawn, black or maroon coloured fringeless *Matlama* shawls are also popular among initiated males. In addition to these traditional blankets, initiates also favour the grey blankets⁹, which serve as canvases for personal embroidery¹⁰ and may feature personal messages, clan names and totem images (e.g., Fig. 3).

There is no specific blanket designated for the initiation ceremonies of girls, but one is required (Sechefo n.d.; Bosko 1981). Therefore, when going through initiation female initiates are usually given an old blanket, sometimes a sheepskin from the maternal uncle (*malome*)¹¹, and they receive a new one upon completion of the ritual (Du Plooy 2006). This ceremonial practice highlights the culturally embedded significance of the blanket, particularly in the construction and articulation of female sexual identity. The blanket serves not merely as a functional object, but as a potent symbol intimately linked to notions of female sexuality and reproductive potential.

As Ellenberger and Macgregor (1912: 288) noted, initiation custom for girls was historically conceived as a set of rites that cultivated and affirmed fertility. Bosko

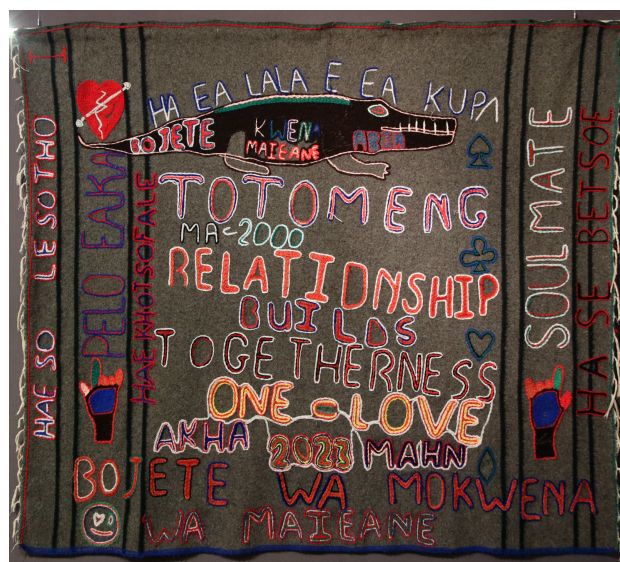


Figure 3: Embroidered grey blanket featured in the *Sutha ke Fete* exhibition at Oliewenhuis Art Museum. (Source: Oliewenhuis Art Museum)

(1981: 23) and Khau (2012: 96) further suggested that blankets are symbolically associated with the female reproductive organ. This symbolism is reflected in Sesotho expressions such as “*mosadi ke kobo ya monna*” (“a woman is the blanket of the man”), and in phrases like “*ho hana ka dikobo*” or “*ho mo tima dikobo*” that describe a woman’s refusal of sexual intimacy as withholding blankets. Khau (2012: 102) also noted that elder women traditionally reminded newly married women of their

⁹ These blankets (usually made from recycled/regenerated materials) are traditionally worn by shepherds.

¹⁰ Lenosa Mohapang, a Mosotho male from Lesotho and an art enthusiast, who was one of the attendees at the walkabout of the *Sutha ke Fete* blanket exhibition at Oliewenhuis Art Museum, mentioned that the decorative elements serve as a medium for initiates to showcase their individuality and creativity.

¹¹ In discussing girls’ initiation, Laydevant (1952: 49) mentions that “as soon as they see the first traces of the new moon, they take off their blanket which is their clothing and like this they run with all speed towards a part of the river which has been previously designated”.

marital duties by encouraging them to prepare their husbands' beds each night. Additionally, Van Wyk (1998a: 142) pointed out that if a groom discovered his bride was not a virgin, he would pierce his blanket with a spear. This act symbolically communicates the cultural emphasis on female purity in the Basotho culture.

Traditionally, a woman (often a new bride, *ngwetsi*) is presented with a blanket or shawl to drape over her shoulders and/or wrap around her waist, symbolically covering her hips, as she is expected to 'stay warm' for her husband until a child is conceived (Karstel 1995; Khau 2012). She will continue to cover herself when she is pregnant, because the heat provided by the blanket is believed to be essential for the protection and growth of the child. Traditional beer is made in the same manner and a blanket is used to maintain the necessary warmth for fermentation, drawing a parallel to the nurturing of life as noted by Bosko (1981: 25). The blanket or shawl used to cover the woman's waist is discarded after the birth of the child or may be kept for carrying the child on the back. Married women are traditionally expected to remain covered, both as a gesture of respect toward their husbands and in-laws, and when participating in public events such as funerals or church services (Karstel 1995: 202).

BLANKET PATTERNS, SYMBOLS AND USE

The Basotho are not the only ethnic group in southern Africa that wear blankets, but they developed the socio-cultural significance around the blanket to such an extent that it has become part of their cultural identity (Danzinger 1979: 50; Rosenberg 2001: 148; Phafoli & Zulu 2012: 247; Pheto-Moeti 2020: 59). The uniqueness of the Basotho blankets lies in the various designs, symbols, bold colour combinations and the characteristic solid lines (pinstripes), which appeared originally a weaver's fault (Sampson 2006: 13) but has become a 'trademark' feature of the blankets. These pinstripes, also known as 'wearing lines', indicate how the blankets should be worn. When worn in the traditional manner, the lines must run vertically, thereby symbolising growth and wellbeing¹². Similarly, the colours, motifs and patterns of the blankets reveal important symbolic messages. Originally, the blankets that were sold to the Basotho were plain¹³ or had minimal decorations. Stripes of various colours were then introduced, and over time, such elements as aeroplanes, crowns, bombs and playing card patterns (clubs, spades, diamonds and hearts) became popular motifs. Aeroplanes and bombs started appearing on blankets after World War II (WWII, 1939–1945) as

symbols of bravery, power and conquest for the Basotho (Danzinger 1979; Karstel 1995). The crest was featured after the Prince of Wales visited Lesotho in 1925, and after the visit of the British royalty (King George VI and his family) to Lesotho in 1947¹⁴, the crown appeared (Tyrell 1968; Karstel 1995).

The acceptance of these symbols are attributed to the relationship and respect the Basotho had for the British monarchy since 1868, when Queen Victoria "spread her blanket" of protection over Lesotho (Danzinger 1979; Karstel 1995). The symbols made a profound impression on Basotho and reflect a certain "touch of royalty in the wearer" (Karstel 1995: 202). The widely used *poone* (mealie/corn) design, which appears on the *Seanamarena*, *Sefate* and other blankets, symbolises wealth and fertility. Mealies are a staple food of the Basotho and an important cultural symbol. Another staple crop, wheat (*koro*), appears on the *Leseli* blanket that was created in memory of the founder of the Basotho nation, King Moshoeshoe I. More elaborate plant patterns including flowers are featured in blanket designs such as *Sefate*. These sometimes resemble the mural art patterns known as *litema*¹⁵ (also spelt *ditema*) that recur in the material culture of the Basotho (Van Wyk 1998b: 58). Other cultural symbols such as crocodiles (the royal totem of Bakoena/Bakwena), the Lesotho coat of arms and conical grass hat (*mokorotlo/modiamyewe*) are also popular blanket motifs. The feline marks on some of the blankets are believed to have been inspired by the leopard skin karosses that were worn by King Moshoeshoe I. Playing card symbols are also common motifs, especially on the *Sefate* blankets (Van Wyk 1998a: 142).

Gendered preferences in the blanket use are evident in both how the blankets are worn and the colours chosen. Traditionally, women wear blankets with the lighter side facing outward, while men display the darker side. Although this distinction has become culturally ingrained, it was not originally intended by the manufacturers. Despite these conventions, it is acceptable for either gender to wear either side of the blanket, particularly when the reverse side is dirty. Specific preferences are also seen in some blankets like the *Matlama* shawls. Women tend to favour grey versions with fringes (Fig. 28), whereas men commonly wear the fawn, black or maroon shawls without fringes (Karstel 1995; Fig. 29). The gendered distinctions extend to how blankets are fastened. Women usually secure their blankets in the middle of their chest, a style that accommodates breast-feeding and facilitates daily chores. Khau (2012) emphasises the cultural importance of aligning the blanket's folds precisely at the bosom, with decorative lines

12 At the Basotho Cultural Village in the Golden Gate area near Clarens, a tour guide shared an intriguing interpretation that the stripes symbolise a river or stream, which represents blessings and good fortune. Interestingly, this perspective has not been documented elsewhere.

13 The blankets were white and Basotho used to smear or decorate them with red ochre (Karstel 1995: 197; Zaverdinos 1997: 247).

14 Haasbroek (2000) details the royal visit to Bloemfontein in March 1947.

15 These patterns, which Van Wyk (1998a) describes as prayers to the ancestors, appear mostly within the domain of women such as pottery, basketry, body art and braiding styles.



Figure 4: The blanket exhibition at Oliewenhuis Art Museum in 2019. (Source: Oliewenhuis Art Museum)

meeting neatly. Women who deviate from this norm may be perceived as outsiders or viewed with suspicion. In contrast, men typically fasten their blankets over the right shoulder¹⁶. Clothing practices are further codified for women; as Khau (2012: 101) notes, women who do not have children typically wear the blanket with the inner fold tucked in. After becoming mothers, they adjust the blanket to display the fold on the outside, signifying their transition into motherhood.

Some blankets are specifically made to commemorate special events such as the coronation of royalty, royal weddings, births, the King's birthday¹⁷ and visits by important dignitaries. Examples include blankets that were made to celebrate the marriage of King Letsie III to Queen Masenate Mohato Seeiso, the birth of their son, the Crown Prince Letsie Seeiso¹⁸ and the visit of Pope John Paul II to Lesotho in 1988.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM'S BASOTHO BLANKET COLLECTION AND EXHIBITIONS

The Anthropology collection at the National Museum in Bloemfontein consists of 83 blankets, including a variety of samples. The first blankets were acquired in 1991 as part of the plan to expand the Basotho material cultural objects in the Anthropology collection. They feature several *Seanamarena*, *Moholobela*, *Nkoe*, *Sandringham*, *Lilala*, *Mbalo Mattross*, *Sefate* and *Pitseng* ranges. More blankets were added to the collection in 2014 when the family of Neil Robertson, a third-generation tradesman in Basotho blankets and grandson

of Charles Henry Robertson¹⁹, gave 39 blankets to the museum on loan for 25 years. This collection, referred to as the Robertson Collection, includes *Seanamarena*, *Moholobela*, *Sandringham*, *Serope sa Motsoetse*, *Badges of the Brave*, *Batho ba Roma*, *Malakabe* (also known as *Mamohato*), *Motlatsi*, *Royal wedding blanket*, *Khotso* blankets, *Letlama* and various shawls. A blanket for the police force²⁰, a prison blanket²¹ and Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD²²) blanket are also featured in this collection.

In 2014, a selection of blankets was exhibited at Oliewenhuis Art Museum, a satellite of the National Museum. The title of the exhibition was *Kobo tsa Borena* (Blankets of royalty). The display featured 34 blankets, most of which were from the Robertson Collection and included *Seanamarena*, *Sandringham* mountain rug (dating back to 1934), *Badges of the Brave*, *Batho ba Roma*, *Malakabe*, *Moholobela*, *Serope sa Motsoetse* and other blankets. The exhibition created an opportunity for the public to engage with the blankets, and to learn about their significance in the Basotho culture. The Free State Province and, in particular, Bloemfontein, where both Oliewenhuis Art Museum and the National Museum are based, have a high population of Sotho speakers. The area is also geographically close to Lesotho. Yet, there seems to be limited knowledge about the blankets among the majority of the Basotho in the region, and through the exhibition they could reconnect with their cultural heritage. The blankets, which according to Unsworth (2017a) are meant to be worn and not displayed, were shown on walls where they reminded one of the beautiful mural art

16 Robertson, N. (n.d.). *The Basotho traditional blanket*. Robertson blanket collection. Unpublished raw notes, compiled by his daughter, Jane Louise Robertson.

17 In honour of His Majesty King Letsie III's birthday, which is a national holiday in Lesotho, a commemorative blanket is unveiled each year and named after the district where the celebrations are to take place. For the King's 62nd birthday, Aranda released a blanket named *Berea*. It was designed by Mamokete Shea, owner of Fashion Blanket in Maseru, Lesotho.

18 A detailed discussion of these blankets will follow in subsequent sections.

19 Charles Henry Robertson owned a trading store in the Leribe district of Lesotho that sold blankets and other items. In the 1930s, he introduced the *Seanamarena* brand, which is still the most popular and prestigious blanket among the Basotho.

20 Since 1993, police in Maseru have donned red blankets made of the same material, marked "LPS", which stands for Lesotho Police Services (Karstel 1995).

21 Prisoners likewise receive red blankets, which remain with them throughout their incarceration.

22 LCD was the ruling party until the formation of the All Basotho Congress in 2006.



Figure 5: The blanket exhibition at Sanlam Art Gallery, Cape Town, in 2024. (Source: Stefan Hundt)

decorations (*litema*) of the Basotho. Thus, the exhibition allowed visitors to rethink the use of the blankets as not just utilitarian items, but also as artistic pieces. In 2019, the blankets were exhibited again at Oliewenhuis Art Museum (Fig. 4) in celebration of the Africa Month²³.

Recently, the *Sutha ke fete* exhibition, which translates as “make way so I may pass” in Sesotho, was featured at the Sanlam art galleries in Cape Town and Johannesburg. These events highlighted the intricate and captivating patterns of Basotho blankets, blending traditional and modern styles. The display (Fig. 5) was open for public viewing from 20 March to 14 June 2024 at the Sanlam Art Gallery in Bellville, Cape Town²⁴, and was followed by

another showcase at the Sanlam Art Lounge in Sandton, Johannesburg, during the Heritage Month in September 2024.²⁵ The journey concluded with a final installation at the Oliewenhuis Art Museum, held from 19 September 2025 to 15 February 2026.

BLANKETS IN THE ROBERTSON COLLECTION

The Victoria England and Seanamarena blankets

The *Victoria England* is the oldest brand of the Basotho blankets; it made its debut in 1897 during Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee. It was originally named

23 Teboho Setena, ‘Basotho blankets on show,’ *News24*, June 5, 2019. <https://www.news24.com/basotho-blankets-on-show-20190604> (accessed 5.04.2026); Staff writer, ‘Africa month is celebrated in true Basotho traditional style,’ *SABC News Free State*, May 27, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/zBFBYqiCM7dM4VH5> (accessed 5.04.2026)

24 Staff writer, ‘Sutha Ke Fete: The art of the Basotho blanket at the Sanlam Art Gallery, South Africa,’ *ArtAfrica*, March 20, 2024. <https://artafricamagazine.org/sutha-ke-fete-the-art-of-the-basotho-blanket-at-the-sanlam-art-gallery-south-africa> (access 5.04.2026)

25 *Basotho Heritage Blanket exhibition at Sanlam, Alice Lane, Sandton until January 2025*. October 24, 2024. <https://www.lizatlan-caster.co.za/blog/basotho-blanket-exhibition-at-sanlam-alice-lane-sandton-until-january-2025> (accessed 5.04.2026); Sanlam, ‘Sutha ke Fete,’ *LinkedIn*, March 2024. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/sanlam_sutha-ke-fete-exhibition-at-sanlam-art-gallery-activity-7181908748527931393-_2Ah (accessed 5.04.2026)

“Victoria” in honour of Queen Victoria, a name which the Basotho people affectionately adapted to “*Lefitori*”²⁶ (Walton 1958; Danzinger 1979; Karstel 1995). Originally, the blankets bore the label “Victoria made in England”, signifying that they were manufactured in England. When the blankets were no longer produced overseas, the “made in” was dropped, and the brand became *Victoria England*, often abbreviated as *VE*. This rebranding elevated the blankets to a symbol of prestige, largely due to their exceptional quality and the regal connotations of the name Victoria. The *Victoria England* collection includes distinguished items such as the *Badges of the Brave*, *Malakabe* and the esteemed royal wedding blanket, all part of the Robertson Collection. *Victoria England* blankets are recognised by the “Original Royal Quality” label, a mark of great quality shared by all blankets of similar quality within the range.

One of the earliest designs from the *Victoria England* range was the leopard skin pattern (Sampson 2006: 11). It was inspired by the traditional leopard skin kaross that was only worn by royalty and symbolised nobility, strength, courage, victory and wisdom (Karstel 1995: 211). Due to the high-quality materials used, these blankets were expensive. Thus, more affordable variations such as the *Morena* (chief) blankets were introduced. The *Morena* range features various designs such as the *Nkoe* (Fig. 6), locally known as *Majoe* (stones) as it reminds Basotho of the stones used to build (or decorate) homes.

The *Badges of the Brave* (Fig. 7), another variant of the old *Victoria England* blanket, was designed during WWII by the Shrubsole brothers associated with Wormalds and Walker (Sampson 2006: 15) to honour the British and Allied Forces and in memory of the Basotho who lost their lives in the war (Unsworth 2017b). The *Badges of*

the Brave is regarded as a symbol of bravery and courage. This blanket range features a collection of motifs associated with various military divisions, including:

- the Springbok (South African forces),
- NZ (New Zealand forces),
- anchors (Royal Navy),
- RAF (Royal Air Force),
- Prince of Wales feathers (Welsh Regiment),
- deer (Scottish Highland Regiment),
- maple leaf (Canadian Regiment),
- field gun (Royal Artillery),
- tank (Royal Tank Regiment), and
- the Victoria Cross, representing military gallantry.

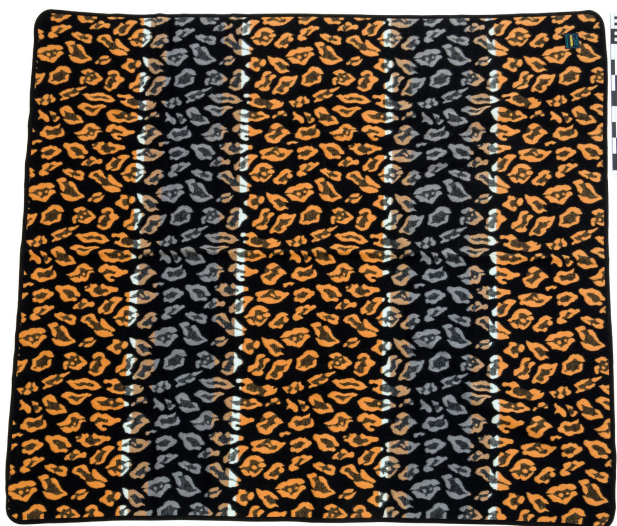


Figure 6: The *Morena Nkoe* design. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)



Figure 7: Two *Badges of the Brave* blankets, the top one featuring the pinstripes. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum and Oliewenhuis Art Museum)

²⁶ Mojela Masupha mentioned that in Lesotho, *VE* blankets are usually referenced using the term “*Lefitori la*” meaning “Victoria” followed by the name of the blanket. For example, “*Lefitori la Malakabe*” meaning “*Victoria Malakabe*” or simply *Malakabe*.



Figure 8: The *Malakabe* blanket. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

The continued presence of British insignia on Basotho blankets reveals a complex and historically layered relationship between the Basotho people and the British monarchy.²⁷ Originally introduced by textile manufacturers as a commercial strategy, these symbols have since been embraced and reimagined by the Basotho community. This transformation reflects a deeper process of cultural appropriation and symbolic rendition, where external emblems are absorbed and redefined within local contexts. As Marais (2017: 15) notes, such acts represent the indigenisation of Western institutional symbols within African cultural frameworks, giving rise to new semiotic meanings through translation and reinterpretation.

The *Malakabe* (Fig. 8), meaning flames, is also an old design that was reintroduced between the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to Tom Kritzinger²⁸ then a manager at Frasers in Johannesburg, the revival was prompted by a direct request from King Moshoeshoe II, who sought to reintroduce the historic design that had not been produced for many years. The blanket later gained elevated cultural and symbolic significance through Her Majesty Queen Mamohato, who frequently wore it at public events following the King's passing. Her public association with the blanket contributed to its widespread recognition and it subsequently became known as *Mamohato* in her honour.

More modern *Victoria England* designs include the royal wedding and *Motlatsi* blankets. The royal wedding blanket (Fig. 9) commemorates the marriage of King Letsie III and Queen Masenate Mohato Seeiso on 18



Figures 9, 10: (9, top) The Royal wedding blanket and (10, bottom) the *Motlatsi* blanket. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

February 2000. The design features a combination of the Basotho hat and crown, symbolising the Royal House of Lesotho, the Lesotho coat of arms, diamonds representing the nation's wealth, and mealies as a sign of prosperity. The *Motlatsi* blanket (Fig. 10), created in 2007, celebrates the birth of Crown Prince Lerotholi Seeiso, son of King Letsie III and Queen Masenate Mohato Seeiso. Although it is commonly referred to as *Motlatsi* (successor), it is also known under a more formal name *Khosana* (Prince). The blanket features a series of different hearts, which signify the heart of the nation. Some of the hearts resemble the crest²⁹, which is an important British symbol.

²⁷ Though meant to honour Basotho participation, the blanket lacks distinctly Sotho symbols. One version (Fig. 7) includes pinstripes, while the other does not. Despite their overall similarity, the two blankets feature subtle differences in the motif design.

²⁸ Correspondence via email and WhatsApp with T. Kritzinger, former Head of Sales and Marketing at Aranda Textiles (2021–2022). From here on, Tom Kritzinger will primarily be referred to by his surname.

²⁹ The crest appeared on the *Victoria England Crest* blanket that was introduced after the visit of the Prince of Wales to Lesotho in 1925 and is traditionally worn during marriage dowry proceedings (Karstel 1995).

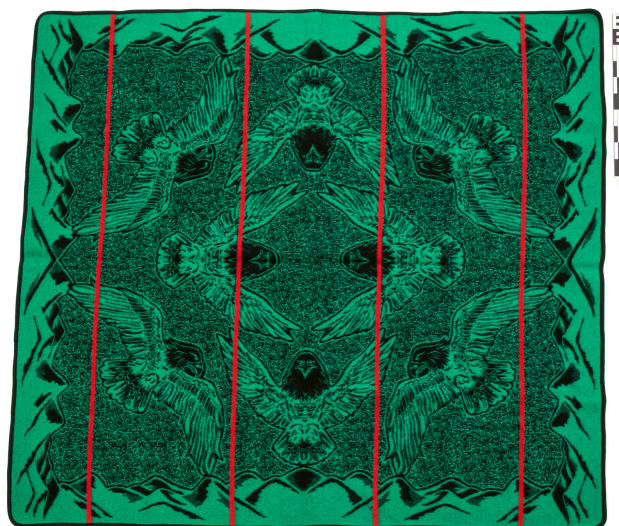


Figure 11: LCD blanket. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

Another *Victoria England* blanket in the collection is the *Nonyana* (Fig. 11), which has been made for the Lesotho Congress for Democracy. The design is known as *nonyana* (bird) and it features an eagle (the emblem of the party) against a backdrop of the Maluti Mountains. The colours (black and green with a red overstripe) are the representative colours of the party.

The *Seanamarena*³⁰ (“we have the honour to swear by the King”) enjoys the highest status of all Basotho blankets and is regarded as the ‘crown jewel’ among them. It was introduced in the 1930s by Charles Henry Robertson who owned a trading store in the Leribe district, the only place where the blankets could be found. Initially it was a *Victoria* blanket that was manufactured in England. According to the notes of Neil Robertson (grandson of C.H. Robertson), Standard Woollen Mills, which was based in Harrismith, acquired the license to manufacture the blankets in South Africa in the 1960s.³¹ It was during that decade when the name *Seanamarena* (Figs 12, 13) was officially registered. Only a limited number of these blankets were manufactured per year in the beginning, which increased people’s desire to possess one. Therefore, it became very popular and sought after (Karstel 1995). Over time, the *Seanamarena* has evolved into a powerful national symbol, with its bestowal regarded as one of the highest honours in the Basotho society (Fig. 14). Notably, the *Seanamarena* blankets also bear the “Original Royal Quality” label, denoting



Figures 12, 13: The *Poone* design (12, top) and the *Chromatic* design (13, bottom). (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum).

their exceptional craftsmanship and premium material composition.

The *Seanamarena* is available in two varieties:

- *Chromatic*³² design is possibly the oldest and features a honeycomb background and the Ace of Spades (Fig. 13). The Basotho call the design ‘skop’, which means ‘to dig’ (as in spade). The letters ‘Chr’ in the name of the design allegedly refer to the initials of Charles Henry Robertson.
- *Corncob* (*Poone*) design (Fig. 12) features the ear of corn (mealie, or *poone* in Sesotho) that symbolises growth and fertility. These blankets are still presented as gifts at wedding ceremonies.

30 Samples of the original English version of the Chromatic design by Mrs Lloyd for C.H. Robertson and manufactured by Wormald and Walker before the turn of the 20th century, are among the blankets that were loaned to the National Museum.

31 Unpublished notes of Neil Robertson, the grandson of C.H. Robertson, who loaned the blankets to the National Museum. Sampson (2006: 13) mentioned that the license was obtained by the Frame Group, which was the owner of Standard Woollen Mills since 1959 when they acquired the Harris Group (McDowell 2000: 95).

32 Apara Sesotho, ‘Seanamarena,’ *Instagram*, April 26, 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc0nuQiM3Yx> (accessed 5.04.2026). Apara Sesotho mentions that the chromatic design is also referred to as *Seanamarena sa Korone* (crown) (credit: Mojela Masupha). It is stated that the crown is embedded within the blanket’s design, where the pointed elements meet at the centre. Thus, the crown’s representation is intricately woven into the blanket’s central design. However, some argue the name is *Seanamarena sa Linaledi* (stars), while other believe it is *Seanamarena se Lipelo* (hearts).



Figure 14: Former President of the Republic of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk, in the *Chromatic* design alongside the late Chief Tsohiti Moli in the *Poone* design during President de Klerk's visit to QwaQwa in February 1994. (Source: National Museum).

Initially composed of approximately 90% wool, the material makeup of Basotho blankets has undergone significant transformation in response to shifting economic conditions and technological advances. In recent decades, the increased cost of raw wool has prompted a transition to a hybrid textile blend consisting of 50% merino wool and 50% dralon, a polyacrylic fibre. As noted by Kritzinger, the dralon component is sourced from a supplier in Germany, while the wool remains locally procured and processed within South Africa.³³ Despite the reduced wool content, Kritzinger asserts that the overall quality of the blankets has improved. This is attributable to the use of high-grade materials and technologically enhanced manufacturing processes.

Two blankets in the Robertson Collection bear the *Seanamarena* name on the labels, but are neither *Chromatic* nor *Poone* designs. One blanket features an image of Jesus Christ with two doves (one flying towards him and another at his feet) and two crosses with the words “*Pelo e tlotlehang*”, which means ‘Sacred Heart’ (Fig. 15A). The Sacred Heart symbol links the blanket to

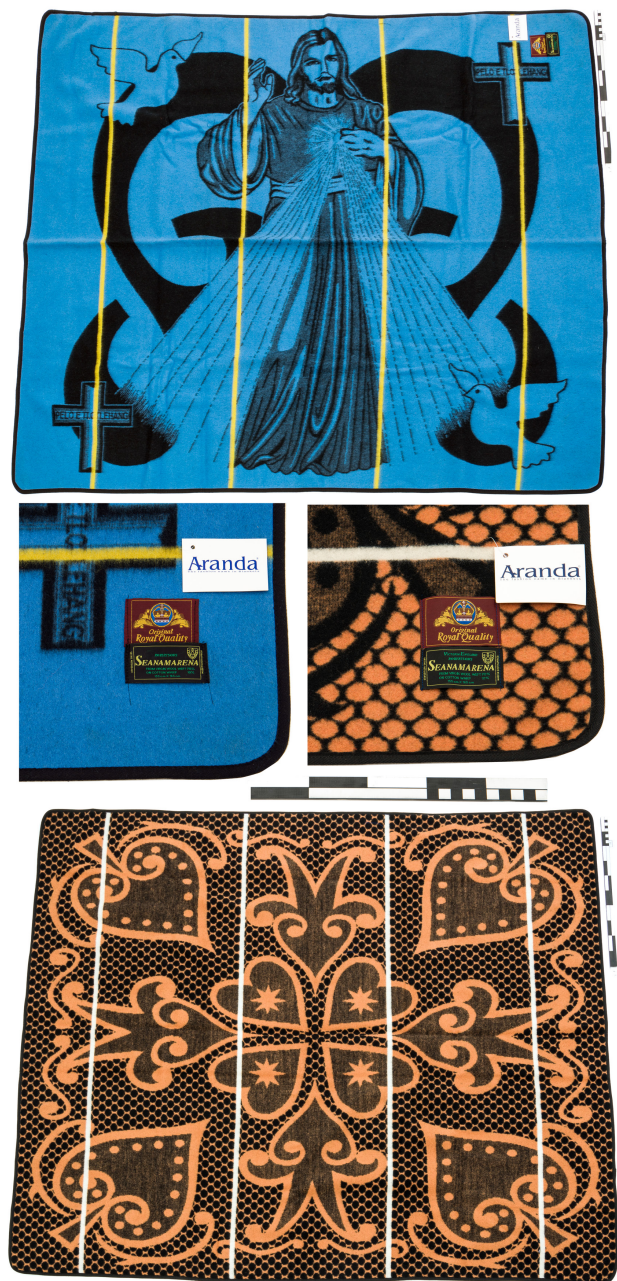


Figure 15: (A, top) Blanket with the image of Jesus Christ, (B, bottom) blanket with the *Morena Riet* design and *Seanamarena* label. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

the Catholic Church, but there are no records available to substantiate this claim and it could have been a limited or special edition made for the church³⁴. The Catholic Church has a significant presence in Lesotho, evidenced by its substantial membership.³⁵ This prominence extends to the nation's monarchy with a historical affiliation dating back to 1912 when Griffiths Lerotholi, who became Paramount Chief in 1913, converted to

³³ At a recent walkabout of the “*Sutha ke Fete*” exhibition, its curator Stefan Hundt mentioned that the wool is also sourced from Australia, because of the limited domestic production of wool in South Africa.

³⁴ This blanket may have been made at the time of Pope John Paul II's visit to Lesotho in 1988, or soon after to commemorate the event.

³⁵ Christian Council of Lesotho, ‘Roman Catholic Church.’ <https://ccl.org.ls/hoc/rcc> (accessed 5.04.2026)



Figure 16: *Sandringham* blanket designs. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

Catholicism (Ashton 1967). Those who came after him also became members of the church, so did most of their followers. It has become common practice for the different associations or guilds (particularly of women) within the different churches to have blankets with the church emblems as part of their attire.

The second blanket features the ace of spades, small hearts and other symbols (Fig. 15B). The design is exactly the same as that of the *Morena Riet*³⁶ (cards) blanket, which according to Kritzinger is possibly an imitation of the *Seanamarena* chromatic design. Kritzinger believes the *Seanamarena* label on those blankets was a mistake even if they were manufactured in the *Seanamarena* quality (Original Royal Quality). He said the “Aranda Basotho” label was created for such cases³⁷.

The revival of traditional blanket designs

Much like the *Malakabe*, several historic blanket designs have been revived in recent years. Among these are the *Sandringham*, *Serope sa Motsoetse* and others.

The *Sandringham*, named after the royal palace at Sandringham in England, is a thick and heavy blanket (Fig. 16) that has mostly been worn in the snow-covered highlands of Lesotho. It is one of the oldest blankets and has possibly been modelled upon blankets used by Queen Victoria when travelling, which were intended to keep the traveller warm and dry on a long journey. This blanket was manufactured with loops that were only cut afterwards by hand using a razor blade attached to a stick. The texture of the blanket reminded Basotho of the inside of a slaughtered lamb's stomach and they referred to it as *Mohodu* (Karstel 1995: 204–205, 214).

After the 1980s, the original *Sandringham* blanket became unavailable. It was reintroduced by Aranda in a different quality, as they could not achieve the surface effect of the original blanket and rebranded it as *Mohodu* (Fig. 17).



Figure 17: *Mohodu* blanket. (Source: Aranda Textiles, photographer: Chris Allan, model: Palo Mokoailane)

36 *Morena* blankets are popular for everyday wear. They are made from the same high-quality materials as *Seanamarena* and *VE* blankets (i.e. 50% merino wool and 50% dralon) and are sold at the same price.

37 Palesa Tladi (Integrated Marketing Manager at Aranda Textiles) has added that the Basotho label is used when a blanket does not have a specific name, or when it is a corporate blanket without a special label.



Figure 18: Serope blankets. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum).



Figure 19: Pitseng (top) and Khotso (bottom) blankets. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

Serope sa Motsoetse

The *Serope sa motsoetse*³⁸, also known as the *Serope* blanket (Fig. 18), has a soft and thick texture. It is made of 90% virgin wool weft and 10% cotton warp. The blanket, which was traditionally given to a wife by her husband after the birth of their first child, was popular in the mountainous regions as it provided protection against the cold weather (Karstel 1995). It was made under the *Monkeynut* and *Setsoto* (Fig. 18) labels. Karstel (1995: 212) mentioned that *Monkeynut* was originally *Magnet*, but it changed possibly as a result of the way it was pronounced by Basotho or due to the motifs that resemble a monkeynut. The name *Monkeynut* was then attached to *Magician* and became known as *Magician Monkeynut*. However, Pheto-Moeti (2020: 60) argued that the name *Magician* or *Monkeynut* was given to the blanket due to the static electricity generated by its fluffy wool, which was seen as magical.

Although Aranda discontinued production of the original *Serope sa motsoetse* blankets, they have since been reintroduced under the name *Monkeynut*.

Khotso blankets

Khotso blankets are produced exclusively from acrylic fibres. They come in various designs and most of them have been adapted from other blankets. For instance, the *Crown* and *Plumes*, originally the *Pitseng* design, can be seen on *Khotso* blankets. Additionally, numerous other designs from the *Pitseng*, *Pitso* and *Sefate* ranges have been adapted for use in *Khotso* blankets (Fig. 19). Decorative elements frequently reference Basotho cultural and national symbols such as the conical hat (*moko-rotho*), shield, spear, crocodile (*kwena/koena*), knobkerrie, maize, as well as motifs drawn from the national coat of arms. Notably, the playing card designs characteristic of *Sefate* blankets are also retained.

38 The word *serope* means 'thigh' and *motsoetse* refers to a woman who has recently given birth and is still nursing the child.

Old Frasers' catalogues feature many of these designs. However, following the closure of Frasers Ltd, some of them have eventually been discontinued (Karstel 1995).

Shawls and some commemorative blankets

Shawls are widely favoured, especially among Basotho women. The characteristic elements of the shawls are the fringes and checked pattern, but not all shawls have these

features. For example, the *Letlama Double Skotch* had the fringes (Fig. 20), but not the checked pattern. This shawl, created by Colin Tunnington of Brand Distributors, was made entirely of acrylic. Unfortunately, it is no longer available due to the closure of the manufacturing company. However, Aranda continues to produce various traditional shawls, including the *Matlama*, which is sometimes confused with the *Letlama*. The *Matlama* shawl, first produced in South Africa after the 1920s, traces its origin to the hand-woven Italian *Lake Shawl* (Karstel 1995: 205).

The majority of the shawls (*Isle shawl*, *Lusso*, *Top suede* and *Letlama*) were made from 100% acrylic, with the exception of the *Matlama* and *Glenroy* reversible shawls (Fig. 21) that were made from about 70% wool.

The Leseli blanket

The *Leseli* blanket (Fig. 22) was designed in memory of the founder of the Basotho nation, King Moshoeshoe I, and is commonly known as *Leseli*, meaning 'light' in reference to Moshoeshoe I saying "*Ke bone leseli*" ('I have seen the first light of day') when opening the door



Figures 20, 21: (20) *Letlama Double Skotch* shawl and its label, (21) *Glenroy* reversible shawl. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

Figures 22, 23: (22, top) *Leseli* and (23, bottom) *Batho ba Roma* blankets. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

of his hut upon rising in the morning. It features ears of wheat, mealies/corn cob (*poone*) and swallows. The *poone*, which symbolises growth and fertility, is a popular blanket motif.

Batho ba Roma

The *Batho ba Roma*³⁹ (Fig. 23) was made to commemorate Pope John Paul II's visit to Lesotho in 1988. Its design incorporates symbolic motifs such as church windows arranged in the form of a holy cross, alongside the bishop's mitre and crozier. These elements reflect the deep significance of the Roman Catholic Church, which has a great number of adherents in Lesotho.

CONTINUITY, NEW DESIGNS AND THE ROLE OF THE ROYAL FAMILY

The intricately patterned blankets continue to hold much significance for even relatively Westernised Basotho and are a common feature among Basotho in Lesotho and South Africa. Kritzinger mentioned that during the 1980s, when he was still at Frasers, the late King Moshoeshe II called him and expressed his concerns about Basotho becoming too Westernised. The King then gave him some old design ideas that he wanted to be revived and those were included the *Malakabe* (flame) design, which was made popular by Queen Mamohato after the King's passing. Aranda still manufactures the *Malakabe* blanket along with other traditional blankets like *Moholobela*

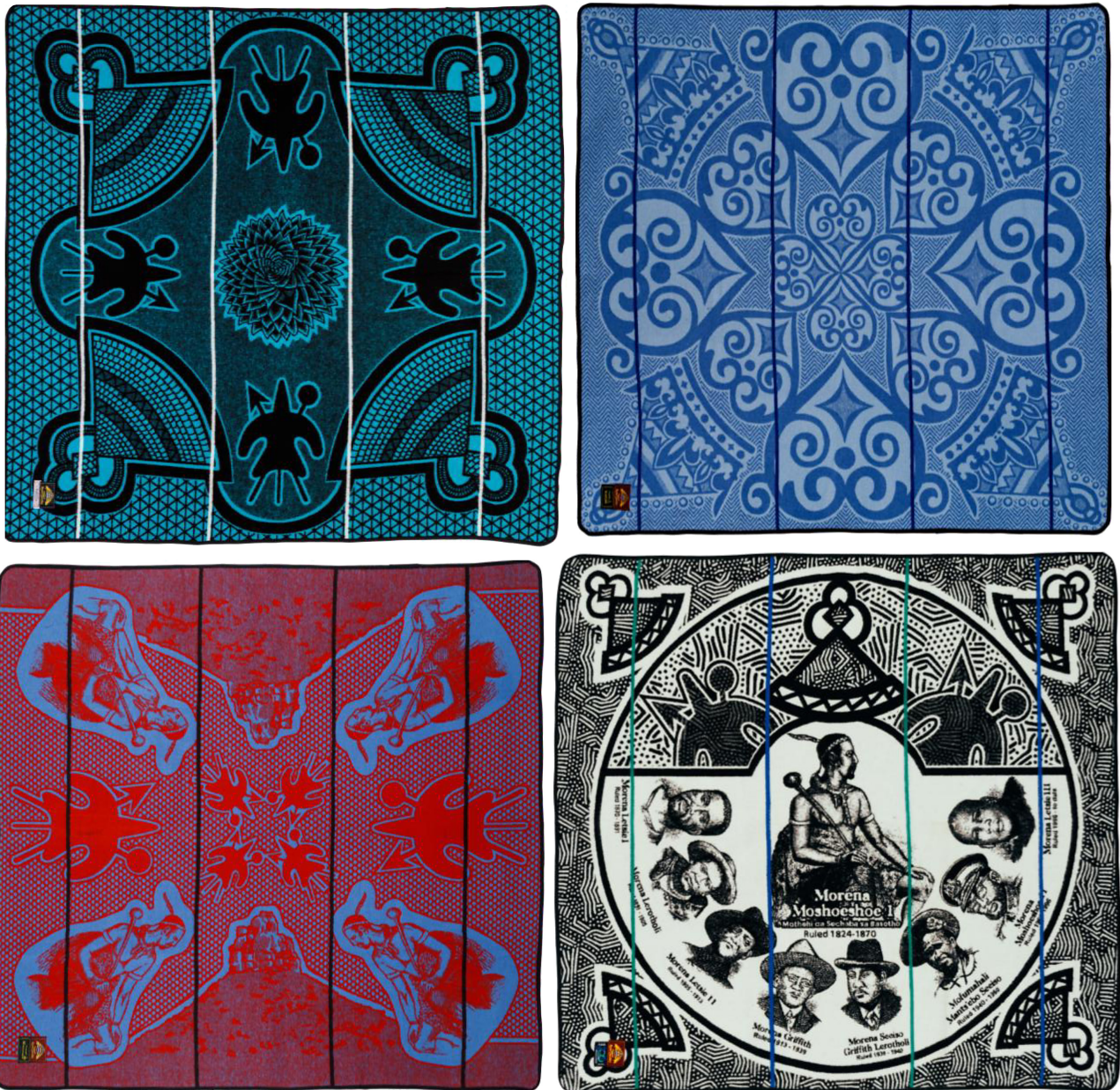


Figure 24: Kharetsa, Marona, Moshoeshe and Chabana sa Khomo blankets. (Source: Aranda Textiles)

39 The name *Batho ba Roma* means 'People of the Roman Catholic Church'.

and *Seanamarena*. Kritzinger mentioned that the *Serope sa Motsoetse* was discontinued, because the market for the blanket was not viable. However, it has since been reintroduced as *Monkeynut* as discussed in the previous sections. Similarly, the *Sandringham* was reintroduced in a different quality and rebranded as *Mohodu*. Certain blankets such as *Badges of the Brave* are still available, but only a limited number is produced per annum.

After the 1990s, several new designs were introduced, including *Moshoeshoe*, *Kharetsa* (inspired by the spiral aloe) and *Marona* (Fig. 24). Most of these blankets were created to honour the Royal Family, as evident in their names and designs. For example, *Marona* (meaning 'our mother') is a tribute to the late Queen Mamohato and it depicts a crown motif and hearts, which symbolise the kindness and love she had for Basotho. The *Moshoeshoe* blanket features the icon of Moshoeshoe I, the founder of the Basotho nation, with the Qiloane Mountain⁴⁰ and Basotho shields. It was developed in 2012 by Libuseng Titi of Maseru, owner of Blanket Parlour and Specialist Blanket Boutique in the Pioneer Shopping Mall and Sefika Shopping Complex, in Maseru. Kritzinger explained that "the shields in the centre are arranged in such a way that they form the Victoria Cross, which was purely by coincidence and testament of how the lives of Queen Victoria and King Moshoeshoe I were intertwined"⁴¹. The *Kharetsa*, a name derived from the unique spiral aloe endemic to Lesotho's Maluti Mountains, holds significant cultural value. This distinctive aloe is central to the design, enclosed by the traditional Basotho hat and shield emblems.

The Royal Family plays a central role in the socio-cultural production and legitimisation of Basotho blanket designs, situated within the broader discourse of material culture. Their public appearances in these blankets, particularly during ceremonial and state functions, serve as a strategic means of promoting emerging designs. Through such embodied displays, the Royal Family not only affirms the blankets' ritual and symbolic value, but also contributes to their dynamic evolution, ensuring their continued relevance within contemporary expressions of identity and heritage.

In recent years, Aranda Textiles has been working with young designers, mostly from Lesotho, to develop new ideas that appeal to the younger generations with the purpose of preserving the Basotho blanket wearing tradition. These designs are promoted among youth through the Aranda Royal Fashion Affair that takes place annually in Lesotho and on other platforms like social media. Kritzinger explains that the project is

called *The Young Basotho Designer's Collection* and it aims to empower young Basotho designers to showcase their work. The initiative facilitates the creative process where young talents can contribute to the rich blanket tradition that is woven into the fabric of the Basotho culture (Figs 30–44). The following designers were part of the 2021/2022 inaugural club of the *Young Basotho Designers Collection*: Masikane Masike, Mokete Mohapi, Khosi Leteba, Ntate Stunna (influencer, rapper), Tshepo Pitso 'Material Don Dada' (influencer, rapper) and Alice Bereng (based in Texas, USA). The designs of Masikane Masike and Mokete Mohapi are respectively called *Majabajaba* (Fig. 31) and *Mokorotlo* (Fig. 32) both feature the conical hat in various styles⁴².

Other designs from the 2021/2022 collection include *Bodulo* (residence, Fig. 30), *Diaspora* (the diamonds and maize designs, Fig. 33), *Lerato la Basotho* (love of the Basotho people, Fig. 41), *Lipere tsa Pitso* (Pitso's horses, Fig. 42), *Lithota* (plains, open field) and *Manoti a Korianana* (sounds/notes of the accordion, Fig. 44).⁴³ The *Bodulo* design features mountains, the *mokorotlo* hat, crops, and horses, which all depict the traditional lifestyle of the Basotho. The designs come in various colours and are manufactured in the Original Royal Quality standard, same quality as *Seanamarena* and *Victoria England* blankets. In celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Basotho nation, Aranda Textiles unveiled blankets named *Chabana sa Khomo*⁴⁴ (the cow nation) (Fig. 24). These unique items are adorned with the portraits of the Basotho nation's leaders through history up to the present day. An image of King Moshoeshoe I is placed in the middle surrounded by his royal successors, including the present monarch, King Letsie III. The blanket also honours the legacy of Chieftainess Mantsébo Seeiso, who reigned from 1941 to 1960, as regent on behalf of her stepson Constantine Bereng Seeiso (King Moshoeshoe II), who was a minor when his father, Paramount Chief Seeiso Griffith passed away. The traditional shield (with the spear and knobkerrie) and *mokorotlo* hat are also included in the design. Completing this historic design is the official Lesotho bicentenary logo, which is intricately woven into the label.

Traditional symbols such as the *mokorotlo*, coat of arms, maize and the wearing lines continue to feature prominently on most of the contemporary designs. In addition, the new models have integrated elements such as cattle or calves, calabashes, mountain ranges, horses and diamonds, which serve as emblematic representations of the Basotho cultural heritage and traditional lifestyle.

40 The conical mountain close to Thaba Bosiu, which inspired the design of the traditional Basotho hat known as *mokorotlo* and *modi-anyewe*.

41 E-mail and WhatsApp communication with T. Kritzinger, former Head of Sales and Marketing at Aranda Textiles, 2021–2022.

42 Sources for the information were Tom Kritzinger and the Aranda Textiles website (<https://www.aranda.co.za>; accessed 10.08.2022)

43 The 2024 range offers new designs such as *Sabole*, *Nalane*, *Kobo ea Poloko*, *Ngoale*, *Litema*, *Letsatsi*, *Likhomo* and *Leisa* (Figs 34–40).

44 Basotho men usually sang a song titled *Chabana sa Khomo* while scraping the skin of an animal to make a blanket. African Composers Edition, 'Chabana Sa Khomo (the Cow Nation)', <https://african-composers-edition.co.za/product/chabana-sa-khomo/?srsltid=AfmBOoohw-RTYzgB8kg1JKqKGz0vkOvkA28m9PLF9YzQcqtRj> (accessed 5.04.2026)

APPRECIATION AND INSPIRATION OUTSIDE OF THE TRADITIONAL CONTEXT

A South African fashion designer, Thabo Makhetha-Kwinana⁴⁵, is known for her fashion line that features coats, capes, scarfs and jackets made from Basotho blankets

(Fig. 25). Her designs are made from various blankets such as *Seanamarena*, *Motlatsi*, *Kharetsa*, *Matlama* (*Letlama*) and other shawls. Thabo Makhetha-Kwinana describes her designs as “a modern take on the traditional Basotho blanket”, which showcases her cultural heritage as a Mosotho woman. Her work was spotlighted in South



Figure 25: Thabo Makhetha-Kwinana designs for men and women. (Source: Thabo Makhetha-Kwinana)

⁴⁵ Information about Thabo Makhetha-Kwinana was obtained from her website (<https://thabomakhetha.com>) and WhatsApp conversations with her team (2021).

Africa, Lesotho, the United Kingdom, Italy, as well as during the Vancouver Fashion Week in Canada where she made her runway debut in 2014. She has received numerous accolades, has been featured in publications across the globe, and has inspired many designers who are using not just the Basotho and Ndebele heritage blankets and the shawls to create diverse clothing items such as coats, jackets, ponchos, scarves, hats, bags, etc.⁴⁶

Basotho blankets were also featured in the blockbuster movie *Black Panther* as the traditional clothing of one

of the imaginary Wakanda tribes, known as the Border tribe (Coogler 2018; Fig. 26). In the movie, the blankets had additional decoration made of vibranium (a fictional metal noted for its ability to absorb, store and release large amounts of energy), which gave the wearers protective powers. The appearance of the blanket in the movie gave them international recognition⁴⁷.

When Louis Vuitton presented its 2017 menswear collection inspired by the Basotho blankets, it stirred considerable controversy (see Pietilä 2022, who discussed



Figure 26: Basotho blankets worn by members of the Border tribe in the movie *Black Panther*. (Source: Coogler 2018)

46 <https://thabomakhetha.com> (accessed 14.10.2024)

47 <https://blackpanthercostu.me/wkabi-the-border-tribe> (accessed 5.04.2026)

this issue at length). The inclusion of Basotho blanket motifs in the designs ignited a debate about the fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. The backlash stemmed from concerns that the fashion house had commodified a deeply emblematic item of the Basotho heritage without adequate engagement with or acknowledgment of its cultural origins. Critics argued that Louis Vuitton's incorporation of these motifs exemplified cultural appropriation, particularly because the designs were presented without meaningful collaboration with Basotho communities or efforts to contextualise the blanket's historical and cultural significance (Pietilä 2022). As Lunde (2018) and Hurst and Manona (2023) suggest, such instances underline the urgent need for the fashion industry to develop frameworks that distinguish respectful cultural exchange from exploitative appropriation. These frameworks must prioritise transparency, consent and equitable representation to ensure that creative expression does not come at the expense of marginalised cultural narratives.

SYMBOLIC ROLE OF BLANKETS IN GROUP IDENTITY AND NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS

While Basotho blankets are often powerful symbols of cultural heritage, solidarity and shared values among the Basotho, they have also been used in ways that marked exclusion, division and othering. In the early 1940s, the blankets became popular with some Basotho gangs who adopted them as part of their group attire. For example, the *Ma-Rashea*⁴⁸ gangs were renowned for consistently wearing Basotho blankets. They paired the blankets with black trousers, matching black shoes, and a *molamu* (traditional fighting stick), which was often tucked within the folds of the blanket (Guy & Thabane 1987). A member of the *Ma-Rashea* explained how factions could be identified by their different blankets:

“Tsotsi, a member of a Russian gang in Soweto, explains that the Matsieng ‘wore *Mafitori* blankets which were red with aeroplane emblems in front’. The Ha-Molapo wore a blanket called *Thapo ya Seeiso* which was black with stripes at the side.” (Bonner & Segal 1998: 36).

The variations of colour and brand were also evident among other gangs. Pheto-Moeti (2020: 179) discusses how the red and yellow *Seanamarena* as well as the red and black *Matlama* were associated with *Famo* groups that were fighting with each other. “Yellow is the colour of *Terene*, one of the largest groups; blue and black the mark of another, *Seakhi*” (Whewell 2022). The rivalry between different groups in Lesotho has sparked years of deadly gang warfare. Community members who wore these blankets sometimes found themselves in danger of being associated with members of rival gangs.



Figure 27: Painting of a Mosotho man standing by the roadside and wearing the *Badges of the Brave* blanket. (Source: Anthropology Collection, National Museum)

Karstel (1995: 199) also mentions that during the British royal tour in 1947, people wearing blankets “did not feature prominently” in the photographs. However, a famous picture of a Mosotho man standing by the roadside during the procession wearing the *Badges of the Brave* blanket suggests the opposite (Fig. 27). It was reported that the painting had been originally commissioned by the late Queen Elizabeth (when she was still a Princess) after their royal tour (Sampson 2006). Princess Elizabeth allegedly instructed the official photographer to take a photo of the Mosotho gentleman with his horse, wearing a *Badges of the Brave* blanket. The painting was done by Mr Schrubsole of Wormald and Walker Mills, designer of the *Badges of the Brave* blanket.

CONCLUSION

The Basotho blanket transcends its utilitarian origins to emerge as a potent symbol of national identity, cultural authority and collective belonging. Its transformation from animal hides to woollen textiles signifies not merely a functional adaptation, but a profound rearticulation of symbolic meaning. As Ellenberger (Ellenberger &

48 The *Ma-Rashea* (Russians) gang was formed by adult Basotho migrants working and living in South African cities and mines during the late 1940s (Kynoch 2005).



Figures 28, 29: (28, top) *Matlama* shawl with fringes and (29, bottom) fringeless *Matlama* shawl. (Source: Aranda Textiles)

Macgregor 1912) noted in his study of the early Sotho regalia, these garments embody multi-layered significances that permeate various artistic domains, including mural art, pottery and architecture. In this regard, the blanket functions as a channel for the transmission of rich artistic traditions and cultural symbolism. Its adornment serves as a visual affirmation of unity and shared identity among the Basotho people, whose emphasis on outward appearance has historically shaped the design and ornamentation of their attire.

Central to the continuation and evolution of this tradition is the enduring influence of the Lesotho Royal Family. Their authoritative role in the endorsement and promotion of blanket designs has been instrumental in

safeguarding cultural continuity while simultaneously influencing public taste. This legacy, started by public acceptance of a trader's gift by King Moshoeshoe I, persists in contemporary times through the monarchy's active engagement in commissioning and legitimising blanket motifs that resonate with Basotho heritage.

The partnership between companies like Aranda Textiles, the Royal Family and local artists shows how tradition and modern creativity are carefully balanced. This collaboration demonstrates the community's role in shaping and preserving its heritage, anchoring collective memory while embracing generational transformation. The engagement of the Basotho youth further illustrates that cultural traditions are not passively inherited, but are

continually reinterpreted and revitalised, affirming the resilience and adaptability of cultural transmission. As Basotho blankets gain global fashion recognition, they spark debate on cultural appropriation and representation ethics. The ‘Louis Vuitton controversy’ highlights the need of acknowledging the communities as custodians of cultural heritage, not just aesthetic sources.

Ultimately, the Basotho blanket constitutes more than a garment; it is a living archive that captures the

intersections of the material culture, gendered expression and social imagination. Through the stewardship of the Royal Family, its legacy continues to evolve, endure and inspire as it is woven into the fabric of Basotho daily life and identity.

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(see References on p. 29)



Figure 30: *Bodulo* blanket. (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan; model: Ronnie Lesadiwa Mahlakwane)



Figure 31: *Majabajaba* blanket. (Credit: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan; model: Ronnie Lesadiwa Mahlakwane)



Figure 32: *Mkorotlo* blanket. (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan; model: Bonolo Mabena)

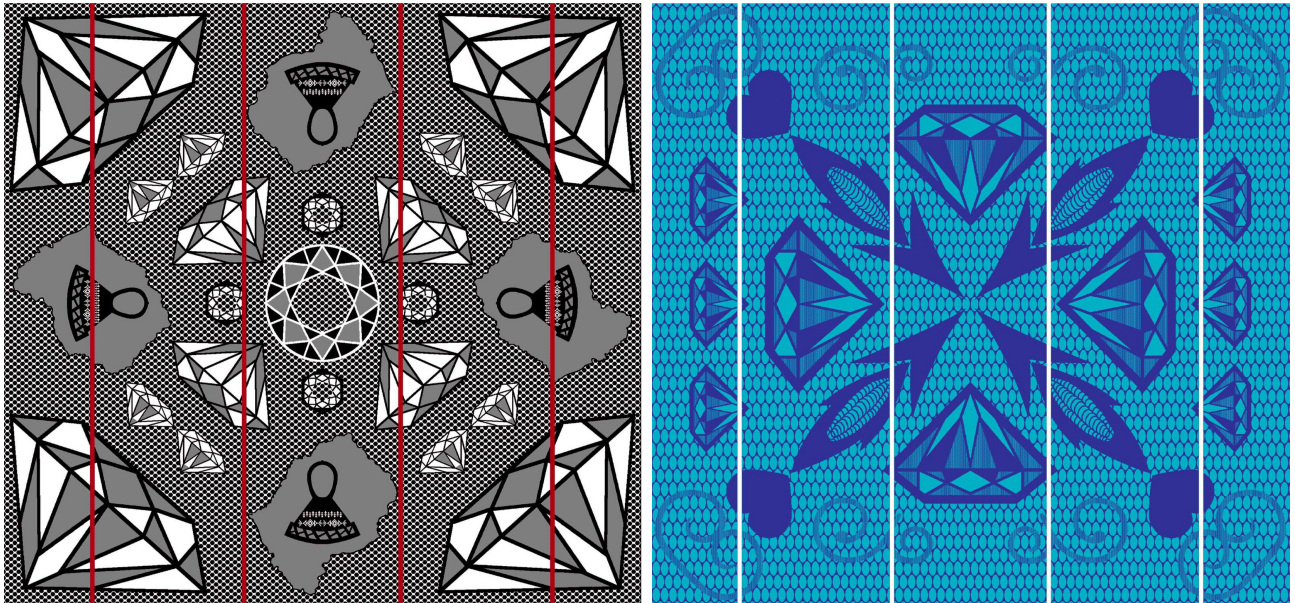
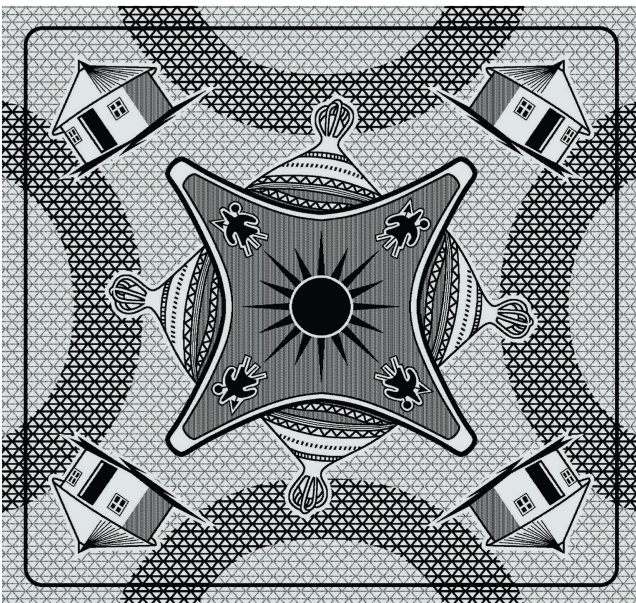


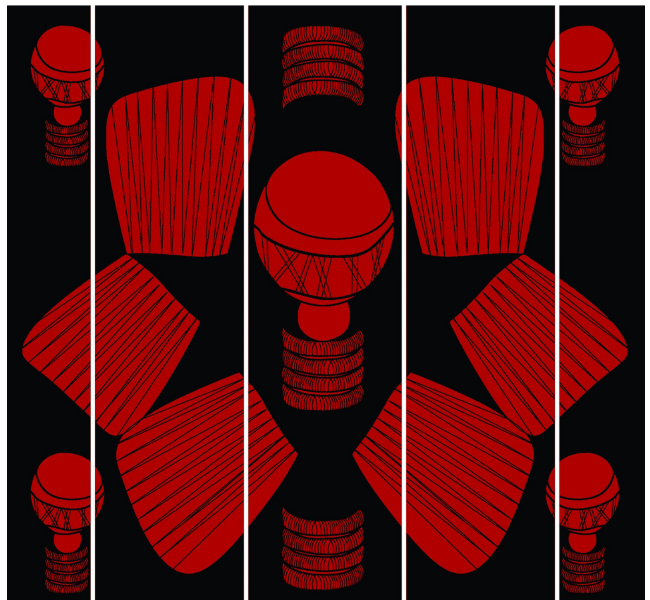
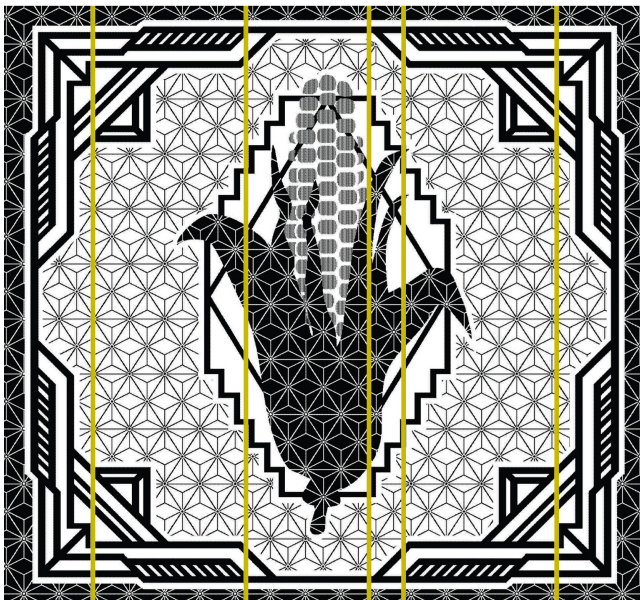
Figure 33: *Diaspora Diamond* (left) and *Diaspora Maize* (right). (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan)



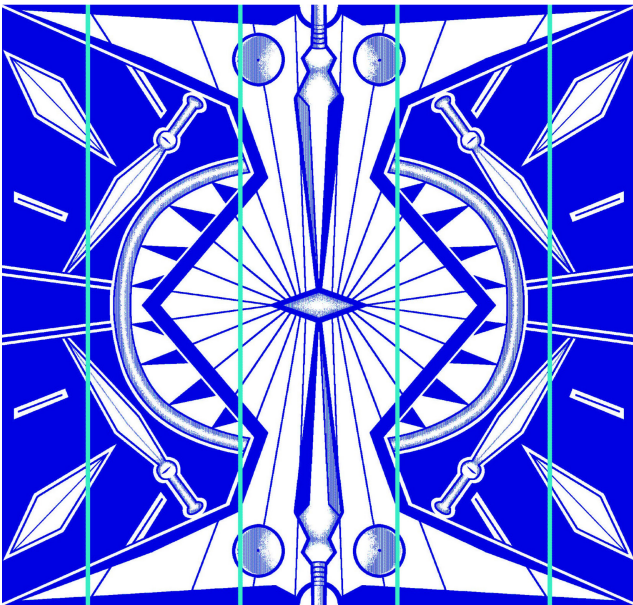
Figures 34, 35: (34, left) *Nalane* blanket, model Nteboheng Monyane; (35, right) *Leisa* blanket, model and designer Kamohelo Chabana. (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan)



Figures 36, 37: (36, left) *Letsatsi* blanket, model and designer Khethang Morusu Hlalele; (37) *Likhomo* blanket, model and designer Lintle Pholo. (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan)



Figures 38, 39: (38, left) *Litema* blanket, model and designer Samuel Nthakana; (39, right) *Ngoale* blanket, model and designer Matabe Lonia Tsáuli. (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan)



Figures 40, 41: (40, left) *Sabole* blanket, model and designer Khauhelo Lephema; (41, right) *Lerato la Basotho* blanket, model and designer Tshepo Pitso 'Don Dada'. (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan)



Figures 42, 43: (42, left) *Lipere tsa Pitso* blanket; (43, right) *Dithota* blanket. (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan; model and designer: Tshepo Pitso 'Don Dada')



Figure 44: *Manoti a koriana* blanket. (Source: Aranda Textiles; photographer: Chris Allan; model and designer: Ntate Stunna)

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