

Livestock Production

I've shown how conservation bureaucrats are working to slow the flow of water downslope in Lesotho's upland catchments through social reforms to the administration of grazing, but I haven't said much about the livestock themselves—the livestock production that is seen as a problem for water production. In this chapter and the next, I consider the kinds of livestock being raised, the uses to which they are put, and the effects they have on the landscape.

Recall how the 1935 Pim Report that I described in chapter 2 marked a watershed moment in the country's fight against soil erosion. The legacies of that report and its fluvial imagination are still present today as Lesotho works to protect its land for the sake of producing water commodities. The report provided the British colonial administration with an assessment of Basutoland's economic potential, determining that soil erosion was "the most immediately pressing of the many great problems which now confront the Administration."¹ Pim made three primary recommendations, which were implemented soon after the report was published. First, he suggested that soil conservation programs be rolled out across the country, efforts I described in chapter 3. Second, he suggested a reduction in the number of chiefs so as to streamline the administration of the colony, particularly with regard to land management, which I outlined in chapter 4. Finally, this chapter turns to the third recommendation: the construction of bridle paths to link highlands wool producers with lowland markets. That initiative, it turns out, was wildly successful—in ways that threaten water production today. With the decline of Basotho employment in South Africa, labor is no longer exploitable and exportable, encouraging the commodification not only of water by the government but of livestock by ordinary people.²

THE OVICAPRINE MYSTIQUE

An older man, perhaps in his sixties, appeared in the doorway of the village court, cutting a silhouette in the bright morning sunlight that poured into the room. As per custom, he leaned his herding stick (*molamu*) against the wall outside and removed his knit hat as he entered. The man greeted the handful of people in the room with a slight bow, a two-handed wave, and a quiet greeting, “Hello everyone” (*Lumelang*), before sitting next to me. Opening up a black plastic bag he was holding on his wrist, he carefully pulled out three small booklets and a folded piece of paper, which he proceeded to unfold and hand to the chief (*morena*). The chief and the secretary (*mongoli*) were seated at the front of the room behind an old, rickety table painted in the turquoise color so often used in Lesotho on doors, window frames, and furniture. It was early in my fieldwork in the rural Lesotho highlands, and I had come to the court to sort through the criticism and praise I had heard about chiefs in their management of grazing land. One of the primary sites where everyday people interact with these figures is the village court, called *lekhotla* in Sesotho—a place people visit to settle disputes, to obtain the chief’s stamp and signatures for official documents, or to register their livestock. I arrived first thing in the morning to see it for myself.

When the man returned to his seat, I asked him why he had come to the *lekhotla*. He explained that he was selling two sheep. The small booklets that he carried were livestock registration books distributed by the Ministry of Home Affairs that keep an account of his livestock—their type, sex, and markings—with a stamp and signature from his chief. The paper he handed to the chief was a letter written by the man that requested the transfer of title to the buyer—a young, local man named Tumisang.

The room slowly filled with people, nearly all of whom did just as this man: they entered, handed a letter to the chief, and waited. For each case, the chief read the letter and wrote up a *bewys* (Sesotho: *babeisi*), an Afrikaans word for a title, or proof of ownership. The *bewys* listed the name of the seller and buyer and was carbon-copied in a government-issued receipt book. The secretary signed the *bewys*, updated the buyer’s and seller’s livestock registration books, and had them place their fingerprints on the carbon copy. There were so many people that the chief and the secretary did their work in batches, taking seven to ten receipts and then calling the parties up two by two to have them affix their fingerprints all at once. The sellers included young men and old men—but also several women. This was surprising, given that women are conventionally known to lack access to livestock property, according to the ethnographic record.³ The buyers, however, were exclusively men, and mostly young men. I was intrigued. First, given what has been written about the reticence of Basotho to sell livestock, even during punishing droughts,⁴ why were all these livestock being bought and sold? Second, how could

these young men, almost none of whom had access to formal employment, be purchasing livestock?

I asked which type of animal people were selling, and invariably it was sheep and goats—mostly sheep. At the end of the day, I asked the secretary how many animals were sold. “Forty-seven,” he said. I asked him about how many animals were sold each month, and he did some quick math—they go through about one hundred to two hundred receipts each month on average and each sale includes about one to five animals. He thought about it and told me that he estimates about two hundred to three hundred animals are sold every month—mostly sheep and goats—with perhaps four hundred to five hundred being sold during the months of December and January, when school fees must be paid and when the maize harvest is not yet in, as well as April and May, when the animals are fat and fetch a good price. I asked him how these young men could afford the livestock, and he explained that most would not keep the animals. Instead, they would take them in the next few weeks over the border to Qwa-Qwa, the former “Bantustan” for South African Basotho that formed part of apartheid’s system of segregation until South African independence, where the livestock would be sold to butcheries. I asked if they were selling the old livestock (*maqheku*), which James Ferguson described as being saleable during his research in the 1980s. No, he said, the livestock being sold are younger animals that will be desirable to butchers.

This economic traffic seemed uncanny in this small, mountain village that was home to just a few thousand people. It’s not only men from this village who are trekking these animals to Qwa-Qwa, he added, but from towns all over the north-east highlands. He and I agreed that there must be well over a thousand animals sold in Qwa-Qwa every month.

In the pages below I track down this mystery—why hundreds of livestock are being sold each month between rural villagers with little money in a place where livestock are supposedly not often sold. I draw a contrast between the sale of “small stock” (*likhutšoanyane*) like sheep and goats and the sale of cattle, and consider what they say about how rural people are navigating the water-export era.

A focus on the nature of commodification can illuminate this situation and its implications for the water-export economy, including the ways it shapes the flow of water across the landscape. Conservation workers, development experts, and anthropologists have long scrutinized cattle in Africa for their social function and resistance to commodification. Ironically, water has served the same function in the literature,⁵ as described in chapter 1. I argue that sheep and goats are similarly significant—not because of the obstacles they pose to commodification but because of the *ease* with which they are commodified. The charisma of noncapitalist, cattle-mediated social relations in Africa have distracted these experts, blinding them to the livelihood and landscape implications of readily commodified sheep and goats. James Ferguson’s concept, the “bovine mys-

tique,”⁶ described a set of cultural rules and political contexts that circumscribed the sale of cattle in ways that puzzled development and conservation workers. In dialogue with Ferguson’s work, I describe what I call the “ovicaprine mystique,” a set of conditions that have enabled a puzzlingly vigorous production and exchange of small stock. Whether partially commodified, as in the case of cattle, or fully commodified, as the case of sheep and goats, commodities are always textured by their dynamic cultural particularity. Even when commodification appears effortless, I argue, it is a contingent achievement, requiring both agency and specific political, environmental, and symbolic conditions.

In Lesotho, sheep and goats have been produced in huge numbers for the better part of a century—specifically, for their wool and mohair sold in global textile markets. Owing to the ingenuity and entrepreneurialism of many rural Basotho, sheep and goats have repeatedly been used as a means of making a living in the seams of an oppressive regional political economy.⁷ Ovicaprid production in Lesotho first expanded in the late nineteenth century, when commoner Basotho sought to settle in the country’s upper highlands and wrest themselves from the control of the chieftaincy.⁸ Over time, as Lesotho was marginalized and transformed from an agricultural center to a labor reserve for South African industry, small stock production became both a retirement strategy for miners returning from South Africa and part of an economic dreamworld into which young men and women imagined themselves.⁹ They introduced improved breeds into their herds, and Lesotho became a major producer of wool and mohair, today producing a fifth of the world’s mohair—the second largest producer of mohair after South Africa.¹⁰

Their use is shifting with Lesotho’s transformation from labor reserve to water reservoir, and conservation projects to protect water production bump into them around every corner. With the collapse of mining employment for Lesotho citizens in the late 1980s, the entrepreneurial dream in which ovicaprids figured as a source of retirement income dissolved. Instead, they occupy the vanguard of a new entrepreneurial dream—one that was first revealed to me during my visit to the *lekhotla*. Though farmers continue to produce wool and mohair, small stock have shifted from retirement strategy to full-fledged occupation, increasing the pace with which the animals are raised and sold. By integrating mutton breeds into their herds, rural Basotho are developing dual-purpose animals whose wool and mohair clip is sold annually, but can be sold at a moment’s notice to South African butcheries. Small stock are newly enrolled as intimate figures in the economic dreamworlds of Basotho eager to find a future in Lesotho’s water-export era. In the rubble of old arrangements, new opportunities are found. What has remained the same over time, however, has been the danger and precarity of Basotho’s position vis-à-vis South Africa. Like the danger of life on the mines, transporting ovicaprids over the border is a risky proposition.

THE BOVINE MYSTIQUE

As understood by water engineers and conservation bureaucrats described earlier in this book, livestock are a threat to water production. The problem engineers seek to overcome is the specific position of livestock in Basotho society, namely as a noncommodity. In this, they share an interest with anthropologists. Like water, livestock have been central to anthropologists' theorization of the commodity form and its relationship to social structure. Since Melville Herskovits described the "cattle complex" in eastern and southern Africa,¹¹ anthropologists have drawn attention to cattle's imbrication in a variety of social institutions, including religion, politics, economy, and more,¹² depicted as a Maussian "total social fact,"¹³ and a site for exploring how African societies respond to urbanization and cash economies.¹⁴ This imbrication complicates their rendering as straightforward, capitalist commodities for market exchange,¹⁵ making cattle a key site for understanding social and symbolic systems, particularly as relationships to cattle are reworked by shifting political economies.¹⁶

James Ferguson's work was crucial to this conversation.¹⁷ Debunking the perception among conservation and development experts that cattle were an "obsession" of Basotho seeking social status—an obsession that experts said led to unsustainably large herds and land degradation—he showed instead that cattle ownership needed to be understood with reference to kinship and political economy. Development workers were right, Ferguson explained, that cattle were not treated like an ordinary commodity. They were only commodified according to cultural rules that produced a one-way barrier to sale, what he called the "mystique": cattle could be bought but not sold. As described elsewhere in Southern Africa, as well as in the Sudan, cash was seen as transitory, whereas cattle worked as a "dam" against the flow of cash.¹⁸ Through bridewealth payments known as *lobola* and other livestock leasing arrangements (e.g., *mafisa*), cattle extended social ties through time and space. Moreover, these cattle-keeping practices were not holdovers from a timeless precolonial past. Instead, the rules that governed cattle exchange reflected the politics of the contemporary labor-migration economy. Examining when and why Basotho preferred to sell or keep their animals, Ferguson illustrated how the terms of ownership were contested across gender and generational lines: young men working at the mines saw little benefit from paying *lobola* when compared with older people for whom periodic bridewealth payments were a source of wealth into old age. Miners also sought to purchase cattle as a means of preventing their wives from accessing cash for household goods such as food or clothing. As cash, women were socially able to make claims on wealth—but not as livestock.

When a conservation-development project sought to establish a beef-production industry in the rural areas where many of Lesotho's livestock are located, Ferguson showed, the effort failed because it misunderstood cattle's position within society. Cattle resisted commodification through beef production, not

because of an “irrational” obsession with social status as conservation and development experts said, but because of kinship relations and local power dynamics, which themselves were configured by the structural conditions of the regional political economy.

Anthropologists have been less interested in applying this same kind of scrutiny to what I think of as “clean-break commodities”: goods that seem to disarticulate easily from social relations and the conditions of their production.¹⁹ Contrast, for example, the attention given to African cattle with the sparse mention of African sheep and goats. Where small stock are discussed, they tend to figure straightforwardly as elements in a livelihood strategy or system of production,²⁰ rather than a rich cultural domain, as with cattle.²¹ This risks forgetting a lesson from the substantivist-formalist debates of the 1970s and 1980s²²—that economics is not a domain of rational actors but rather of cultural, historical actors. We should not assume that some commodities are more inflected by culture than others. The disenchanting commodity is never as it seems.

If the bovine mystique captures a mystery of *partial* commodification, the ovicaprine mystique captures the mystery of *full* commodification. The commodity is, after all, as Karl Marx said, “a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”²³ Sheep and goats embody the aspirations and anxieties of some rural people I describe in this chapter. Ovicaprids were crucial agents in the settling of the Lesotho highlands, as I show in this next section, and they help shed light on the conservation problems faced by the Lesotho Highlands Water Project today.

SHEEP, GOATS, AND THE SETTLING OF THE LESOTHO HIGHLANDS

Phase 1: 1700–1900

Sheep and goats—but especially sheep—have been central figures in the settlement and colonization of southern Africa. This is true over the *longue durée* in that ovicaprids enabled the southward colonization of pastoralist people in Africa by “domesticating” the landscape in tsetse zones through the clearing of woody vegetation.²⁴ For example, fat-tailed sheep were present in indigenous Khoisan herds when the Portuguese and Dutch first came to Southern Africa in the fifteenth century.²⁵ But it is also true for the colonial period. William Beinart describes the dramatic increase of these animals in South Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁶ Sheep numbered about 1.5 million in the Cape in 1806—mostly the fat-tailed mutton breeds. Wool-producing merino sheep subsequently rose in importance, and their population shot up to 5 million by 1855 and 10 million by 1875 as the textile industry in Britain drove significant demand.²⁷ This trajectory mimicked Basutoland’s, though merino sheep arrived there several decades later.

Until the 1870s, all livestock types in Basutoland were primarily kept in the lowland areas near villages, with very few kept at cattle posts in the colder, expansive highlands. The highlands up to that time were inhabited only by diffuse, highly mobile, and often culturally creolized communities (incorporating San hunger-gatherers), many of whom were involved in or suspected of raiding cattle from lowland communities.²⁸ Three factors changed that: land pressure in the lowlands, British colonialism, and class dynamics within Basotho society. Land pressure increased with substantial population growth, loss of lowland Basutoland territory to Afrikaner farmers over the eastern border, and the South African Land Act of 1913, which pushed South African Basotho into Basutoland.

By the mid-nineteenth century, white “Voortrekkers” were increasingly settling in areas that are today known as the Free State Province and came into conflict with refugees who began to coalesce into a political group under Moshoeshe. After severe droughts in the 1860s, those white farmers worked to seize more land at the western end of Basotho territory.²⁹ With land and population pressures brought about by white incursion, and because of an interest on the part of Basotho aristocrats in protecting their large herds from potential cattle raids by whites and other African groups, the first wave of semipermanent or permanent settling of the highlands for residence and pasture came in the 1870s. The colonial government at the time exercised little control over this process,³⁰ a point that worried colonial administrators, particularly with respect to their concerns about unregulated population growth and land degradation.³¹ During this initial period, however, the settlers were mostly herders in the employ of an aristocratic class that sought to render itself less vulnerable to the effects of wars with white settlers and other African groups.

What were initially highland cattle posts would later morph into permanent villages. Around the turn of the twentieth century, and in the aftermath of a rinderpest epidemic that killed over 95 percent of cattle herds in Southern Africa,³² Basotho and the British colonial administration came to recognize that the highlands were some of the best sheep-producing areas in the region, albeit for short summer seasons. The British began promoting wool and mohair production through the issuing of licenses to white traders for the establishment of mountain trading posts where wool and mohair could be legally exchanged,³³ and later through the construction of bridle paths to facilitate its transport to markets in South Africa. Judith Kimble reports that between 1893 and 1908, Basutoland wool exports grew by 380 percent in weight and 480 percent in value, increasingly from mountain areas.³⁴ Mohair exports also ballooned by nearly 3,000 percent in weight and value, though they started from much lower levels. In 1923, a wool export duty was introduced, indicating the importance of that growing industry to colonial profits,³⁵ and the Prevention of Scab Act was passed to make dipping compulsory throughout the country.³⁶ The transition to wool production not only led to rangeland degradation, which I discuss in the following chapter. It also led to nutritional

deficiencies among families in the highlands who substituted dairy cows for sheep, contributing to a serious outbreak of pellagra, the skin condition caused by a lack of vitamin B₃.³⁷

The highlands became much more important to wool export production than the lowland areas ever were.³⁸ The elevated importance of the cattle post areas prompted the Basotho aristocracy to assert its control over those lands around that time.³⁹ But chiefs struggled to control highland settlement, as commoner livestock owners established highland cattle posts that helped them circumvent chiefly authority over grazing land. Struggles between those two groups were evident from the early twentieth century onward, as I described in chapter 4.⁴⁰ Cattle remained at that time tightly tied to the “tributary mode of production,”⁴¹ a system in which subjects are promised security and prosperity in return for tribute payments of cattle and labor to the chief, the standard-bearer of a tributary class.⁴² Small stock, however, were not under such tight control. Because they could remain for much of the year in the higher, colder reaches of the mountains, they did not conflict with chief-controlled cattle pastures in the lowlands or the lower-lying areas of the highlands.

Phase 2: 1900–85

Commoner Basotho exploited that opportunity, and numbers of small stock in Lesotho surged from 1.5 million in 1900 to 3 million in 1930.⁴³ Serious anxiety emerged at that time surrounding the ecological effects of sheep in both Lesotho and South Africa, including claims that they were leading to shifts in vegetation, soil erosion, and compaction, and even that they were encouraging generalized desiccation—a decrease in rainfall and in the capacity of soils to retain moisture.⁴⁴ After dramatic droughts in the early 1930s, when all livestock types plummeted, herds recovered over the next decade, and highland cattle posts rose “exponentially” between the 1930s and 1980s, though total herd size has not returned to 1930 levels again.⁴⁵

Over time, as sheep and goat production became central to rural livelihoods, Basotho have become skillful fiber producers. However, Basotho had not always been interested in wool- and mohair-producing varieties. Back in the 1830s, when the missionary Thomas Arbousset accompanied King Moshoeshe I to his cattle post in the highlands, Arbousset described indigenous fat-tailed breeds being given preference over European wool breeds, the former of which he saw taken into a covered kraal during inclement weather and fed hand-picked forage.⁴⁶ But by the 1940s, the anthropologist Hugh Ashton reported that Basotho were more interested in improved sheep and goat varieties than improved cattle. This he ascribed to the heightened social role played by cattle, in contrast to sheep and goats, from which a “considerable cash income is derived from the export of wool and mohair.”⁴⁷ By the time Ashton was writing in the 1960s, the poor-quality fleeces of earlier times had been “almost completely submerged through the introduction

of merino sheep and angora goats.”⁴⁸ Contrast Arbousset’s account with one from my own research in 2014, when I came upon two herders while hiking through the upland cattle post areas one day. One of them was seated on the ground with a sheep reclining comfortably between his splayed legs. The sheep was an adolescent and it seemed perfectly at ease, so much so that at first, I thought it might be ill. The herder was picking burs called *bohomo* (*Xanthium spinosum*) from the sheep’s wool.⁴⁹ It was such a tender scene, speaking to the intimacy of herders and their animals, the duties of a herder to maintain the quality of a sheep’s wool by keeping it well fed and free of burs, and the value of wool.⁵⁰

The upswing in small-stock production and the transition from fat-tailed mutton to merino wool and angora mohair varieties was a response to the punishing poverty of Lesotho’s labor-reserve era. As I noted earlier in this book, Basutoland in the late nineteenth century was dubbed “the granary of the Free State,”⁵¹ for its prodigious agricultural production, but it would be slowly drawn into becoming a labor reserve for the mining industry through colonial and South African policies. At any given moment since the early twentieth century, tens of thousands of Basotho miners worked in South Africa, returning to Lesotho after retirement or injury.⁵² Because of apartheid-era laws prohibiting miners’ families from immigrating to South Africa, and partly because of Basotho desires to remain in their own country, mining labor was in some sense an entrepreneurial activity: a means of acquiring money to invest in a future by varied means, including through bridewealth payments, education for children, a sturdy home, a taxi or clothing business—and a herd of animals. The herd would pay out over time, with cattle producing milk and plow-strength, and sheep and goats producing wool and mohair for slaughter and cash. It is likely that the commodification of small stock acted as a buffer to the monetization of cattle during the labor-reserve era, injecting much-needed cash into rural households where the social ties that prevented cattle sale continued to matter a great deal. That is, the hypercommodification of small stock I call “the ovicaprine mystique” made the bovine mystique possible.

Phase 3: 1985–Present

Beginning in the mid- to late 1980s, as opportunities for Basotho in the mines dwindled, this economic dreamworld was no longer tenable. As in former Bantustans, the monetization of rural economies, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and enduring poverty have ramified in people’s relationships to gender, kinship, livestock, and political authority in Lesotho, in many ways sharpening class and gender identities.⁵³ In the post-labor reserve era, raising sheep and goats has gone from a retirement activity to an occupation. In one of the rare successes of foreign and domestic development work, wool and mohair growers associations were created across the country that organized production, further improved animal breeds for wool and mohair quality, and cut out middlemen to secure favorable prices for farmers’ clip. In 2001, they were federated as the Lesotho National Wool and

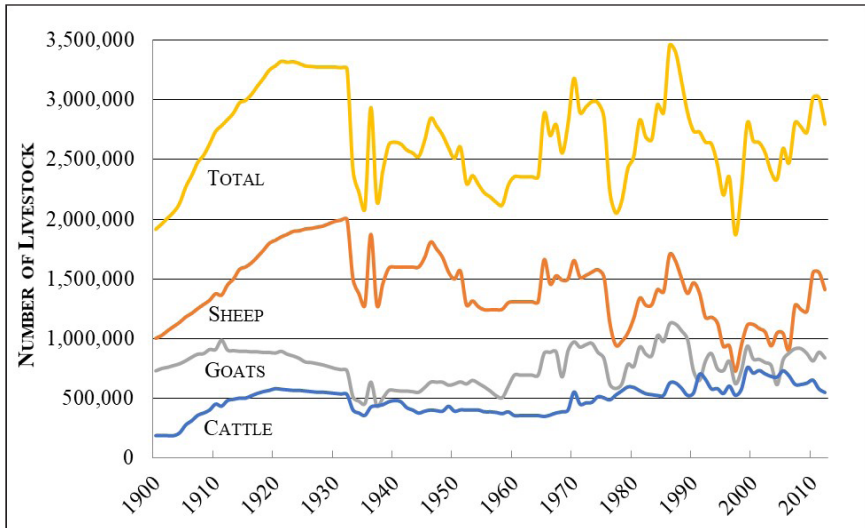


FIGURE 14. Livestock statistics, 1900–2013. Source: Lesotho Bureau of Statistics and Swallow and Brokken (1987).

Mohair Growers Association. Revenues from wool production in 2014–15 were M195 million (USD 19.5 million), while mohair generated an additional M57 million (USD 5.7 million),⁵⁴ a form of foreign revenue that primarily accrues to ordinary people in contrast to water export, which must “trickle down” through government programs like *fato-fato* (see chapter 3).⁵⁵

Livestock registration statistics for the village I described at the outset of this chapter certainly reflect an emphasis on small stock. Sheep and goats together accounted for 80–90 percent of the total herd every year between 2001, when records were first kept for the area, and 2014. Sheep alone accounted for 60–70 percent of the total herd, with goats accounting for another 20–25 percent. Tregurtha states that the average herd size in the mountains is fifty,⁵⁶ but that 50 percent of owners own less than forty head of small stock, meaning that most of the production is by smallholders. I was regularly told that today there are more *barui*, livestock owners with large herds, than in earlier generations. Then, however, *barui* might own eight hundred or many more head of livestock, whereas today a large herd is typically closer to three hundred (see fig. 14).

Mokhotlong District, where my research was sited and where the Polihali Dam is sited, produces the most wool of any of the ten districts in Lesotho, with over 19 percent of the total clip (roughly 680,000kg of a total 3,600,000kg) from 18 percent of the total herd.⁵⁷ The district produced over 86,000kg of mohair or 21 percent of the total clip and the most goats. In the village where I conducted interviews, the chief’s livestock registry showed that between 80–90 percent of the livestock were sheep or goats, with cattle, donkeys, and horses making up the remainder. The

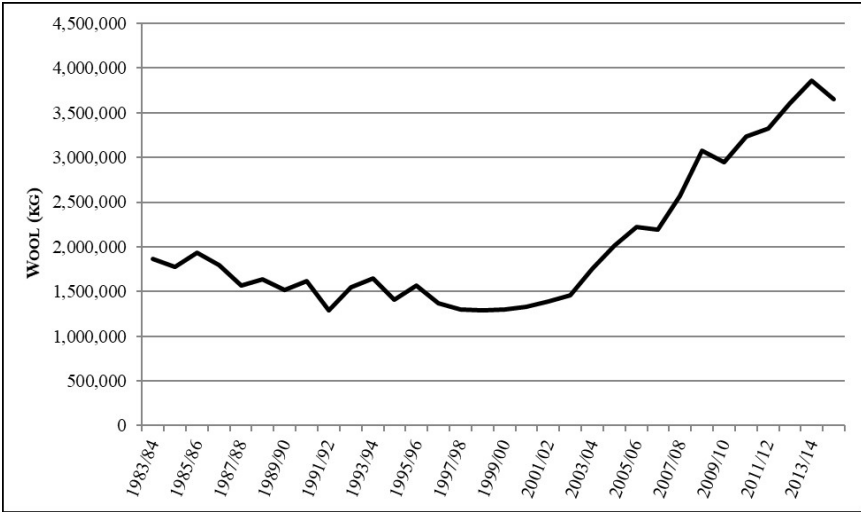


FIGURE 15. Wool (kg) sold through Lesotho's woolsheds. Source: BKB (2015).

amount and the quality of wool has consistently increased over the past decade, thanks partly to the Wool and Mohair Growers Association, a network that now includes 37,500 farmers in ninety-eight local cooperatives across Lesotho and registered in 2001.⁵⁸ Each cooperative has its own woolshed where sheep and goats are shorn, and all sell their clip to BKB,⁵⁹ a major wool and mohair processing company in Port Elizabeth that sells fiber by auction to global textile manufacturers.⁶⁰ After selling the wool to the woolshed, farmers wait as much as one year before receiving their check (see fig. 15).

However, as I began to see at the village court described at the opening of this chapter, rural Basotho are seeking new forms of entrepreneurial diversification. While wool and mohair continue to be produced, a new market has been found for mutton, allowing for the quick sale of small stock to young men who traffic them illicitly over the border to South Africa. After my visit to the village court, I asked the secretary whether this was a recent phenomenon. He told me that for a long time—fifty years or more—people from Mokhotlong had been taking wool to Qwa-Qwa for sale, but not the animals themselves. In fact, in the 1950s, there was a woolshed at Letšeng on the high plateau, along the road from Mokhotlong to the lowlands, sited specifically so that animals could be shorn near their cattle posts and their wool taken immediately to Qwa-Qwa by horse or donkey—on the same paths used today.

“When did the sale in sheep and goats increase?” I asked.

“It began in the late 1980s,” the secretary explained, “because of ‘the changes’ [*liphethoho*].” He said that at that time mineworkers were losing their jobs and they began to think about how else they could feed their families. “They asked

themselves, ‘What am I going to do?’” So, they started to sell animals at butcheries in Qwa-Qwa, where the animals fetched a high price.

Lesotho’s structural position vis-à-vis South Africa has shaped the ways that rural Basotho relate to livestock, including both cattle that resist commodification and ovicaprids that do not. Small stock are objects both of long-standing interest (see fig. 14) and of recent innovation in Lesotho, becoming different kinds of commodities at different historical moments. In the following section, I give a fuller account of the ovicaprine mystique and its relationship to the bovine mystique from the perspective of livestock owners.

“SHEEP ARE OUR MINES!”

In a footnote, Ferguson suggested that all grazing domestic animals were probably governed by similar rules of exchange as cattle, although he conceded that more research on the point was needed.⁶¹ As a result, he used the term *livestock* to refer to all grazing stock types. But including sheep and goats in this category of “livestock” obscures important differences. This is especially so because these differences may have amplified since Ferguson’s writing.⁶² For example, sheep and goats can be sold much more easily than cattle, making them desirable, as I was consistently told.⁶³ Herders who work for one year tending someone else’s livestock are typically paid either twelve small stock or one cow. I would often ask herders whether they preferred to be paid in sheep and goats or in cattle. Without exception, I was told sheep and goats. When asked why, they responded like one young man named Likhang: “Sheep? They’re money” (*Linku? Ke chelete*), he said, swiping his fingers over an open palm in the vernacular sign for money. Cattle are major investments. If you have an emergency, you can sell a sheep or goat—but you cannot sell part of a cow. So, in contrast to cattle, with their “barriers to sale,”⁶⁴ small stock are always ready for sale. They’re not sold carelessly, of course, but are saleable whenever one needs the cash for food, medicines for their animals, school uniforms for their children, or other household items. This held generally, whether I was speaking with owners of small or large herds, and whether the owners were young or old.⁶⁵ As one elderly man put it with an apt regional metaphor, “Sheep are our mines!” (*Nku ke maene ea rona!*).

Ferguson described how he presented men with a hypothetical situation: If someone offered them one ox or the cash equivalent, which would they choose? The men always chose cash, which could be converted into cattle, whereas the reverse was not true. If they owned a cow, they would never sell it, even under dire circumstances, because of its potential future value. When I presented men with the same scenario for sheep and goats during research in 2014 and 2016, men largely opted for sheep over cash. I posed the question to a middle-aged man whom I picked up on the high plateau while driving to Mokhotlong. He was not particularly interested in livestock and owned just a few sheep and a few cows.

He didn't want his children to be *barui* (wealthy in livestock) either, because he'd rather they go to school than become herders. But when I asked him whether hypothetically he'd choose a sheep or R750 in cash (the price he quoted me for one sheep), he opted for the sheep because "small stock are a business—you make money off of them."⁶⁶ I then asked him the same question about whether he would choose a cow or R4,000 (the going rate). He reported that he would take the money rather than the cow, but not because he could use the money to buy a cow, as told to Ferguson, but because he wanted an animal that he could sell easily. "A cow is difficult to sell—and it takes a long time to grow." During that time, he said, it might die. Sheep and goats, on the other hand, sell easily and multiply rapidly. Their easy commodification made them desirable.

When I asked which animals women preferred, they, like the men, told me that the cattle are important for plowing, but that the small stock are important because of their easy commodification and their rapid multiplication. When I asked men about whether *they* or their wives made decisions about when to sell sheep, most told me it was them—not their wives. But some men explained that they would sell when they understood that their wives needed things around the house.

Women I spoke with mostly suggested that they chose to sell sheep and goats in concert with their husbands, although some said that they were more firmly in control. "No! *I tell him* [when we need to sell]!" one woman said. To be sure, sheep, goats, and larger stock are primarily the domain of men in rural Lesotho. Many livestock, particularly the small stock, are kept at distant cattle posts over which women have no direct control. But none of the people I spoke with described a situation for sheep and goats quite like that outlined by Ferguson for cattle—that is, as a special domain of property and a dam against the flow of cash. And because small stock are so easily sold, women are certainly able to make more claims upon them. In my visits to the *lekhlotla*, I saw numerous women selling small stock themselves. I was told by men and women, in fact, that it had long been the case that men working in South Africa would sometimes instruct the chief of their village to allow their wife to sell sheep as she saw fit. I could not discern how this may have changed with the decline of mining employment, but it seems clear that women have long had greater access to ovicaprids than cattle.

Perhaps more striking to me than the fact that people liked the flexibility of small stock was how confident they were that a market for sheep and goats existed. After all, just as conservation workers told Ferguson, they told me that a big problem facing livestock owners was poor market access. As indicated above, conservation and development workers described by Ferguson sought to resolve Lesotho's land-degradation problems through the development of a beef-production industry. They believed that rangeland degradation—seen as pervasive and potentially catastrophic—could only be resolved by extricating cattle from the shackles of cultural tradition and placing them under the control of the "invisible hand" of the

market.⁶⁷ It was by similar logic that the British colonial resident commissioner Godfrey Lagden in 1898 suggested that more Basotho men must work in the mines or face the threat of overstocking.⁶⁸ These notions endure today. A World Bank report on Lesotho from 2010, for example, advocated “livestock development projects involving pricing policies, trek route construction, new slaughter facilities, [and the] purchasing of livestock in the field [for] reduced numbers of livestock on the range and reduced grazing pressure.”⁶⁹ It explained that Lesotho should enter into “international trade agreements such as the Lome IV Convention (‘Beef Protocol Agreement’) which allows for sales of beef to the European Union at above world market levels.”⁷⁰ In my conversations with government and conservation officials in Lesotho, too, the issue of Basotho valuing cattle for their conferral of social status came up on numerous occasions when I asked them if and why they thought rangelands were degraded. Conservation bureaucrats believed that livestock owners cared more about the size of their herd than they did about the quality of the animals.⁷¹

All this emphasis on markets, yet livestock owners were insistent to me that they could sell ovicaprids anytime they wanted.⁷²

I saw conservation bureaucrats struggle with this issue—their insistence on improving market access when markets exist—at a meeting for the Khubelu Sponges Project in Mokhotlong. The meeting gathered together “project stakeholders” for updates on progress and challenges. Ministry representatives were there, as well as chiefs, councilors, and others. The first thing discussed was an issue raised by a Ministry of Commerce representative regarding the cross-border sale of animals.⁷³ The ministry wanted animals to be sold *inside* the country,⁷⁴ he explained, so it staged auctions across the district—but livestock owners did not show up.⁷⁵ They were “afraid,” he said, to bring their animals because they feared the bidding could yield a low price, preferring instead to take their animals over the border to Underberg, Qwa-Qwa, or even as far as Vanderbijlpark near Johannesburg.

Another ministry representative chimed in to sympathize with the livestock owners. A sheep in Mokhotlong might fetch R600, but at Vanderbijlpark, the animal would sell for as much as R2,000, she said—obviously, people are going to take their animals where they can get the best price. Everyone nodded in agreement. Even the term for auction—*fantisi*—would dissuade sellers, another person pointed out. It derives from a former trading post named Fantasy, but in common parlance it is used to refer to selling something very cheaply. *Ke fantisa nku ea ka* would translate to, “I’m selling my sheep for cheap.”

Sepheo, the director of the Sponges Project became frustrated and referred everyone to the law. He said that it was important to focus on the fact that this is an “illegal act” (*tlholo ea molao*) to take animals across the border without the proper permits. They could not simply accept that this was the way it was.

. . .

The fact that ovicaprids can be sold easily does not mean that small-stock entrepreneurialism is as desirable as, say, a living wage. Few herders would pass up a job at the mines. But whereas they used to tend their father's livestock as boys, head to the mines as young men, and return to Lesotho in retirement to live off of the herd they acquired through mining wages, mining work is scarce and herding has become a full-time occupation. The mining economy was one fraught with risk and violence—from thieves in South Africa's cities to police harassment to the occupational hazards of working underground. The livestock economy presents a new set of dangers, as I describe in the next section.

JOURNEYS TO QWA-QWA

Thapelo and his friend Khutliso were heading to a horse race that Thapelo's uncle would be participating in, and they invited me along. On our way there, Thapelo told me that he planned to head to Qwa-Qwa the following morning, taking twelve sheep with him. What Thapelo referred to as "Qwa-Qwa" technically does not exist. That is the name of the apartheid Bantustan created on Lesotho's northern border, an impoverished "ethnic homeland" that was designated for South African Basotho who were not in possession of a permit to work in that country's segregated white cities and towns. Qwa-Qwa was dissolved as a legal entity with the end of apartheid, but it remains a poor and densely populated area featuring a large town, Phuthaditjhaba. With a population of fifty-five thousand people, Phuthaditjhaba is, like other former Bantustan capitals, a conspicuous urban center in the middle of an otherwise rural landscape. Most of the land surrounding it, however, belongs not to smallholders but to large agricultural companies or individuals. Few of those enterprises raise meat for the town's butcheries, meaning a market opportunity exists for people like Thapelo. He can sell his small stock there for around twice the going rate in Lesotho. (Sheep are mostly desired in Qwa-Qwa, but further to the east, where amaZulu people predominate, I was told that goat meat is preferred.)

Like those purchasing livestock at the *lekhotla* I described at the beginning of this chapter, many young men in the Mokhotlong area make a living in this way, buying animals with whatever money they have or can borrow and selling them in Qwa-Qwa. But it is no easy task. The trip there is arduous and dangerous. After paying a truck to drop him and his animals off on the high plateau along the road between Mokhotlong and Butha-Buthe, Thapelo will set out at a quick pace north. From noon, when he begins the hike, he will drive the animals through the day and through the night, arriving before dawn at the edge of the escarpment that marks the border with South Africa. From there, he will descend about four thousand feet into Phuthaditjhaba, whose nighttime lights illuminate the trail. There is a border gate along the footpath and 4x4 road at the base of the mountains, which Thapelo will need to avoid; as for most other herders, neither Thapelo nor

his animals have the proper documents to enter South Africa, which are difficult and expensive to acquire. Over the course of the next few days, he will stay with friends and bring his animals to one of the main kraals in the town, where buyers from local butcheries come. When all or most of his sheep have been sold, he will return home by the same path, cash in hand.

Thapelo explained this all with an air of satisfaction—a kind of masculine pride. With a wife and a young baby, he was eager to reinvest his profits in more sheep that he can sell in Qwa-Qwa. Thapelo had sought work in South Africa without success and was disinclined to continue working at the cattle post as he had for several years prior, given how little herders are paid.

I asked Khutliso if he drove animals to Qwa-Qwa, too. I half-suspected not. Whereas Thapelo was stocky and confident, Khutliso had a small frame and disarmingly kind eyes. He used to do it, he told me, flashing a nervous smile and bowing his head down. But he doesn't anymore. He explained on my prodding that, after having made the trip a few times, he had a bad experience. Three years ago, he and his childhood friend Relebohile were held up at gunpoint and robbed of their entire flock—about thirty animals. Two armed men stopped them at daybreak, just as they reached the escarpment. Worried that he and Relebohile would head to the police after having seen their faces, the two men took Khutliso and Relebohile to a cove, beat them up, and tied them together. After several hours, during which time Khutliso assumed they were trying to make a plan, the men decided to shoot them. With Khutliso watching, the men put the gun to Relebohile's head and pulled the trigger—the gun jammed. They stabbed Khutliso in the stomach, immobilizing him, and then stabbed his friend repeatedly. Khutliso pulled up his shirt and showed me a one-inch scar on the side of his abdomen. While the men prepared a fire that Khutliso believed would be used to burn the bodies, Khutliso managed to free himself of the rope around his hands and feet. He ran away, hobbling with his stomach wound as fast as he could back to the road through the day and into the night. There, he managed to catch a lift with a passing car back to the clinic at Mapholaneng. He will never take animals to Qwa-Qwa again, he told me.

Shocked by the sadness and violence of the story, I asked Thapelo if he wasn't scared about his impending trip. He replied, "It's just that the money bites, it bites" (*Feela he chelete ea loma, ea loma*).

LEKALAPENSE: WEIGHING WOOL AND MUTTON IN THE WATER RESERVOIR

Fiber production has been heavily emphasized in Lesotho over the second half of the twentieth century—not only by British colonists, but by rural Basotho and the Lesotho National Wool and Mohair Growers Association—yielding a national flock of fiber-producing ovicaprids. Consider the use of the term *lekalapense* in Sesotho. The term is a Sesotho-fied version of the Afrikaans word, *kaalpens*, which

means bare (*kaal*) stomach (*pens*), or “no wool on the stomach.” The term refers to the Dohne Merino sheep, a breed of merino from Germany with a wide, short tail, produced for its meat instead of its wool. However, the term is used in a derogatory way to refer to any sheep with poor wool quality by wool farmers and employees at the woolsheds, where sheep and goats are shorn. At Growers Association woolsheds, it was explained to me that a *lekalapense* would be expelled because it threatened to diminish the quality of the clip as a whole. A *lekalapense*, I was told by several livestock owners, is “a bad breed among a good breed.” In fact, the word has been recontextualized to apply to people, connoting a polluted, outsider status. In such cases, it is extremely derogatory, and one man even told me that “someone would kill you if you called them *lekalapense*.”

One evening, as I walked along a road after finishing some interviews with livestock owners, I bumped into a friend of mine—a young and energetic man named Lesuhla. He flagged me down as I walked along the road past his village, eager to show me his new ram. He had told me about it once before, so I was interested to see what he was so excited about. He said that it was a “German” type, meaning that it is fat, but produces only mediocre wool. A young herder who saw us looking at the animal walked over to get a look. He was clearly impressed, and pulled out a cell phone to snap a photo. Lesuhla was excited about the ram because it embodied a grand plan, which he then described to me in impressive detail.

Lesuhla had thirty-four sheep at the time, he explained, five of which he would take to Qwa-Qwa in the coming week. He planned to mate his ram with the remaining sheep, all of which were wool sheep that produce “medium-fine” grade wool.⁷⁶ The offspring would be sheep that produce a lot of wool but which would also get fat and fetch a good price at the butcheries. Standing up and gesturing to the agricultural fields outside his home, he said he planned to plant oats (*habore*) as fodder for his sheep. Then he swept his hand over to some more agricultural fields in the distance up the hillside from us. There, he would plant two specific varieties of maize that he would mill for the animals. He would bring back a select group of sheep from the cattle post and fatten them up with the maize before taking them to Qwa-Qwa. In addition, he planned to breed his ram with other people’s stock, the privilege for which they would pay him. He joked that he already had a list of people eager to breed with his *lekalapense* (see fig. 16).

He would repeat that cycle and each time reinvest the money to multiply his herd. In the longer term, he hoped to build a brick house and, later, to open up a clothing store in a nearby town.

Lesuhla talked about these plans with excitement. They were so close at hand that it was clear he thought about them regularly. This is only the tip of the iceberg, he explained. He wanted to increase his production by quite a lot. I asked him if he wasn’t scared of the thieves that I had heard about. He nodded his head deeply. One time, his entire herd was stolen by three men armed with guns. He and a friend were making the trip with a herd of ninety sheep when they were



FIGURE 16. A *lekalapense*. Photo by author.

stopped. But he seemed pleased that I had asked. He had already agreed with four other men and women to form a kind of cooperative. They would pay annual dues to be members, and these dues would go toward paying the men who herd the animals to Qwa-Qwa, as well as toward purchasing medicines and fodder for their animals. Members would be obliged to direct part of their profits toward purchasing more animals, and every time animals were taken to Qwa-Qwa the herd would be comprised of a number of each of their animals. This way, if the animals were lost to theft, the effects on each individual would be minimized.

Lesuhla and his collaborators were refining an approach to the contingent economy of mutton and wool. The *lekalapense* was just the latest development in a long-standing relationship between Basotho and small stock. Selling these animals in Qwa-Qwa, he and others like him make life possible in post-labor-reserve Lesotho, subtending the water economy through an ovicaprine arbitrage that plays upon differences in market prices for marginal gains.⁷⁷ By developing a hybrid line of sheep that produce wool but that are also desirable to butcheries, they both interrupt and extend the government's efforts to capitalize on Lesotho's highland pastures through wool and mohair production. This is not an unambiguously positive development, however. In hedging against the risk and violence of this illicit trade, his venture shows that new livestock entrepreneurship could be as dangerous as life on the mines.

CONCLUSION

Moving further upstream from the sedimentation problems in Lesotho's dam reservoirs, we see how the livelihoods and dreams of rural people come to matter to the LHWP's conservation of catchment landscapes.

Herders and livestock owners are forced to negotiate the spacetimes created by the bureaucratic ecologies of conservation workers that I described in the previous chapter, even as they work to circumvent them. Ovicaprid commodification by rural livestock owners shows how they do so. Conservationists' and anthropologists' emphasis on cattle as recalcitrant commodities has obscured the importance of ovicaprids to culture, economy, and ecology. Small stock have grossly outnumbered cattle for decades in Lesotho, partly prompting the settlement of the highlands and enabling rural Basotho to navigate life in eras of labor export and of water export. Repeatedly, conservation programs proposed cattle commodification to reduce land degradation through the guidance of the market's invisible hand. Yet, ovicaprid numbers have been high precisely because they were skillfully commodified. Whereas conservation bureaucrats believe that market-based livestock production could alleviate overstocking and land degradation, Basotho eagerness to produce ovicaprids for global markets is itself a cause of degradation, as I explain in chapter 6—a product of commodified small stock, not uncommodified cattle.

Like the bovine mystique—the cultural particularity of cattle that determines how they can be bought and sold—the ovicaprine mystique has also been misunderstood. The fluid nature of the exchange relations rural Basotho have with ovicaprids expresses the historicity of these livestock, and it is a reminder that commodity status is not binary but dynamic. Charismatic, recalcitrant commodities do not show us the ultimate limits of commodification but rather expose that unique set of conditions necessary to any act of commodification.

Ovicaprids became clean-break commodities because they grow quickly and in marginal areas; because of a historical process through which bridle paths, woolsheds, and breeding practices were established for their production; and because of shifting political-economic conditions that have made demands of entrepreneurial diversification on Basotho to survive and thrive. In the process of commodification, Basotho projected themselves into that context as agents, expressing particular kinds of economic fantasy. Their dreams arose in response to the slow violence of decades of political-economic marginalization against which sheep and goats had been a lifeline. Small stock in Lesotho became different kinds of clean-break commodities during different historical moments. Once a means to circumvent chiefs in the early colonial period, they morphed into a slow retirement commodity, ameliorating the punishing conditions of the labor-reserve era and allowing young Basotho to envision themselves as (masculine) entrepreneurs in a dreamworld of accumulation verging on the “self-devouring growth” of beef

export industries in Botswana.⁷⁸ In the water-reservoir era, ovicaprids have transformed again into a primary occupation, even a get-rich-quick dream.

In each case, Basotho worked within the rubble of old arrangements, creatively reorganizing existing practices to make a living in the seams of empire. But the smuggling of small stock to butcheries in the former South African Bantustan of Qwa-Qwa is dangerous, illustrating the violence and risk that continue to characterize Basotho relationships with South Africa. Whereas Lesotho was once forced into acting as a reproductive community for mines in South Africa, producing young men for the market, today Basotho produce fiber for the global textiles industry and meat for the South African proletariat.