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A Transnational History of Stock Theft on the Lesotho–South Africa Border, Nineteenth Century to 1994

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ABSTRACT
Stock theft has long been a problem along the Lesotho–South Africa border. From Moshoeshoe I’s cattle-raiding in the nineteenth century through to the start of the democratic era in Lesotho (1993) and South Africa (1994), the idea that stock theft is both prevalent and an international problem has been generally accepted by one and all. This article traces and problematises the practice of stock theft to show how it has disproportionately impacted the poorest residents of the borderlands. Just as important as the actual practice of theft, however, is the construction of a perpetual ‘stock theft crisis’ on the border that has served the interests of those who are economically better off. The article therefore traces the history of theft, but also of the discourses around theft and thieves in the borderlands. Despite claims that stock theft is seemingly always on the rise, in many cases the sources dispute this. The contradictory and competing ideas about the practice of stock theft have helped to create and maintain the idea of a border in crisis that has historically served the ends of those who already have access to economic and political power.

Introduction
A contested historicity has characterised the stock theft narrative in the Lesotho–South Africa borderlands. In the Maluti District of the Eastern Cape (Matatiele) on the south side of the Kingdom of Lesotho (hereafter Lesotho),¹ a Mosotho businessman from Matatiele in South Africa identified stock theft as a ‘serious challenge’ that has personally affected him. He claimed to have lost over 300 sheep and said the general ‘perception’ is that the thieves are ‘people from Lesotho’.² Similarly, on the north side of Lesotho in the Ladybrand

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1. As people from both Lesotho and South Africa referred to the territory as Lesotho, even during the colonial period, we will also do so throughout this article unless we are directly referencing the colonial government. Then we will use Basutoland.
2. Interview, Mosotho businessman, Matatiele ha Sibi, 21 October 2021. All interviews in this article were made possible thanks to the generous funding by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) and the University of the Free State (UFS) Humanities Interdisciplinary Research
District, a commercial farmer who owns a mixed-stock farm about 8 km from the border at Maseru said that a lot of the small-scale stock theft could be traced to Lesotho and narrated a story of a horse of his that was recovered in 2021 in Lesotho after being stolen. A Mosotho consultant, from Lesotho but currently living in Ladybrand, linked this history of stock theft back to nineteenth century land dispossession, saying that for Basotho, stock theft is ‘a historical response to the Conquered Territory’!

In all of these accountings, the contemporary Lesotho–South Africa borderlands are places rife with stock theft, but stock theft also happens within national boundaries. Kynoch and Ulicki documented extensive stock theft in Lesotho in the late 1990s, while a study of sheep theft in South Africa’s Free State Province from 2017 found theft rampant in every district in the province, not just in those that bordered Lesotho. Doorewaard similarly found that while stock theft sometimes crosses borders, it also happens purely within one country, with some of the reasons people steal being poverty, revenge against perceived bad employers, feelings of inadequacy because of the high unemployment rate in South Africa, and large-scale organised theft for profit.

Stock theft plays an important part in the strategic economic and political interests influencing the history of the entire southern African region. Cattle raiding by Xhosa groups was the excuse given by colonial forces in the Cape for many of the so-called Frontier Wars fought from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. King and Challis describe the Maluti-Drakensberg mountains in the mid-nineteenth century as a space where stock theft was an integral part of subsistence strategies for both mobile bands of pastoralists and more sedentary neighbouring chiefdoms. Conz further describes the late nineteenth-century Maluti-Drakensberg as a fluid site characterised by some cattle and stock raiding and ‘symbiotic’ relations between groups of Basotho, Baphuthi and Baroa, despite power imbalances.

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Project from the Dean’s Office. The interviews were conducted by a project team from UFS that included Dr Munyaradzi Mushonga (Principal Investigator), Dr Grey Magaiza, Dr John Aerni-Flessner (also from Michigan State University), and Dr Chitja Twala. The research team included student assistant researchers Tokoloho Lephoto, Mammolo Sebolao and Paballo Seseli.

3. Interview, commercial farmer, Ladybrand District, 30 October 2021.
4. Interview, Mosotho consultant, Ladybrand District, 30 October 2021.
River Valley, Etherington notes the importance of cattle raiding in the competition for power during the middle of the nineteenth century, but also posits that some accounts of incessant raiding were ‘exaggerated’ in later narratives, as part of political claim-making. Along these same lines, King cautions us to look at southern African cattle raiding, and the stories told about it, in all of its performative contexts to better understand how raiding became intertwined with processes of political formation, paths to leadership and enactments of masculinity.

In the context of the construction of a border between the nascent Orange Free State (OFS) and Moshoeshoe’s Lesotho, OFS leaders leaned heavily on the idea of stock theft in their negotiations with the British in the drawing of boundaries. Stock theft was a frequent excuse to declare war on Moshoeshoe and conquer land right up to the Mohokare River in the 1850s and 1860s. OFS leaders also used the idea of stock theft to construct the idea of Africans as ‘lesser’ than Europeans because they supposedly did not respect private property rights. European settlers deployed narratives about stock theft to justify conquest, but South Africa was not the only place where colonial stock theft narratives underpinned the dispossession of African groups, as Anderson has demonstrated for Kenya. Much as with Basotho groups, the Kalenjin in Kenya had clear moral economies around and certain prohibitions on raiding and theft, but colonists ignored the moral economy as they sought to justify colonial conquest.

Thus, by the time the borders of colonial Basutoland were officially established in the 1869 Convention of Aliwal North, a narrative was firmly in place that stock theft, in particular by Basotho, was a defining feature of the landscape (See Figure 1). The narrative remained strong, in part because cross-border crime remained a fact of life for many borderland residents. Coplan notes that these crimes have ‘always involved South Africans and other foreigners working with Basotho in partnerships or “syndicates”’, while Thabane notes that the construction of this border left a territory ‘inadequate’ for Basotho to sustain themselves economically, and thus has led to ‘political instability in Lesotho’s vicinity’ which has provided spaces for more stock theft. This article follows those authors in arguing that the dominant narrative

of the Lesotho–South Africa border as an area rife with stock theft has stayed relatively constant, with a recurring narrative that stock theft is often ‘getting worse’. Yet in a variety of periods there are statistics and archival evidence both suggesting that stock theft, particularly cross-border theft, while problematic, was not always at the near-crisis levels claimed by many of the loudest voices. While all stock owners would have benefitted from less theft, the most economically privileged borderland residents benefitted the most from the continuation of the narrative of crisis and the resulting securitisation of the border. Smaller stock owners and those with no animals often had to cross the border, whether for work, for smuggling grain and wool, or to access better grazing, and so increased securitisation that cut down on theft by making the border harder to cross did not necessarily benefit them as much as it did the biggest stock
owners. Therefore, the constant sense of crisis tended to benefit most the commercial farmers in South Africa and the chiefs in Lesotho, who were often the largest stock owners.

**Contestations around nineteenth-century stock theft**

Moshoeshoe I, the founder of the Basotho nation, made a name for himself initially as a cattle raider.\(^{15}\) Born Lepoqo, the young man was renamed Moshoeshoe, a name that derives from the sound made by a razor shaving the face. This name was bestowed because of his great success in raiding cattle from the nearby chief Ramonaheng, which allowed him to leave his father’s village and become a chief with his own followers.\(^{16}\) After moving to Thaba Bosiu in 1824, Moshoeshoe continued to raid cattle. In 1829, Moshoeshoe and his Baphuthi ally Moorosi conducted two large cattle raids into the Transkei that gave them the riches to consolidate their positions in the Mohokare and Senqu valleys, respectively.\(^{17}\) The cattle surplus from raiding allowed Moshoeshoe to earn the loyalty of his followers through *mafisa* loans, the ‘placing’ of his sons/relatives and other loyal men as chiefs, and paying the *bohali* for strategic marriages that strengthened the kingdom by adding more followers.\(^{18}\) ‘Placing’ sons was a means of extending authority over new territory by putting loyal rulers in key locations, but was also a strategy to reduce the risk of being the victim of cattle raiding by dispersing cattle to more locations within the kingdom. Thus, stock raiding and the prevention of stock raiding both played key roles in the building of the Basotho kingdom in the nineteenth century.

However, Moshoeshoe’s reputation as a feared cattle raider preceded him in his relations with the OFS, even though Moshoeshoe himself had largely stopped raiding cattle before the Dutch settlers arrived. Eloff, quoting a Dutch-speaking reverend from Winburg, says that Moshoeshoe had an ‘insatiable desire to increase his livestock and expand his territory’.\(^{19}\) As more European farmers moved into what would become the OFS, setting boundaries for Moshoeshoe’s territory became a matter decided by colonial officials – British and Dutch. Sir George Napier declared a boundary line in 1843 that gave most of the land on the west side of the Mohokare to the Basotho. Further declarations, however, shrunk the land available to Basotho. Peregrine Maitland’s declaration of 1845 removed the triangle of land between today’s

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15. Henceforth referred to as Moshoeshoe. This reference should not be misinterpreted as a sign of disrespect to the Basotho founding father.
18. *Mafisa* was the practice whereby the chief ‘loaned’ the cattle to followers to allow them to pay bride price (*bohali*) and get married. The cattle remained the property of the chief, although the family could use the milk and draught power of the animals. This bound the followers more closely to the chief who had provided for them.
western border of Lesotho and the junction of the Senqu and Mohokare Rivers. Orange River Sovereignty Governor Southey cut off more Basotho lands from the western edge (near today’s Free State towns of Rouxville, Zastron and Wepener) in 1848. Finally, in 1849 Major Warden drew a boundary line between Basotho and the Orange River Sovereignty, and this line shaved more land Moshoeshoe claimed in the west and north for the new British colony. Despite the declaration of these ‘boundary’ lines, much of the land on the OFS side of the border was un-surveyed and often unoccupied by European settlers. Thus, Basotho farmers and pastoralists, who had been using this land, continued to utilise these spaces for cultivation and grazing.

There was nothing sinister about this action by Basotho farmers, but OFS administrators and farmers took it as a direct challenge to their authority, and it therefore led to conflict between Basotho and the OFS. Accusations of cattle raiding flew fast and furious as OFS farmers accused Basotho of the theft of animals while Basotho remained unhappy with the loss of territory. The OFS called cattle raiding ‘provocations’ and declared war on the Basotho in the Seqiti Wars of 1858, 1865 and 1867, with the final conflict leading to the loss of all Basotho territory on the western side of the Mohokare River. Thus, over the course of the 1850s and 1860s, the OFS justified taking large portions of land – what Basotho call the ‘Conquered Territory’ – in large part based on a narrative of Basotho stock theft.

While Moshoeshoe was reviled by the OFS and revered by many in Lesotho, King cautions us to ‘think archaeologically’ about ‘the ways in which people use the material world and its backstories to create narratives about what is going on around them’, as these stories can ‘be responsible for creating outlaws, as much as [actual] law-breaking’. In the case of cattle raiding, Moshoeshoe’s reputation both gave him standing at home, and impetus for colonial leaders to dispossess Basotho of their land. The narrative, deeply entrenched, took on a life of its own that was divorced from the reality that Moshoeshoe was not personally raiding cattle, even if some of his followers did at various times. This complex and yet simple configuration of Moshoeshoe and the Basotho reflected and served the political and material interests of the colonial powers as they sought to cement their authority. The narrative of stock theft that became entrenched by the mid-nineteenth century has continued to play an important role in how borderland residents conceive of the border. ‘Landscapes’, King argues, are ‘more than the sum of [their] physical parts’, as they ‘evoke a suite

20. The Orange Free State was annexed by the British in 1848 and remained in their hands until 1854 when it was returned to the Dutch settlers. At that point, it took the name Orange Free State again.
21. All information on treaties comes from Eloff, So-Called Conquered Territory, 7–9.
of senses, memories, anxieties, and imaginations. Thus, the ‘landscape’ or narrative of the Lesotho–South African borderlands as a place of constant stock theft needs to be interrogated to see how it compares with historical realities.

Formalising the border, formalising stock theft: the early twentieth century

The late nineteenth century was a period of relative prosperity in Lesotho, but it also marked the start of Basotho labour migration to the mines of South Africa. This has been extensively documented elsewhere. What has been less well documented is how the South African War (1899–1902) disrupted the border and opened new opportunities. Stock theft, and colonial ideas about the supposed propensity of Basotho for theft, played an important role in this. OFS wartime leaders attempted, mostly unsuccessfully, to woo Basotho chiefs into an anti-British alliance. The British authorities, on the other hand, attempted to keep Basotho from raiding abandoned OFS farms so as not to embroil the territory directly in the conflict. The British Resident Commissioner claimed in his 1900 annual report that ‘casual thieves occasionally broke away and stole cattle from deserted farms, but most were brought to book’, but this may have been an overly rosy view. In May and June of 1900, heavy fighting in nearby OFS border regions, which eventually led to the surrender of half of the OFS army in July within sight of the Lesotho border at Surrender Hill, left a tempting vacuum. The Resident Commissioner wrote a June 1900 Circular to all colonial administrators calling for them to be alert for stock ‘either being stolen or secreted in Basutoland on behalf of the owners’. Paramount Chief Lerotholi assisted in these efforts, at least in part because he was still struggling to consolidate the power of the Basotho monarchy and fight off competing claims to the throne from his brothers. Lerotholi thus wrote a letter in June asking Basutoland authorities to ‘take notice of Basuto [sic] living on farms near the border [in the OFS] and remove them from the border’ as they ‘invite their friends and children [in Lesotho] […] to go in the night to fetch stock’.

23. King, Outlaws, Anxiety, and Disorder, 74.
26. Lesotho National Archive (hereafter LNA) S3/2/6/2, Stock Theft Anglo Boer War, Circular No. 60 of 1900, 22 June 1900.
27. LNA S3/2/6/2, Stock Theft Anglo Boer War, Letter, Lerotholi to Government Secretary, 13 June 1900.
In the wake of the surrender of the Afrikaner Republics in 1902, the situation along the border remained unsettled. Many Afrikaner farmers had fled with their stock into Lesotho during the conflict, setting up several refugee settlements in the lowland districts. In total, over 1500 Afrikaners and thousands of stock weathered the war in Lesotho. In addition to showing the gracious hospitality of the Basotho chiefs and local communities who allocated living spaces and allowed grazing for the animals, staying in Lesotho allowed some OFS farmers to start the post-war period with a leg up on their counterparts who either fought in the commandos or spent all or part of the war in concentration camps, and often had their stock confiscated.

Despite the hospitality shown by Basotho chiefs and commoners during the war, the deeply embedded notion among OFS farmers that Basotho were inveterate stock thieves remained. Less than three months after the war officially ended, an Afrikaner farmer named Fouche, whose farm was between Wepener and Zastraon, wrote to the British authorities in Bloemfontein angrily saying that in the one month since he had re-occupied his farm he had lost 52 sheep and two horses, while he reported three of his neighbours had lost a combined 16 cows and 122 sheep to theft. He alleged that a group of farmers had tracked the spoor (or trail) of the animals, and in ‘every case’ it led to the Basutoland border where their party had confronted a group of Basotho. In his telling, they accused a group of Basotho of ‘beginning to steal again as you did in 1865’, to which the Basotho supposedly retorted: ‘What can you do, you have no guns?’ Follow-up efforts by the colonial authorities in Lesotho managed to locate ‘80 sheep, 27 cattle, and 2 horses’ in the Mohale’s Hoek District, and the Basotho thieves were brought to book, serving up to two years in prison. However, the Assistant Commissioner in Mafeteng also noted that many of the sheep Fouche talked about in the letter ‘were never reported’ to the police and that others reported as having been stolen were, in fact, later discovered ‘on the farms of the respective owners’.

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28. The refugees at Kolo near Mafeteng even published a newspaper, one issue of which survives: Kolo-nyane Kaleidoscope, No. 1, 1 January 1900, Missionary Archives, Morija Museum and Archives: https://primarysources-brillonline-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/browse/missionary-archives-from-lesotho-1832-2006; Accessed 17 January 2022; South African National Archives, Bloemfontein Archives (hereafter SANA B), CO 56 546/02, Education for Children of Boer Refugees in Basutoland 1901. We are indebted to David Ambrose for the newspaper reference.
29. LNA S3/2/2/1, Returns of Refugees and Stock 1901–1902, Refugee Lists.
31. SANA B CO 102, Theft of Stock from Fouche’s (and Other Farms) on Basutoland Border, Presumably by Basotho 1902, Letter, Fouche to Colonial Governor, 29 September 1902.
32. SANA B CO 102, Theft of Stock from Fouche’s (and Other Farms) on Basutoland Border, Presumably by Basotho 1902, Letter, Kennan, Assistant Commissioner Mafeteng to Resident Commissioner, Maseru, 15 October 1902.
In other words, Fouche and his peers exaggerated the amount of stock being stolen from their farms. Ironically, it is likely that the Fouche family had so much livestock in the first place because they had spent the war years sheltering with their stock in Lesotho courtesy of the hospitality of Basotho.33

This correspondence shows how narratives around the border were formed and deployed, even when they were not backed up by the evidence from the ground. While Fouche’s story about a confrontation might have been apocryphal, the interaction between Fouche’s ‘gang of farmers’ and Basotho at the border highlighted how stock theft operated in public memory, even over a span of 35 years. While the farmers clearly did not forget the history of conquest, in this telling, neither did the Basotho. However, the narrative of ‘theft’ is complicated by the fact that many of the animals settler farmers claimed had been ‘stolen’ turned out to be simply lost on the farmers’ own properties – so the level of ‘theft’ was not as high as the farmers perceived or claimed. But it was in the interest of the farmers to claim a high level of theft so they could get the authorities in Lesotho to search for their stock and put pressure on authorities in the OFS to better control the border. These patterns continued for many decades after 1900.

What stock theft was present after the war often occurred as the result of large-scale criminal gangs, with members on both sides of the border. One of those suspected in the Fouche case was reported to have ‘absconded […] and might be in Aliwal North’ [in the Cape Colony].34 Some of these criminal gangs did utilise the border to steal and sell animals. The Lesotho authorities cracked the largest gang in the post-war years in early 1904 by catching two Basotho who resided in the Orange River Colony with stolen stock in their possession in Lesotho.35 The courts there eventually convicted 14 Basotho of crimes relating to stock theft, with sentences ranging from six months to 10 years in prison. The authorities further disbanded the village of the Basotho ringleader, Headman Qhesi Maqadika, whose village was ‘situated on the Caledon River not far from Ladybrand’.36

In their trials, however, eight defendants claimed they had ‘sold the [stolen] horses to Cobie van Zyl of Mount Blanc Farm, Ladybrand’, with two maintaining ‘they were especially retained by this Dutchman to steal horses for him’. Van

34. SANA B CO 102, Theft of Stock from Fouche’s (and Other Farms) on Basutoland Border, Presumably by Basotho 1902, Letter, Resident Commissioner Sloley, Maseru to Lt. Governor, Orange River Colony, 31 December 1902.
35. At the conclusion of the South African War in 1902, the name of the Orange Free State was changed to the Orange River Colony when it was annexed to the British Empire. That name remained until 1909 when the Act of Union brought together the four colonies into the country of South Africa. At that time, the name reverted to the previous Orange Free State. After the first democratic elections in 1994, the named changed again to the Free State Province. We will refer to the land as the Orange Free State (OFS) in most cases for ease of understanding.
Zyl was charged with 10 counts of stock theft, and his brother was also charged with three counts for ‘systematic dealings with natives in stolen horses’. In the trials, evidence came out that the gang operated from Ficksburg in the north right around to Maghaleen (Mohale’s Hoek) in the south, an area encompassing hundreds of miles of territory on both sides of the Mohokare River. Defended in court by the former president of the OFS, General Hertzog, van Zyl was found guilty on one count and sentenced to two years in prison.37

This case is remarkable on a number of levels, but especially noteworthy in that we see a transnational syndicate systematically stealing horses, cattle and some smaller stock from an area encompassing roughly half of lowlands Lesotho and territory in at least four magisterial districts in the OFS. The success of the gang shows the extent to which theft was, at times, a serious problem in the Lesotho–South African borderlands and how the biggest gangs involved participants from both sides of the border.38 The smaller-scale ring busted by the Basutoland authorities in 1902 in Mohale’s Hoek in the Fouche case, on the other hand, does not seem to have had any South African participation, which made it harder to successfully launder the stock, as the Ladybrand gang had been doing for close to a year before it was shut down. However, the bigger, more successful gangs also risked coming onto the radar of authorities, as the Ladybrand syndicate did. Shortly after its demise, in 1907, the Ladybrand district reported only nine stolen horses, 21 stolen cattle, and 330 stolen sheep over an entire year.39

The Government Secretary in Maseru noted that ‘undoubtedly [there is] a certain amount of stock-stealing in both directions on the border, but I do not think it exists to any great extent’.40 Thus, we see stock theft on the border ebbing and flowing – certainly not always at crisis levels.

Official statistics on crime, however, have their limitations. Whether it was over-reporting, as happened in the Fouche case, or farmers not reporting theft because they either had no time or worried the police could not do anything, the official statistics offer only a rough estimate of theft numbers. They also often fail to capture the experience of the working poor who lost animals to bureaucratic processes, like Basotho who worked as seasonal herders and migrant labourers on farms in the OFS and tried to bring home their payment on the hoof. These Basotho, most often men, were vulnerable because of their inability to read English or Afrikaans and because of racial

38. This is a common theme throughout the history of this border. See Coplan, ‘River Runs through It’, 108–109; and Doorewaard, ‘Livestock Theft’, 41.
39. SANA B CO 370 1223/2/06_1, Stock Thefts along Basutoland Border: Letters from W. Milligan 1907–08, Report on South African Constabulary for year ending 1 October 1907.
40. SANA B CO 370 1223/2/06_1, Stock Thefts along Basutoland Border: Letters from W. Milligan 1907–08, Letter, Government Secretary, Maseru to Colonial Secretary Bloemfontein, 28 January 1908.
prejudice baked into the colonial laws. Many migrant Basotho lost animals without adequate compensation – a process that could be considered bureaucratic stock theft. A case from Lesotho’s western border in 1907 illustrates this. At the time, the OFS had outlawed the exportation of Angora goats to protect its lucrative mohair industry, unless the owner paid an exorbitant levy of 100 pounds per animal. Two Basotho, Clock Kotse and Charlie alias Tikana, had just concluded six months of employment on a farm in the Rouxville District. They were each paid with five Angora goats and attempted to bring them to their homes in Seeso’s Ward in Mafeteng District through Raboroko’s Gate. When they arrived at the gate, however, they were told they could not bring the goats across. At this point, both Basotho men claimed in sworn statements that the police refused to allow them to return to the farmer, threatening to ‘arrest us and take us to gaol’. The only option they had was to accept an offer of three pounds from the police for all 10 goats.  

Feeling cheated by the South African Constabulary at the border post, both Kotse and Tikana filed a report with the Assistant Commissioner in Mafeteng, Lesotho. This brought about an official investigation which concluded by reprimanding the border police officers for conduct unbecoming an officer, and the authorities in Bloemfontein sent a check for two pounds to Kotse and Tikana to compensate them for the animals. The testimony from the men showed that Kotse and Tikana saw the authorities as having unjustly taken their animals – stolen them. In this case, however, the transnational gang – one that often worked closely with their uniformed counterparts in Basutoland – was the South African Constabulary. Even though this ‘theft’ did not make the official crime statistics, Kotse and Tikana returned home without the animals they had worked six months to obtain, the same result as if they had been robbed on the roads by stock thieves, or had the animals taken from the kraals at home. While in this case, the Basotho labourers were able to gain some compensation from government for their lost labours, it took courage to go to Mafeteng to file a report and it is likely that most people in a similar situation did not feel so empowered to approach the authorities about it.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, with a relatively healthy economy, the complaints about crime continued to exceed the levels at which crime was happening. The magistrate in Wepener, across from Mafeteng in western Lesotho, documented complaints in February 1925 from farmers in his district that the border fence was in poor condition, which ‘facilitates stock theft by natives from Basutoland and […] considerable loss from

41. SANA B CO 453 4016/2/06, Complaint by Two Basotho against Police at Raboroko’s Gate 1907, Statement Made by Clock Kotse at Mafeteng, 10 September 1907.
42. SANA B CO 453 4016/2/06, Complaint by Two Basotho against Police at Raboroko’s Gate 1907, Letter Colonial Secretary Bloemfontein to Resident Commissioner, Maseru, 14 November 1907.
Basutoland dogs, which I am told, are worse than jackals’. The police in Wepener followed up in 1927 claiming that the border fence in the district was in a desultory state, and they asked for a new post at Bokpoort 12 miles from Wepener since ‘a large number of natives returning to Basutoland use this route and it is fairly certain that anyone conveying stolen stock would do so as they are able to get across the border without touching a police station’.

From these complaints, the narrative of Basotho as stock thieves is quite visible, and were one to read only this correspondence, it might reasonably be concluded that stock theft was a serious problem demanding new police posts and fences to protect border farmers from Basotho thieves and their marauding dogs. However, the police statistics from 1927 and 1928 do not bear out these impressionistic conclusions. On the contrary, they describe not only a relatively calm border region, but also farming populations quick to declare theft, even when it is not present. South African Police Inspector Mitchell declared in March 1928 that ‘never since my arrival in [...] 1923, has so little stock been stolen on the Border as is now the case’. The statistics he presented showed that in 1927 in the border districts of Fouriesburg, Ficksburg, Ladybrand, Wepener and Zastron, while there were a combined 122 cases of reported stock theft, 76 of these cases (62 per cent) were found to be ‘false’. These were not cases of theft, but rather lost animals later found. Mitchell went on to note that ‘it was once the prevailing idea that Basutoland was the haven of stock thieves and the safe hiding place of numbers of stolen stock’, but now that happens only ‘occasionally’. Yet the narrative from border farmers was strong. The demand for stronger border controls and more police patrols were calls from the wealthier settler stock farmers for the state to support their economic enterprises.

Police officers stationed just a bit farther south along the border in the Herschel and Barkley East districts of the Cape Province came to the same conclusions when facing similar complaints from settler stock farmers. The New England Farmer’s Association complained about stock theft through the 1910s. A.W. Sephton, the Chair of the organisation’s Vigilance Committee, claimed at a stock theft conference in 1918 that Lesotho and the Native Reserves in the Herschel District bordering Barkley East were ‘infested with professional thieves’ who needed to be removed to eliminate the stock theft threat farmers were facing. Similarly, in 1926 Sir Charles Crewe wrote that the ‘old trouble’ with stock theft had arisen

43. South African National Archives, Pretoria (hereafter SANA P) JUS 595 3040/32 Fence between Basutoland and OFS, Letter Magistrate Wepener to Secretary for Agriculture, Pretoria, 2 February 1925.
again in the Barkley East area. He pleaded with the South African Police to
refortify the border with Lesotho because ‘the only thing to stop the con-
stantly recurring and trying thefts is to have stations on the mountains
between the thieves and the farmers’. Kilpatrick, the South African
Police officer stationed in the area, rebutted Crewe’s claims, both of wide-
spread theft and of the answer being more police stations in the cold,
wind-swept mountains between the eastern Cape and Lesotho’s Quthing
District. He noted that Crewe’s vaunted mountain police posts had
‘handled [only] one case’ and had therefore ‘failed in preventing stock
theft’. Moreover, since the police had closed those remote stations and rede-
ployed the officers to more hospitable locations, ‘the number of losses
reported to police have decreased by 50%’. He stated ‘definitely’ that ‘the
position is better in that area than it has been for 15 years’.

Of course, it is in the interest of the police to claim that crime is down and to
boast about the good job they are doing when writing to their supervisors,
especially when facing citizen complaints. However, Kilpatrick’s memo also
notes that written complaints to authorities did not match with the number
of animals that these same people were reporting stolen to the local police.
Further, he quoted local farmer Claude Orpen as saying that what cuts down
on stock theft is ‘better supervision’ by farmers of their farming operations
and quick reporting of stock theft to the police. In closing, though, Kilpatrick
notes that the calls for better patrols of the border by the police were coming
from ‘five or six influential farmers’ whose farms are right on the border
while the ‘greater majority’ of farmers were convinced that spending 5000
pounds a year on mountain stations was not prudent.

So, on both the Eastern Cape/Lesotho border and the Free State/Lesotho
border in the 1920s, police were reporting that far less stock theft was occurring
than some of the most vocal citizens were claiming. Police in both places made
very similar arguments about how calls for the fortification of the border were
unnecessary. These measures would be expensive and, even if they were
effective, would only have protected the interests of a very few, well-off
border farmers. Even with the local economy doing well in the 1920s,
however, stock theft, real and imagined, remained a constant focus of border
farmers, and those with wealth amplified cases to further their interests.

47. SANA P PM 1/2/301 PM 82/9, Stock Theft, Barkley East and Basutoland 1926, Truter, South African
Police, Forwarding Letter to Commissioner for Justice, Pretoria, 6 May 1926.
48. SANA P PM 1/2/301 PM 82/9, Stock Theft, Barkley East and Basutoland 1926, Kilpatrick, SAP Com-
mander Eastern Cape Division to Secretary of South African Police, 1 June 1926.
49. Claude Orpen’s father, Joseph Orpen, had been a surveyor and advisor to King Moshoeshoe. Joseph
wrote the book History of the Basutos of Southern Africa. (Cape Town, 1857; reprinted Mazenod,
Lesoto 1979).
50. SANA P PM 1/2/301 PM 82/9, Stock Theft, Barkley East and Basutoland 1926, Kilpatrick, SAP Com-
mander Eastern Cape Division to Secretary of South African Police, 1 June 1926.
Discourses of stock theft in the mid-twentieth century

Claims of stock theft tracked, to some extent, the rise and fall of the macroeconomic fortunes of borderland residents so the Great Depression of the 1930s resulted in increased stock theft in the region. The administrative focus, however, remained largely on the interests of economically better off residents. This meant maintaining and bolstering small border posts in the hopes of stemming stock theft. In 1931, the South African Police proposed closing the one-man station at Joel’s Drift on the Mohokare River across from the town of Butha-Buthe in Lesotho to save money. The magistrate in nearby Fouriesburg protested this decision, claiming that the post prevented a ‘considerable amount of petty theft’ by the ‘mere fact that the police are within reach of the river’ and that the post helped with enforcement of the ‘Masters and Servants Act’ that controlled farm labourers, and, by implication, kept down instances of theft from insiders. However, he also had to note that the post had only investigated and turned over for prosecution seven cases of stock theft during the entire year of 1930.51 Similarly, the British assistant commissioner in Qacha’s Nek, on Lesotho’s southern border, was concerned about a series of small shops on the South African side of the Qacha’s Nek border post. He claimed that those running what he called beer canteens, brothels and eating houses were ‘nearly all’ from Lesotho and they would ‘steel sheep, slaughter them, and dispose of the meat to their customers’.52 Despite rather flimsy evidence in both cases, the authorities on the border used the threat and practice of stock theft in an attempt to maintain bureaucratic structures at or near the border, largely aimed at surveilling and controlling impoverished borderland residents attempting to eke out a living by working on settler farms or selling services to travellers.

Within Lesotho in the 1930s, the colonial administration moved to curtail the number of South Africans grazing stock within the territory. This was in response to the pressure on the land from an increasing population, but also to a worry about non-residents being in the territory who might be tempted to steal stock. In March 1936, Basutoland officials wrote to magistrates in border regions like Matatiele, Mount Fletcher, and Herschel in the Cape Province and Witzieshoek/QwaQwa in the Free State. They noted that ‘many Natives and even Europeans have made arrangements with the various chiefs to run their stock in Lesotho’ but it is time to ‘restrict this practice in order to preserve the grazing […] for those who have an inherent right’ to the land.

52. SANA P NTS 7055 136/322, Native Beer Canteens and Brothels on the Matatiele Side of the Basutoland Border, Letter, Assistant Commissioner Qacha’s Nek to Government Secretary, Maseru, 24 February 1932.
in the territory.53 Within Lesotho, however, the majority of animals were owned by the chiefs and large stock holders, while many of the borderland residents coming over from the Native Reserves in South Africa struggled to find adequate grazing as these areas also faced a land shortage. Thus, even policies to protect the communal grazing in Lesotho benefitted primarily Basotho chiefs and others already at the top of the economic pyramid, again at the expense of poorer borderland residents.

Even with a better economy, complaints about stock theft continued through the 1940s and into the apartheid era. Political moves towards the end of colonial rule in Lesotho and the hardening of apartheid regulations from the early 1950s led to more frequent complaints, and a new level of acrimony, around claims of stock theft in the borderlands. J.J. Botha of the Natal Agricultural Union in December 1952 complained of a ‘continuous stream of Basutos [sic]’ coming over the Drakensberg passes into Natal who are a ‘real menace to farmers’ because they ‘are in a position to easily dispose of stolen animals, drive them through the passes and no trace can ever be found’. He called for all Drakensberg passes to be ‘blown up and totally blocked’ because the lack of a pass law on the Lesotho side made it ‘practically impossible to control’ Basotho. Coming on the heels of the June 1952 Native Laws Amendment Act that made South African pass laws stricter and applicable nationally, Botha’s letter suggests farmers were leveraging the perception of widespread stock theft and melding it with new apartheid legislation in an effort to get more government protection for their farms and livestock.54

In the 1950s, stock theft away from the border also took up much of the administrative focus of officials. Chiefs and headmen within Lesotho, often some of the largest stockowners, were concerned about the prevalence of stock theft and the propensity of those suspected of such crimes to flee deep into Lesotho’s mountains and across the borders. An April 1953 stock theft drive in the Lesotho mountains targeted three notorious thieves – Tahlo Kopung, Mahlooma Nkuzula and Matshiti Sikau – who were suspected of operating from the Semonkong area deep in the Maluti. The stock theft drive consisted of three separate patrols converging on Semonkong from the north and west. The authorities to the south in Quthing were also alerted to ensure the thieves could not ‘escape over the Orange River and/or towards the Union [of South Africa]’ suggesting that the thieves were well versed in both internal and cross-border work.55 Meanwhile in South Africa, the passage of the Stock

53. SANA P NTS 8129 337/340, Basutoland Grazing in by Cape Natives, Acting Government Secretary to Secretary for Native Affairs, 28 March 1936.
55. National University of Lesotho Archives, Leribe Collection, 26/2 Monthly Newsletters, April 1953, ‘Stock Theft Drive’. 
Theft Act 57 of 1959 suggests that authorities there were also concerned about intra-South African theft during the same decade.56

Some border officials were sympathetic to the problems faced by borderland residents. An area of particular interest was the region encompassing Qacha’s Nek and Quthing in southern Lesotho and Matatiele in the Eastern Cape. This area was a point of constant tension in the 1950s and 1960s. On the Lesotho side, the population was largely clustered around Qacha’s Nek town with the surrounding mountains mainly used for seasonal grazing. In South Africa, the border was part of the Transkei with Basotho, Hlubi, and Xhosa groups all living alongside the settler farming districts of Kokstad, Ongeluk’s Nek and Matatiele. With stock theft complaints from residents on both sides of the border, the District Commissioner in Qacha’s Nek in 1951 identified European traders along the border as ‘the real source of trouble’. The border fence was constantly being cut not just by stock thieves, but also by smugglers and tax-evaders. South African stores offered better prices to Basotho wool farmers because they did not have to pay the high Basutoland wool tax. They were also ‘nearer the coast and […] do not have to worry about bewyses or legal ownership’ of the animals/wool.57 Those who crossed illegally, according to the Quthing police in 1954, would often sell their wool and then purchase bags of maize, smuggling them back over the mountains, to avoid paying the heavy South African maize levy at border posts.58 Individuals from communities on both sides of the border faced a heavy burden of taxes and avoiding them meant joining the ranks of cross-border smugglers and stock thieves to better support families who struggled to survive on the economic margins of the colonial and apartheid systems.

Constant recriminations about theft, smuggling and the concomitant fence-cutting along this border led to a 1954 conference at Matatiele that brought together magistrates from Matatiele, Mount Fletcher and Kokstad, South African police representatives from Bloemfontein and the Transkei, their counterparts from Qacha’s Nek and Quthing Districts, and the Basutoland Acting Resident Commissioner and the Commissioner for Police. In short, the issues of stock theft and smuggling were so concerning that all of the top officials from the Free State, Cape and Basutoland came together to talk. Most participants bought into the idea that stock theft was both a massive problem and virtually unsolvable, with the group calling the idea of imposing a ‘cordon sanitaire’ on both sides of the border ‘impractical’ because the mountain

57. LNA 394 IV and V, Border Fence, Letter, District Commissioner, Qacha’s Nek to Government Secretary, Maseru 7 February 1951.
58. LNA 394 IV and V, Border Fence, Letter, Assistant Superintendent Police, Quthing to Commissioner of Police, Maseru 5 January 1954.
areas in Lesotho had little to no permanent population and because ‘stock theft was closely linked with smuggling’.  

But even here the narrative of stock theft as a constant crisis is undercut by the minutes showing how little of the theft actually crossed the border. Police statistics from Lesotho in the early 1950s show that theft was a problem, especially in the mountain areas, but it was intra-Lesotho crime for the most part. In 1952 the Basutoland Mounted Police (BMP) reported over 1500 stock theft cases within the territory and noted that they were redeploying resources from border gates to new police stations in the mountainous interior of Lesotho. The police at border gates were ‘unable to patrol’ because they were primarily serving as revenue authorities collecting tax on wool and mohair exports, so the redeployment was meant to combat the problem of theft in the interior. Despite this, in 1952 there were still 28 police posts along the mountainous borders of Lesotho manned by almost 20 per cent of the BMP force, showing how the interests of collecting tax and providing some deterrence against cross-border theft were still driving border policy. The interest of the government in protecting its wool and mohair revenue, and the overly loud complaints of South African border farmers, continued to drive policy, at the expense of small-scale Basotho herders in the mountains whose stock was more at risk of theft.

Despite the high volume of complaints from South African border farmers about stock theft, the South African Police on the Lesotho border in the 1950s were ineffective and underfunded. Basutoland authorities complained in 1954 that along Lesotho’s southern mountain border there were seven Basutoland police posts, while there were none on the South African side, except in the towns of Himeville and Matatiele, both of which were at least 15 miles from the border. Even these two posts were not adequately equipped to deal with cross-border stock theft. As late as 1963, the police posts at Himeville at the bottom of the Sani Pass and the BMP station at Mokhotlong in Lesotho were only connected by surface mail, so a report of stock theft in the Himeville District reached the Mokhotlong police in Lesotho 24 days after the theft itself, and 17 days after the police reports were finalised in Himeville!

Despite most of the complaints in the archives coming from European farming associations along the border, cross-border stock theft seems to have been concentrated primarily between African small-stock holders in Lesotho and South Africa. S.C.B. Flatela, the Secretary/Treasurer of the George Moshesh Tribal Area (a primarily Basotho area outside Matatiele in the

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60. LNA 2494/6, Basutoland Mounted Police Annual Report 1952.
Transkei), complained in August 1961 of 600 cattle being stolen from owners in the area, with only 60 being recovered.\textsuperscript{62} In 1964, there was a series of raids and reprisals between Basotho herders in the Quthing District and communities in Mount Fletcher in South Africa. The armed parties stole over 130 animals from South Africans in late January 1964, with retaliatory attacks following in Lesotho in which 10 sheep were killed and the herders’ huts burned. There were follow-on attacks from both sides, with ‘some Basotho cattle […] disappear[ing] into South Africa’, but the British administrators noted that this was ‘merely’ raiding and counter-raiding and not ‘an international incident’ yet.\textsuperscript{63} What losses did occur in raids of this type certainly impacted the small-stock farmers on both sides of the border and the poor herders bore the brunt of the violence, but because of their lack of political clout, incidents like these were dismissed by colonial officials as simply ‘raiding’ rather than an issue of stock theft that needed to be dealt with in a formal conference, as had happened when settler farmers complained in Matatiele in the early 1950s.

There were a few voices attempting to quell the narrative of the border as a zone of constant theft. Mr Shaffer, the long-time magistrate in Matatiele, was one of these, as he wrote multiple memos to his superiors in the Bantu Affairs Department and to police officials in the early 1960s. He first noted that if the border fence was intended to ‘prevent stock theft’ or the ‘illegal entry into or departure of persons from the Republic’ then it ‘does not serve any purpose whatsoever’ as it stops neither of these activities.\textsuperscript{64} Further, he took a nuanced view of stock theft on the border that rejected the long-standing narrative of Basotho from Lesotho as the prime drivers of regional stock theft, writing in March 1963:

> It would be incorrect to assume that the Basutos are the principal culprits. I don’t think they are. Our own people are equally at fault. In fact, I believe that the main culprits of large-scale stock thefts are gangs of professional stock thieves with members operating on and from both sides of the border. Administration measures alone are inadequate to ensure border control.\textsuperscript{65}

This year (1963) was also the year that passport checks were first introduced on the Lesotho–South Africa border. While stock theft was still occurring in the later 1950s and into the 1960s, the issue was increasingly intertwined with the political changes taking place in Lesotho and the hardening of the apartheid


\textsuperscript{63} The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew (hereafter TNA) FCO 141/937 SA, Police Activity and Liaison in Basutoland, Report on Allegations of Public Violence from Mount Fletcher District in South Africa, 6 February 1964.


system in South Africa. Police statistics suggest that bigger stock theft problems were occurring in regions away from the borders, but cross-border stock theft still occurred. While well-capitalised settler farmers and small-scale stock owners were both impacted, the precarity of small stock owners meant that they were hurt harder by losses from theft. Yet border policy and enforcement continued to favour those with more economic and political power. South African officials, in particular, attempted to redress complaints from settler farmers and limit the crossing of borders, especially by poorer residents of South Africa’s Native Reserves and Basotho from Lesotho who often struggled to obtain the newly required passports.

Independence for Lesotho and the apartheid era

Lesotho’s independence in 1966 changed the tenor of relations along the border, but it was not an abrupt change. The first post-independence government of Lesotho, under the leadership of Chief Leabua Jonathan and the Basutoland National Party (BNP), attempted to cozy up to the South African regime to garner extensive development funding. This meant that Jonathan gave the South African Police relatively unfettered access to Lesotho to surveil political activity, especially among South African refugees, and combat stock theft. The Stock Theft Unit was tackling the very real problem of stock theft in the Lesotho highlands, but it was created from South African pressure based largely on the still-dominant narrative of cross-border stock theft. The unit was noted for its heavy-handed ways of dealing with suspects, and was highly unpopular within Lesotho because uniformed South African officers patrolled Lesotho’s mountains alongside local police. The controversial unit played a key role in Jonathan’s loss in Lesotho’s 1970 elections. However, in the years from 1966 until the democratic period (post-1993 for Lesotho and post-1994 for South Africa), political leaders, farming communities and border officials all continued to deploy narratives of stock theft.

Even in the late 1960s and early 1970s when relations between Lesotho and the apartheid regime under B.J. Vorster were at their best, however, the border and the idea of theft were deployed to achieve political ends. The South Africans gave money to bolster Lesotho’s police services, but much of this went to bolster the stock theft unit and the Special Branch, the group that monitored political activists resident in the Mountain Kingdom.

British High Commissioner in Pretoria’s assessment of this support was that the emphasis on cross-border cattle theft came about because of the disproportionate political clout that South African borderland farmers held in the political system, and the hold that the narrative of cross-border theft had on official minds. A British embassy official noted that when South African farmers suffer theft, they ‘appeal to their Members of Parliament’, but the issue was often overplayed during ‘agricultural debates in Parliament’ compared to the scale of the actual theft.69

An issue related to stock theft was grazing theft, with Basotho crossing the border to gain access to the more abundant grasslands on the farms on the South African side of the border. With lowlands Lesotho facing grass shortages because of the dense population of animals, poor lowlands residents often crossed the border illegally onto farms to graze their stock. On 19 November 1968, a South African farmer in the border district of Clocolan shot and killed a 14-year-old Mosotho herdboy and wounded eight others. The farmer ‘fired upon a herd of Basuto cattle which had been brought across the river to graze on his land’.70 A further case in September 1969 saw the South African Police stock theft unit mistakenly shoot a Lesotho citizen named Mr Mokubung near Witzieshoek in the OFS.71 These incidents whereby Basotho from Lesotho were wounded or killed attempting to access South Africa highlighted the danger poor Basotho faced attempting to cross the border to better support themselves. None of the perpetrators were severely punished for this violence, either, showing again how the law favoured property owners and border officials and how the official narrative about stock theft supported that status quo. The Lesotho government could only lodge tepid protests because of the money for security coming in from South Africa. The price for the Lesotho government’s assistance was, therefore, often paid by poor Basotho who did not have the same access that Lesotho’s chiefs did to the mountain grazing in the years after Lesotho’s independence.

The good relations between the governments of Lesotho and South Africa deteriorated from the mid-1970s as Lesotho became more vocally anti-apartheid in its foreign policy. The border continued to be at the centre of relations between the two countries.72 As relations soured, Lesotho became more strident about its continued claims to the ‘Conquered Territory’ – the land in the OFS taken in the nineteenth century. In April of 1973, the constitutional monarch Moshoeshoe II opened the interim National Assembly with provocative

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words about how Lesotho planned to ‘negotiate with South Africa on its boundaries’, a clear reference to the Conquered Territory. In late December 1974, Prime Minister Jonathan was even more explicit at a political rally in Hlotse, saying that Lesotho planned to take its case for the return of land to the United Nations and the International Court of Justice.

At the same time, the ‘South Sotho’ Bantustan of QwaQwa was also demanding more land from the South African government. While relations between QwaQwa and Lesotho were never cordial, with Lesotho refusing to accept QwaQwa as a legitimate polity, this was not a coordinated campaign but was still one that drew more attention to the border at a time when the white population of the farms and towns near the Lesotho border was falling dramatically. By the early 1980s, South African newspapers were asking if the ‘Conquered Territory’ would end up back in the hands of Lesotho because of this declining population. Harkening back to the Seqiti Wars of the 1850s and 1860s, The Star noted that ‘effective farm occupation has always been the key factor’ in deciding border disputes. The article noted that white farm populations had fallen by anywhere from 27 per cent in the Ladybrand District to 47 per cent in Fouriesburg, and 61 per cent in the Hobhouse Districts in the 1980s. One reason The Star claimed for the declining population was, naturally, stock theft. Drawing on the existing narrative of constant cross-border theft, stock theft was described as an ‘added curse – despite the efforts of the combined stock theft unit of the South African and Lesotho police forces’ that conspired to drive white settlers away from border district farms.

Just as in earlier times, however, border issues were too numerous and important to be ignored. From June 1981, despite poor overall relations, the two governments set up an Inter-Governmental Liaison Committee (IGLC). The IGLC, consisting of top civil servants from both governments, had the remit to attempt to resolve cross-border issues. While it was able to make some progress, political considerations on both sides often stymied the yearly meeting on the thornier issues of stock theft and cross-border transit for individuals. Unable to tackle the issue of the ‘Conquered Territory’ for being a political rather than technocratic issue, in November 1982, the IGLC attempted to harmonise crossings between Natal and Lesotho to make recreation easier in the newly set-up Drakensberg Catchment Park along the border. The IGLC’s minutes noted this would also help thwart the ‘smuggling of guns and ammunition, dagga, and even stolen animals’. Despite this progress, the South African Defense Force raid on Maseru on 9 December 1982 that killed 42 people broke the momentum.

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75. ‘QwaQwa Must Have More Land – Chief’, The Friend (Bloemfontein), 22 July 1975.
76. ‘Will South Africa Lose the Eastern Free State by Default?’ The Star (Johannesburg), 18 March 1982.
77. SANA P, DCD 2904 7/2/5/2/18, RSA/Lesotho Liaison Committee 1981–85, 3rd Meeting of Lesotho/ RSA Liaison Committee, Maseru, 17 November 1982.
of the committee, and it struggled for the next few years to make sustainable progress – with border problems losing out to geopolitical concerns.\textsuperscript{78}

In addition to the stalling of IGLC work, the raid disrupted progress that had been made on cross-border stock theft. In February 1983, \textit{The Star} reported that stock theft was ‘on the increase’ due to the ‘friction between the police forces’ on the two sides after the violent raid.\textsuperscript{79} However, after the South African regime blockaded the border to help overthrow Leabua Jonathan and install a more friendly Lesotho military regime in January of 1986, the issue of stock theft took a back seat to more pressing concerns like the Lesotho Highlands Water Project treaty.\textsuperscript{80} There were no discussions of stock theft from 1986 to 1988, when the IGLC records ended.\textsuperscript{81} Thus, even in the waning days of apartheid, stock theft discussions and narratives were still linked to local political and geopolitical concerns, even if the focus of the governments had largely shifted to the massive township uprisings of the 1980s and the highlands water project.

As the turbulent 1980s drew to a close, the end of the Cold War and the start of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) talks in South Africa put pressure on the military regime in Lesotho to hold elections. Thus, the early 1990s saw leaders and citizens in both countries debating the forms new governments should take. The issue of the border, not surprisingly, remained salient in the lives of borderland residents. While some in Lesotho wanted to finally open talks on returning the Conquered Territory, politicians in both countries largely ignored the issue while they worked through more immediate problems in the post-1993 (Lesotho) and post-1994 (South Africa) new political dispensations. Both the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) government in Lesotho and the African National Congress (ANC) government in South Africa faced enormous challenges in consolidating democracy and building social programmes to support the black majority who had long lacked such services during the apartheid era.\textsuperscript{82}

Even though the governments were not prioritising the border, grassroots contacts across the border improved in the 1990s, building on the structures that the IGLC initiated in the 1980s. A series of District Liaison Committees.

\textsuperscript{78} For an account of the raid, see P. Naidoo, \textit{Le Rona Re Batho: An Account of the 1982 Maseru Massacre} (Verulam: Phyllis Naidoo, 1992).

\textsuperscript{79} ‘South African Police Hard Pressed to Control Stock Theft’, \textit{The Star} (Johannesburg), 21 February 1983.

\textsuperscript{80} The Lesotho coup of 1986 replaced the unelected Jonathan regime with military rule, but it was carried out largely on the prodding of South Africa, which both raided Maseru again in December 1985 and instituted a serious go-slow at the border which meant crucial food and fuel supplies were not coming across. This was the impetus for the military coup. R. Edgar, ‘The Lesotho Coup of 1986’, \textit{South African Review}, 4 (1988), 373–382.

\textsuperscript{81} SANA P, DCD 2904 7/25/2/18, Lesotho Liaison Committee 1985–1992, 8\textsuperscript{th} RSA/Lesotho Intergovernmental Liaison Committee Minutes, 21 September 1987, Cape Town.

(DLCs) had started operation in 1985, but it was not until after the arrival of democracy in 1993/1994 that the DLCs were able to overcome the fundamental distrust of the apartheid era. By June of 1999, the DLC in the Maseru/Ladybrand District reported that there were ‘no recent cases of cross-border stock theft’ because of the ‘patrol of the Caledon River by the members of border communities on the side of Lesotho and the farmers on the South African side.’

History has shown that this type of grassroots cooperation is the key to limiting stock theft, but stock theft has certainly not permanently disappeared from the borderlands. A farmer interviewed in the Ladybrand District in 2021 noted that stock theft ‘will be with us forever […] until we find a way to get rid of poverty, and even then it will still be with us!’ He did, however, suggest that narratives around stock theft needed updating. Despite a continued perception that stock theft was coming from Lesotho, the reality was ‘it is not always from that side. A lot of it is from South Africa’. This was also true for other border districts in the post-1993/1994 period. And yet, the security resources – army patrols, enhanced paper checks at official border posts, army checkpoints on roads and calls for more fencing – continue to be focused primarily on the international boundary. Even in the new democratic era, what is old is new again when it comes to narratives of and securitisation around stock theft in the Lesotho–South Africa borderlands.

**Conclusion**

The perception of rampant theft along and across the Lesotho–South Africa border is a phenomenon that is older than even the demarcation of a formal boundary between Moshoeshoe’s Basotho kingdom and the OFS. The narrative of crisis levels of theft has been, and continues to be, deployed by a wide range of actors in the borderlands, usually in an attempt to gain access to state resources or to protect the interests of private property. However, time and again, the perception of theft has proven to be much higher than the reality. A 2017 study of sheep theft in the Free State Province found that while farmers perceived theft to be higher in areas that border Lesotho, there was no statistically significant difference in how much stock was lost from border farms compared to Free State districts away from the border.

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84. Interview, commercial farmer, Ladybrand District, 30 October 2021.
Tracing this continuity in perceptions of stock theft from the nineteenth century to the 1990s suggests two things. First, while stock theft was and remains a trans-national issue, it is not simply confined to border regions. Some thieves make use of the difference in laws and enforcement between the two countries in an effort to make crime pay. However, extremely high unemployment rates and economic inequality in both countries mean that stock theft will likely remain an attractive option for many on both sides of the border. The evidence strongly suggests, however, that historically small-scale farmers close to the border and in Lesotho’s mountainous interior are the ones bearing a disproportionate cost from theft as well as from the increasingly stringent border measures that are the easiest political reaction to narratives of theft. For instance, small-scale farmers and those living on communal land in the South African borderlands have a much harder time than large commercial farmers in getting police to open a stock theft case when they lose animals.

Second, larger-scale farmers and government security officials have played outsized roles in shaping the narrative of borderland theft. It is these officials and well-off farmers who can magnify small (and often tragic) border incidents for their own economic or political benefit, while the poor herders, migrant labourers and border residents all too often pay the price. Whether it is chiefly interests in Lesotho reserving the best (and safest) mountain grazing for themselves, white South African border farmers petitioning members of parliament for more and better border security measures in the apartheid era, or vested commercial interests in the present advocating for more border patrols to curb smuggling and grazing theft, those with economic and political clout deploy the theft narrative to secure their own interests in the borderlands, leaving poorer residents to fend for themselves. The idea of a border in crisis from theft has been deployed time and again in an effort by those with means and power to maintain structures that serve their interests at the expense of poor and vulnerable residents of the borderlands.

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