



# ‘Art is different from life’: Doctrine and agency in Thokozile Philda Majozi’s insights and imagery

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<https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.102.15>

## Abstract

Established in apartheid South Africa, the tapestry-weaving venture at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke’s Drift, was situated in a complex mission environment, on the junction between evangelised and unevangelised isiZulu-speaking communities. Although local women who worked at this centre in the 1960s and early 1970s were trained in creative strategies by Swedish artists, their lives were constrained by missionary strictures, inherited customs and apartheid laws. Little has been written on the tapestries made by these marginalised women, whose experiences were discounted in the socio-political milieu. Yet even as they were subordinated by political and social hierarchies, some found ways to assert their individualities. One of the most prolific was Thokozile Philda Majozi. As this study demonstrates, her woven iconographies, as well as her personal insights on those of others, provide a lens through which local Lutheran agendas and prejudicial social practices may be read. Some works anticipate the mission’s eventual change of heart on inherited customs and African-initiated churches. Majozi’s discussion also reveals how weavers often ignored Lutheran restrictions in the interests of artistic experience, despite the systems of control that defined their lives. Yet Christian weavers such as Majozi also complicated their representations of mission life, deploying images of un-evangelised women that articulated their own ambivalence towards them.

**Key words:** Tapestry, Thokozile Philda Majozi, Rorke’s Drift, South Africa, mission

## Introduction

Initiated in apartheid South Africa in 1963, the tapestry-weaving<sup>1</sup> venture at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke’s Drift<sup>2</sup> introduced many local black women to loom technologies during the period of Swedish teaching until 1976 (**Figures 1a and 1b**). In turn, sales of their works supported further programmes for local women and men, such as ceramics, textile printing, fine arts and a course for art and craft advisors at hospitals. The Centre’s Stockholm-based funding organisation, the Swedish Committee for the Support of African Art and Craft,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Generally, tapestry is a weaving technique in which coloured weft strands are interlaced through thinner warp threads set at ninety degrees in a loom. In this weft-faced technology, each woven weft strand is pressed tightly against the last, resulting in a dense overall weave.

<sup>2</sup> The name ‘Rorke’s Drift’ derives from James Rorke, the first owner of this 5,000-acre tract, bought by the Church of Sweden Mission in 1876. It is also known by the *isiZulu* name, ‘Shiyane’.

<sup>3</sup> In Swedish, Svenska kommittén för stöd åt afrikanskt konsthantverk.



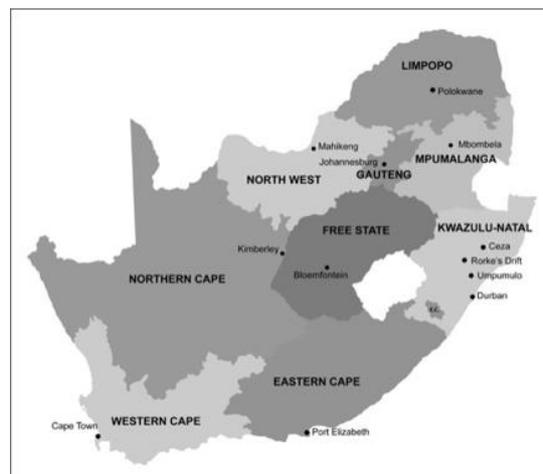
hoped thereby to help alleviate poverty and starvation in the rural KwaZulu-Natal region (**Figure 2**).<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1a:** View of the Mission at Rorke's Drift below Shiyane Hill, c.1966. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of the Power, Gender and Community Art Archive, University of Johannesburg (PGCAA).



**Figure 1b:** Community at Rorke's Drift, c.1965. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of PGCAA.



**Figure 2:** Contemporary map of South Africa, indicating the positions of Umpumulo and Rorke's Drift in what is now KwaZulu-Natal.

<sup>4</sup> This region incorporates the former province of Natal and the Kwazulu 'homeland' (previously Zululand), the latter established in 1971 by the South African regime.



Historians have rarely taken cognisance of the individual subjectivities of these marginalised women at the looms, whose experiences and iconographies as informally-trained artists did not count in “authorised” versions of South African art history. Although underestimation of the creative potential of black women was not unique to the times,<sup>5</sup> the oversight seems remarkable, given Rorke’s Drift’s ambitious exhibition programme in South Africa, Europe and beyond.<sup>6</sup> Some historians have even constructed the erasure of their personal contributions as a convention endorsed by the women themselves. Writing in 1979, Maria van der Walt (1979: 133) noted in her Masters dissertation on weaving in Southern Africa, for example, that weavers at Rorke’s Drift maintained a degree of anonymity in which they saw themselves not as artists, but as “nederige vakmanne” (humble craftsmen), a conclusion reached without the benefit of personal interviews with the weavers. Based on this finding, she declared tapestry artists at Rorke’s Drift a “school”, categorising their works according to a typology that included folktales, folk history, genre and Bible stories (Van der Walt, 1979: 132-134).

In Sweden there has been surprisingly little interest in the tapestry artists themselves, even if their names appeared in the media and their works were bought for museum collections as early as 1963. Instead, valorising discourses associated with the project were preoccupied with the Centre’s founders, the young Swedish art graduates, Peder and Ulla Gowenius. Writers such as Barbro Alving (1961: 30), for example, represented the couple as art pioneers embarking on a historic expedition to “save” art on the African subcontinent.

As Lize van Robbroeck (2006: 14, 139) and others have shown, twentieth-century representations in South Africa tended to group works by black artists, promoting these practitioners as a ‘tribal’ phenomenon stripped of personal agency. Yet narratives preserving the obscurity of the women weavers at Rorke’s Drift still seep into influential contemporary publications such as *Visual Century: South African Art in Context 1907–2007* (2011), which are assumed to redress prejudicial attitudes of the past. The compilers fell short of this imperative in the section, “Timelines 1945-1976” (Vol. 2), in which entries of works on exhibitions in 1966 and 1968 identify white and male artists, but not the women artists from Rorke’s Drift. Instead their works are grouped only as “Rorke’s Drift tapestries” (2011: 200-201). Simplistic to the point of distortion, this genre of narrowly-conceived accounts detaches these women from real life, providing scant insight into their identities and agencies.

I challenge such historical constructs built on a “lack of cultural variation”, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1991: xii) put it in *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Vol. 1). By letting women’s voices “speak from the historical record” as the Comaroffs (1991: 10) expressed it – likewise in a context of missionary hegemony – my reading aims to give substance to individual subjectivity. Unmasking the insights and achievements of one of the Centre’s most prolific tapestry artists, Thokozile Philda Majozi (**Figure 3**), I expose prejudicial social practices and Lutheran agendas at the Swedish mission<sup>7</sup> the Centre was stationed at. As I show, a number of Majozi’s works, whether made alone or in collaboration with others, may be read as statements on the complicated

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<sup>5</sup> Women could rarely initiate new designs at the German Catholic mission at Mariannhill near Durban, for example. Despite her personal tapestry skills and experience, Helen Sigwebela’s series of 14 tapestries, *Stations of the Cross* (1969–70), was designed by Sister Maria Johanna Senn and woven under the direction of Sister Cassiani Theiss (*Stations of the Cross* 1970, 3). For a discussion of other such cases, see Hobbs (2019: 8-10, 82).

<sup>6</sup> When an individual tapestry artist is cited in the literature, this is invariably Allina Ndebele, most of whose works were made only after she left Rorke’s Drift in late 1977. Such misconceptions have been perpetuated, for example, in the South African Department of Basic Education’s *National Curriculum Statement: Visual Arts, FET Phase, Grades 10-12* (2011: 58), in which Ndebele represents tapestry at the Centre.

<sup>7</sup> The first Lutheran mission in the South-East region of the African subcontinent was founded in 1850s by the Norwegian Missionary Society. Sweden and other sending countries likewise established Lutheran synods in the area, all of which amalgamated in 1960.

social, political and doctrinal environment in which she and her colleagues worked.<sup>8</sup> Due to the instability of memory, especially after some 50 years, it is inevitable that self-understandings will be inflected with present attitudes. Recollections of the surviving tapestry artists vary, and some, like Majozi, speak with authority and conviction. Even when she cannot definitively recall the intended meanings of some of the woven iconographies I discuss below, they nevertheless present themselves as a mnemonic resource, through which Majozi excavates her past experiences and understandings.



**Figure 3:** Thokozile Philda Majozi, 2018. Photo: Russell Scott.

### **Life of Paul and white guardianship**

Born in 1944, Majozi grew up at nearby Amoibe, where she completed six years of schooling. After her family could no longer afford her school fees, she worked as a cleaner at the Lutheran seminary at Rorke's Drift, then taught at a lower primary school at nearby Helpmekaar. In March 1964 Majozi took up weaving to help support what would be nine children, training under the Goweniuses. The Centre they had established the previous year was located between evangelised and unevangelised isiZulu-speaking communities. This was also the junction between geographic areas designated 'white' and 'black' by apartheid policy.<sup>9</sup> But as the Mission itself fell just inside white land, its black residents were illegal in the eyes of the law. The lives of women in this politically-charged environment were further constrained by a complex social environment in which missionary strictures and inherited customs limited their access to economic empowerment.

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<sup>8</sup> In 1972 Majozi's husband, Bhekamandla Robert Majozi, also joined the Centre, working mostly as a weaver until 1983. As is also little-known, it was not unusual for men to pursue tapestry there. However, their numbers did not equal those of the women, who had fewer employment opportunities. Most men took up other work after a few years.

<sup>9</sup> After the Nationalist government came to power in 1948, it enacted a series of laws designed to limit the opportunities of South Africans not deemed white. The Population Registration Act (No. 30 of 1950), required the classification of all South Africans as 'white', 'black', 'coloured' or 'Indian', according to perceived racial characteristics. The Group Areas Act (No. 41 of 1950), forcibly segregated these 'race groups' into specific areas.



**Figure 4:** Women displaying *Life of Paul*, 1965. Commissioned by the Church of Sweden, this work, which measured 190 x 522 cm, was woven by Dorothy Sibiyi, Elisa Xaba and Philda Majozi. The latter is second from left and Princess Ngcobo at the far right. The other women are unknown. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of the PGCAA.

One of the earliest large tapestries Majozi worked on was *Life of Paul* (**Figure 4**). It was commissioned in 1965 for the Church of Sweden Mission (CSM) by its Pro-Rector, Holger Benettsson, who was also a member of the Centre's Swedish initiating committee. Together with her colleagues Dorothy Sibiyi and Elisa Xaba, Majozi was assigned to weave this five-metre tapestry from a set of line drawings made by the Centre's first fine artist, Azaria Mbatha (Joelson 30/5/2016). According to the CSM's periodical, *Utblick*, in which *Life of Paul* was reproduced as a two-page spread and cover, the twelve scenes narrate the Apostle's experiences, from tentmaking in Tarsus, to his evangelical enterprises and eventual martyrdom in Rome ("*Afrikansk konstnär skildrar Pauli liv*", 1966: 8-9). Others show his fall from a horse, spiritual conversion, return of sight and escape from Damascus. Exhibited in various centres around Sweden in 1966, the tapestry was lauded as a triumph by the CSM's publicity programme.

As my research suggests, this *magnum opus* was not only intended to be an inspiring narrative, but also a validation of the Lutheran project in Africa. Its story was thought to reveal similarities between the Apostle's evangelising journeys in the Eastern Mediterranean from 30 C.E. and the CSM's own christianising enterprise. Conservatives such as the Norwegian synod's Rev. Gunnar Liserud, Rector of the large Lutheran Church Centre at Umpumulo,<sup>10</sup> drew a parallel between their own ongoing sojourn in Africa and Paul's guardianship of the early churches he had established on his travels (Liserud 1967: unpaginated). Like in those ancient times, the task of the white missionary, he asserted, was to "guide this young church to maturity". Their own "great commission" to make disciples of all nations took precedence over local aspirations of an African Christian autonomy emerging among the young theology students.<sup>11</sup> This Liserud argued on the basis that Paul's culturally-mixed church had elevated Jesus to a universal saviour, transforming Christianity from a sect into a comprehensive faith. It followed, then, that founding and transplanted churches constituted 'one body'. Based on this seemingly incontrovertible universalist teaching, many Lutheran missionaries anticipated

<sup>10</sup> The common Lutheran Theological Seminary, where pastors received their training, was located at Umpumulo Church Centre from 1961. The campus also comprised a Teachers' Training College and Theological College.

<sup>11</sup> Peder Gowenius, who had been asked by the students to attend the sessions, recalls Mbatha and Bishop Helge Fosseus sympathising with these revolutionary views (Gowenius 27/5/1999).

indefinite custodianship in South Africa. Lislrud further argued that, if left to its own devices, African autonomy could deteriorate into “egocentricity”. By evoking similarities to the Apostle Paul’s evangelising travels, therefore, *Life of Paul* strategically promoted the *status quo* of the white missionary, or *umfundisi* (meaning a pastor or teacher), as they were deferentially called. Arguably the work reflects anxiety over the prospect of losing this foothold.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding such arguments against African independence, by the mid-1960s Majozi and others had already begun to articulate racial differentiation in the Biblical figures they wove. In early works like *Paul* such departures appear tentative. Uniformly lit from one side, their stylised faces comprising dual skin tones are ambiguous; they could be read literally as forms partially illuminated by a raking light, or they could indicate an African claim on Christian ancestry and ownership. Read this way, *Paul* is congruent with the memorable Black Theology discourses articulated by students at the seminary, and their call for missionaries to go home. The figures also reflected the views of Mbatha, who had participated in these debates while boarding at Umpumulo in 1962-3. As he later pointed out, these discussions “deepened my vision” (Mbatha, 1969: 30).<sup>13</sup> However, he was away in Sweden when *Paul* was woven, and had left only simple, uncoloured, line drawings on sheets of brown paper for the women to work from. If a revolutionary discourse asserted through colour was indeed the intention in this tapestry, it was quite likely to have been the outcome of the weavers’ own ideas, therefore.

In time, women’s statements on racial specificity would become more emphatic. Woven in 1976 after most Swedish missionaries had left the field for home, the dark brown skin tones of the figures in *Adam and Eve* unambiguously situate Old Testament events in Africa (**Figure 5a**). Likely to have been woven by Majozi, the tapestry appropriates a section of a linocut by Paulos Mchunu, where the scheme of solid black figures on a white ground had necessarily been silent on racial identity (Fig. 5b), depicting them in specific brown shades. By such means the weavers redirected Mchunu’s intended meanings, narrating The Fall of Adam and Eve and their subsequent Expulsion from Eden as a drama in Africa.



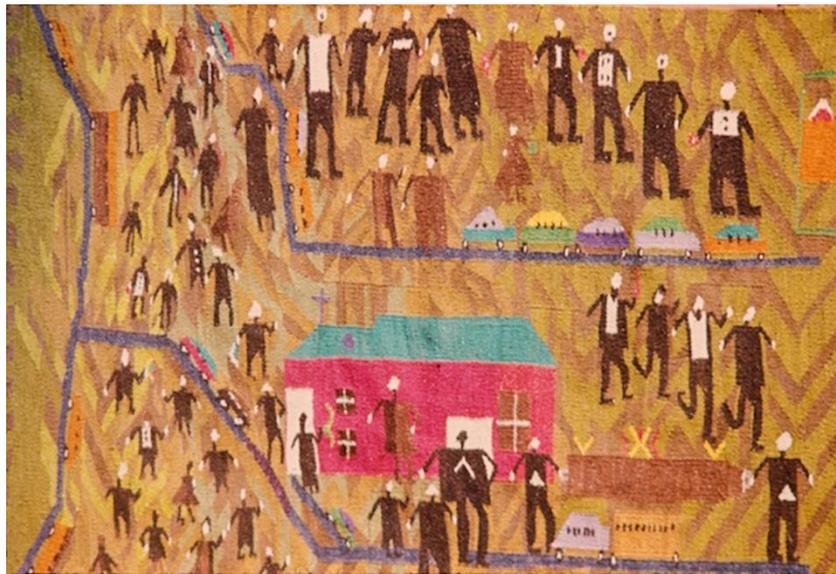
**Figures 5a and 5b:** Left: Philda Majozi *African Expulsion* (1976). Karakul tapestry. 167 x 189 cm. Private collection (Photo: Russell Scott). Right: Paulos Mchunu *Adam and Eve* (1968). Linocut. 54.5 x 67.5 cm. Collection: School of Archeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University (Photo: Russell Scott).

<sup>12</sup> Aside from interviews, my reading of this complicated era of missionary intransigence was informed by letters, reports and papers at the Lutheran Theological Institute in Pietermaritzburg. In revealing the fight for African “souls”, they offer insights into tensions between social responsibility and religious ideology – particularly where women were concerned. Yet few black women’s views are recorded here. Rather, this material reveals modes of social control women submitted to on the Lutheran mission field.

<sup>13</sup> For a more sustained discussion of this development and Azaria Mbatha’s role in it, see Hobbs, 2003: 84-85.

## Servant of the oppressor's church

Women who wove at Rorke's Drift in the 1960s and 1970s prided themselves on possessing greater courage than that of their younger colleagues. In our discussions Majozi (11/8/2015) emphasises that their generation of weavers developed the creative ingenuity with which to articulate political statements in their tapestries. In this, she says, the Swedish staff encouraged them. One such work was *The burial of the prime minister* (1966-7) by Majozi, together with Elsaphina Zondi, Ester Nxumalo and others. News of the assassination the apartheid mastermind, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, apparently had an emboldening effect. As Peder Gowenius wrote in his diary that day, 10 September 1966, general applause broke out at the president's demise, followed by a "curious air of happiness".



**Figure 6:** Pilda Majozi (together with Elsaphina Zondi, Ester Nxumalo and others). *The burial of the Prime Minister* (1966-7). Karakul tapestry. 142 x 203 cm. Whereabouts unknown. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of PGCAA.

The scene in *The burial of the prime minister* (1966-7) was not just situated in Africa, but more specifically the apartheid South Africa's capital, Pretoria (Fig. 6). Conceived directly on the loom, it deployed racial specificity in a contemporary political context, depicting Verwoerd's funeral procession, from the church to Heroes' Acre in Pretoria. Majozi's Swedish mentor, Ola Granath, pointed out at the time how

[T]he weavers make this event a purely "white" business. (Look at all the white-faced people in their nice clothes.) The Africans in the picture are small and unimportant, for the most part they are like passive onlookers on the periphery. (Granath 'Vävverkstaden', c.1969: [12])

As he also observed, the women made use of strategically-altered reality, in the bloated proportions of a lone black priest stationed outside the church, who has grown fat from working for the oppressor's Dutch Reformed Church.

## Barriers to personal advancement

Yet the intended meanings of such tapestries were not shared with the public in South Africa for fear of arrest for subversion and closure of the Centre. Thus, although the Centre considered these works opportunities for self-actualisation, Majozi and others were seldom

accorded recognition for their initiative outside the immediate community. The economy of apartheid South Africa also played a role in the paucity of recognition the tapestry artists enjoyed; almost all wove in order to earn a wage to support their families – critically important to them, as many men in the region had been co-opted to South Africa's mines. Nor could the women have afforded time off to study fine arts. Unlike the (mostly male) fine-art students from urban centres who studied there from 1968, who had received more schooling and enjoyed at least some access to funding, local women in this rural environment had no means of affording study fees.

In view of this, developing different visual languages in the loom was used by the Swedish art teachers as a way of promoting weavers' personal growth, especially in the 1970s under the management of a later Swedish teacher, Malin Lundbohm. This pedagogic strategy also provided a creative stop-gap when the women struggled to maintain a flow of original designs. As women were responsible for the ideas critical to a high turnover of unique works, they often experienced their employment as demanding. However, this approach, which had been previously trialed then abandoned by the Goweniuses in the mid-1960s, would prove unfair in time, as it mostly boosted the interests of the young male fine artists, who received both public acknowledgement for these works and payment for their designs if used by weavers. Yet they had little prospect of personal advancement beyond the immediate mission community, unlike the fine artists, who often managed to develop careers independently of the Centre, even if apartheid policy limited their opportunities.

Prejudicial expectations that erased women's participation in the tapestries were common in Sweden too, where Rorke's Drift staff had little influence over exhibition protocols or publicity. When tapestries derived from Mbatha's designs were exhibited on *Afrikaner Väver* at Moderna museum in Stockholm in 1966, they were valorised in the media as his own works. Woven by Majozi and Xaba after a section of one of his linocuts, *Nebuchadnezzar*<sup>14</sup> (1965) occasioned some 25 articles on the young man, including the cover design of a popular magazine, *Vi* (Figs. 7a-7c). But these works hardly mention the women who wove (and developed) his iconography – including his prominent signature – on an ambitious scale.

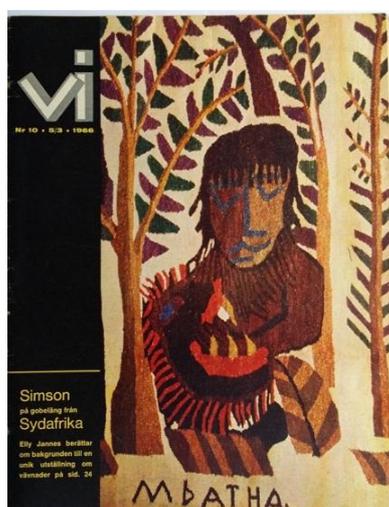


**Figure 7a:** *Nebuchadnezzar* and other tapestries from Rorke's Drift on *Afrikaner Väver* at Moderna Museum in 1966. In 'Sydafrikansk konst ger pengar till skola' by L. Widding, published in *Expressen*, on 23 March 1966. Courtesy of the PGCAA. Article in the public domain.

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.straussart.co.za/auctions/artist/11-jun-2012/azaria-mbatha>



**Figure 7b:** Philda Majози and Elisa Xaba *Nebuchadnezzar* (1965). Karakul tapestry, 195 x 530 cm. Skellefteå kommun. Photograph in the author's collection.



**Figure 7c:** Detail of *Nebuchadnezzar* on the cover of *Vi*, 5 March 1966. Photograph by Harry Dittmer. Courtesy of the PGCAA. Article in the public domain.

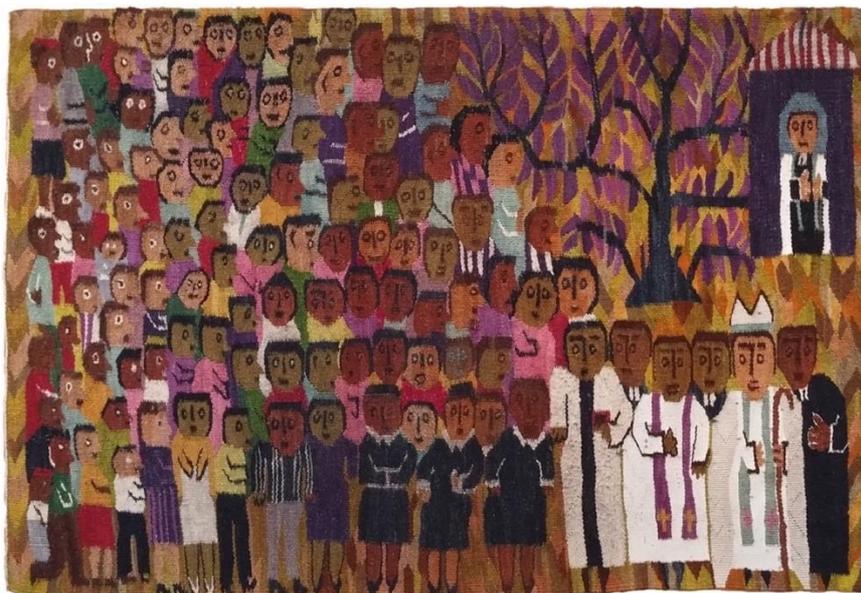
As Europe was assumed to offer a precedent for local tapestry practice, such conventions were often upheld in South Africa too. Canons of 'good taste' suppressing notions of individual (women's) imagination were promoted, for example, by Eddie de Jager (1992: 27-28), who considered the anonymity of the weavers at Rorke's Drift a convention fittingly "in keeping with the tradition of the great period of textile weaving in the Middle Ages in Europe". Ironically, Majози (30/10/2015) expresses this practice in terms that seem self-disqualifying to the weavers: Mbatha's tapestries were signed in the warp, she says, "because he was not a weaver". Despite the Swedish art teachers' efforts to foster individual expression in the women they trained, as well as the fact that weaving from men's designs was not the norm at the Centre, the honour of representation as 'artist' in the publicity, as well as in authorised art-historical literature, would be accorded to Mbatha.

### **Abasizikazi and the church body**

One way Majози and others could pursue social advancement was as members of the local Abasizikazi women's prayer league. Initiated by black women at the Mission in 1928 to mitigate the hardships of rural families when destitution forced men to work in urban areas, the movement promoted domestic education, singing and devotional habits among Christian women, establishing a forum for prayer and testimony. Once a novice had made a public commitment, she was mandated to comfort victims of poverty, illness, police harassment or

bereavement. As the former bishop, Helge Fosseus (1974: 149), said of these stalwarts, they were the “backbone of the Church”, whose fundraising provided “everything needed for the service of God”. Uniquely among Abasizikazi groups, at Rorke’s Drift their conduits of expression included visual communication in the loom.

Majozi’s 1968 tapestry of the Rorke’s Drift congregation locates a cohort of these devout members next to the clergy; as “close to God” they enjoyed this special place during services. Their distinctive black uniforms denote their status as champions of fidelity, responsibility and moral character (**Figure 8**). Fosseus appears next to them, second from the lower right of the scene.



**Figure 8:** Philda Majozi. Congregation at Rorke’s Drift (exact title unknown) (1968). Karakul tapestry. 170 x approx. 500 cm. Now in the Mariakyrkan parish church, Sigtuna, Sweden. Photo: Philippa Hobbs.

However, conservative clergy found their “more African” style of religious expression offensive and called for them to be schooled in appropriate forms of Lutheran practice. One, Stig Falk (1949: 55), warned that the group was “strongly exposed to pagan influences” from African-initiated churches because they dealt in “ancient prophecy”, danced in church and prayed for childless wives by “hand-piling”, a collective laying on of hands likened to healing practices in local messianic African churches. Majozi and her colleague, Mary Shabalala, described how the “old missionaries”, as they referred to them, attempted to curb their forms of worship (Majozi and Shabalala 7/3/2018). For my benefit, she and Majozi staged a mock imitation of the censure they experienced: “You must be quiet, don’t make [a] noise, sit down, pray in your own heart, [and] sing when it’s the right time ...”

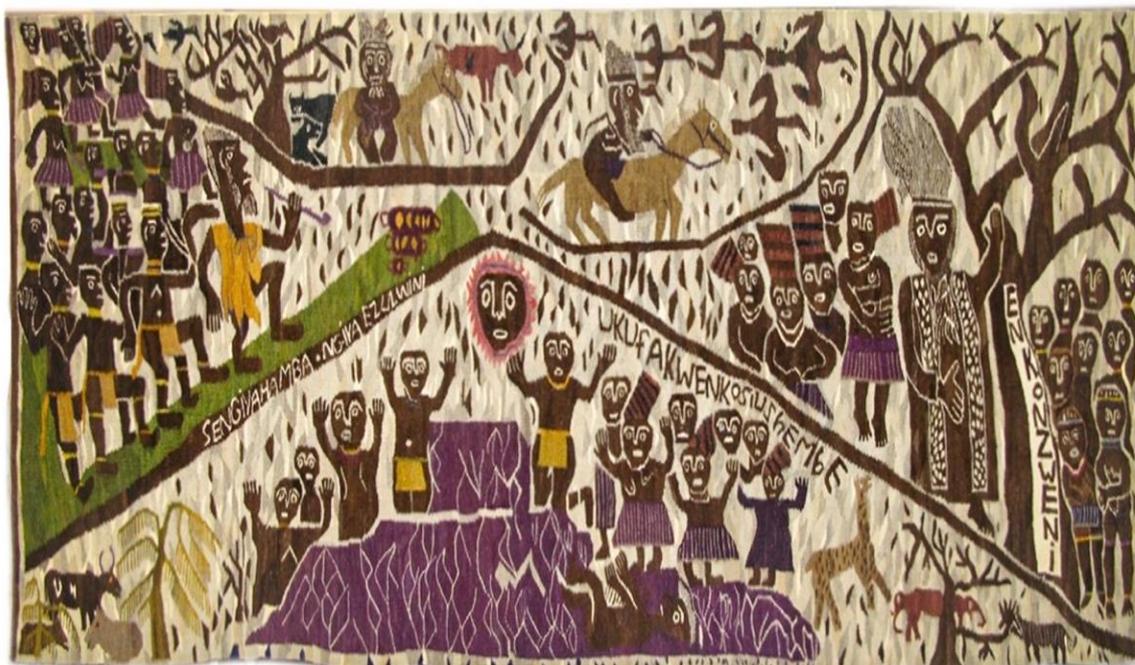
## Shembe

There were other instances of religious disobedience in the weavery at Rorke’s Drift. Lutheran missionaries perceived the growing number of African-initiated messianic churches, who were accused of causing converts to “backslide”, a threat to their work. One was the Nazareth Baptist Church, or *Ibandla lamaNazaretha*. Established by Isaiah Galilee Shembe around 1911, it comprised a mix of inherited pre-Christian beliefs and Old Testament doctrines. Shembe was likened to Moses, who in ancient times led the Israelites out of subjugation in Egypt to a Promised Land. As *amaNazaretha* saw it, the white man’s Jesus had permitted the passing of the Land Act in South Africa in 1913, stripping them of their right to retain land

outside the increasingly congested reserves set aside for them, thus forcing almost a million people into either itineracy or serfdom.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Shembe had managed to acquire land near Durban, proclaiming a sanctuary and Holy Mountain for black worshippers. He was thus considered a more legitimate prophet.

In 1968 Majozi, Ester Nxumalo, and (possibly) Victoria Mncube tackled another large tapestry, *The story of Shembe*, repurposing a linocut by Caiphaz Nxumalo that proclaimed Shembe's achievements (**Figures 9a and 9b**). The weavers accordingly encountered discourses on alternative forms of Christian worship the Mission deemed "degenerate". In a demonstration of both diligence and expertise, they replicated the main elements of Nxumalo's design, including his lino-text inscriptions demarcating the features of Shembe's life: "In the church", "King Shembe's death", and "I am going to heaven".

On the far left of the tapestry, Shembe and his followers ascend the mountain to the site of a ceremony. Above its summit hovers a visage said to be *Nkulunkulu*, the unseeable Great God in local pre-Christian belief. The faithful are shown in traditional wear, rather than white cotton garments suggesting, perhaps, Shembe's mobilisation of the Zulu nationalist spirit in order to attract new converts.<sup>16</sup> But elsewhere Caiphaz Nxumalo's iconography becomes more fanciful. The upper sections are said to reveal the saviour's heavenly life, where birds shade him from the sun. Below is the scene of an enactment inspired by Shembe's maxim, "you can't go to heaven by flying", in which Nxumalo imagines the prophet to crash to the ground in a demonstration of the futility of this notion (Majozi and Shabalala 7/3/2018).



**Figure 9a:** Ester Nxumalo, Philda Majozi (possibly with Victoria Mncube). *The story of Shembe* (1968). Karakul tapestry. 190 x 430 cm. Smålands Museum, Växjö, Sweden. Photo courtesy of Smålands Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Established by the British authorities, the colonial government of the Union of South Africa (comprising Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Free State) instituted the Natives Land Act (Act 27 of 1913), which designated 7.3 percent of land as 'reserves' in which to accommodate the 'native' population. The Act would be extended by the Nationalist government after 1948.

<sup>16</sup> On this point see Mbongeni Malaba (1986: 112).



**Figure 9b:** Caiphaz Nxumalo *The story of Shembe* (1968). Linocut. 40 x 63.5 cm. Private collection.

The fact that these devout Christian weavers were reluctant to renegotiate this unchristian design to any obvious degree could have been an outcome of inherited social practices in which women deferred to the interests of men, as well as norms at the Mission. Weavers might also have perceived the young man's linocut as an artistic 'authorisation' from the Centre itself. Either way, the women did not necessarily find weaving men's images a humiliating experience. As Majosi says, improvising an existing image afforded them a respite from the pressure of thinking up new ideas.<sup>17</sup> My exchanges with former Swedish teachers, such as Malin Lundbohm (19/5/1999), suggest that, in working up their designs on the loom in the early 1970s, the women were happy to please the young artists, who received payment for the favour of lending their prints to the weaving workshop, and who are said to have delighted in seeing them take shape in the loom.<sup>18</sup>

Nor does the tapestry necessarily imply a lack of initiative on the part of the weavers. Their independent agencies could be demonstrated through imposing scale, alternative visual solutions, and bold colour choices (an imperative Majosi and others often emphasise). They could mediate and manipulate aspects of the image at will: the prominent hovering visage that Majosi calls the vigilant "eye of God" is bordered with pink flames, while Shembe's head with regal plume is less prominent, developed in brown like the accessories of the other mortals.

Majosi's group also effected some iconographic interventions too. The wings Nxumalo had equipped Shembe with seem not to have been re-issued to the prophet. This was not necessarily a perverse omission; it may simply have been a lack of familiarity with the artist's intended meanings. However, in our recent discussions of this work, Majosi observed that the birds were mocking Shembe with their laughter (Majosi and Shabalala 7/3/2018).

### **Disobedience in the warp**

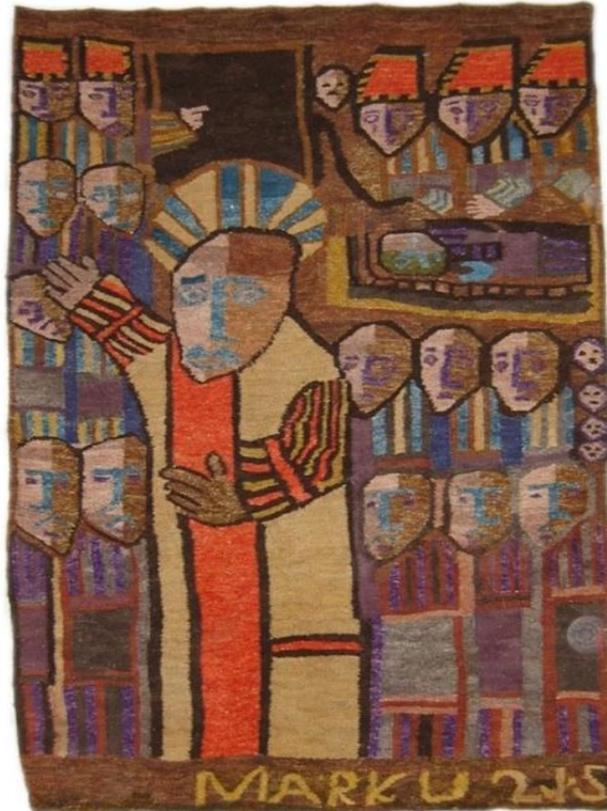
The Lutheran Church would eventually abandon its restrictive stance on African-initiated churches, extending an official outreach to Shembe followers in 1970, also making them an object of study.<sup>19</sup> Now declared "brethren", their presence was accepted as "an expression of longing for an African Christianity" (See Hobbs, 2019: 151). It is notable, however, that the ambitious *Shembe* dates from 1968, prior to this ecumenical overture to independent churches, when engagement of 'pagan' practices was still outlawed. In truth the clergy, both

<sup>17</sup> Mary Shabalala (14/8/2015), amongst others, describes the pressure of evolving a new idea within the two days allowed them by their weaving supervisors such as Jessie Dlamini.

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps understandably, this magnanimity did not last. Dissatisfaction eventually grew at the privileges the fine art students enjoyed, contributing to the closure of the Fine Art School in late 1982.

<sup>19</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this ecumenical development see Hobbs, 2019: 150-51.

white and black, were disinterested in the Centre’s artistic affairs, other than on one memorable occasion, when Dean L.E. Dlamini objected to the representation of Jesus as black in *Jesus healed a paralysed man* (1965) (**Figure 10**) by his wife Jessie and Josephine Memela, after Fosseus hung it in the Rorke’s Drift church. As Peder Gowenius (26/4/2017) recounted to me, the Dean had expected a “real” picture in which Jesus looked European. The older clergymen “... were used to a blond Christ... Black pastors wanted a *proper* painting.”



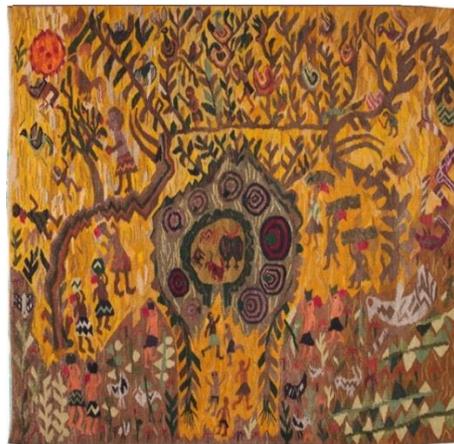
**Figure 10:** Josephine Memele and Jessie Dlamini *Jesus healed a paralysed man* (1965), karakul tapestry, 230 x 150 cm. Later repaired by Philda Majози. Rorke’s Drift church. Photograph in the author’s collection.

Dlamini was particularly censorious of women wearing beadwork and brewing beer for ceremonies. Nevertheless, these precolonial practices would be imagined in their looms. For Majози and Shabalala (7/3/2018) a tapestry by an unknown weaver solicited memories of the social constraints imposed on them at the time. The imagery shows women – some of whom are in traditional dress – bringing illicit, locally-brewed beer in customary vessels, or *izinkamba*, to a church wedding (**Figure 11**). Majози explains this transgression on the part of the weaver by drawing a distinction between life and art. In life, they were unlikely to contemplate any unchristian conduct. However, they did not consider these norms binding in the loom; a woven image was, Majози (7/3/2018) says, a “weaving idea”, whose imperatives were “different from [those of] life”.



**Figure 11:** Unknown weaver. Wedding at Rorke's Drift (exact title unknown) (c.1967). Karakul tapestry. Dimensions and whereabouts unknown. Photo: Peder Gowenius. Courtesy of the PGCAA.

Ironically, even though the Mission barred unevangelised women from attending religious events, by the late 1960s these figures were depicted in many tapestries, such as *The fowl and the eagle's axe* (1971) by Majozi and Ester Nxumalo (**Figure 12**). Their forms gave a tapestry “life”, Majozi (7/3/2018) explains. There might have been some expediency at work here. As she recalls, weavers realised that buyers of tapestries found these picturesque tropes attractive. However, against the wishes of their socialist Swedish teachers, they refused to weave alongside these unchristianised women, citing their employment in the workshop the privilege of the converted.



**Figure 12:** Philda Majozi and Ester Nxumalo *The fowl and the eagle's axe* (1971). Karakul tapestry. 189 x 200 cm. Private collection, Johannesburg. Photo: Russell Scott.

As is little appreciated in standard accounts of South African art history, transgression in the loom could sometimes take the form of overt political defiance. When in June 1976 police shot black children protesting Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at schools in Soweto, near Johannesburg, Majozi wove *Soweto Uprising* (**Figure 13**). At the bottom left of this chaotically fragmented scene, children rally with knives and knobkerries as a policeman takes aim at them. Above on the right, the fatally-wounded Hector Pieterse, reportedly the first child to die in the clash, is rushed away. Ambulances, police and a helicopter converge above, while a

building burns below. She also recalls that, when she sought approval for the weaving of this tapestry, her supervisor Jessie Dlamini, raised no objection, but silently signed her request. Having completed the work, Majozi embarked on a more incriminating version of it that claimed a greater number of victims than the last tapestry did. Although she risked arrest, weaving these indictments of apartheid helped soothe her sense of horror. While both tapestries were sanctioned by the Centre, they were nevertheless quickly sent out of the country (Majozi 30/10/2015).



**Figure 13:** Philda Majozi *Soweto Uprising* (1976). Karakul tapestry. Dimensions and whereabouts unknown. Reproduction from Dirkie Offringa, 'Rorke's Drift Weefwerk: Skakel tussen twee pole,' 1990. *South African Journal of Cultural History / Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Kultuurgeskiedenis* 4: 254.

## Conclusion

In foregrounding these woven acts of agency and subversion, this reading of the tapestries and the practice itself dislodges notions of the Rorke's Drift workshop in the 1960s and 1970s as a quaint collective. As is clear, Majozi's understandings and images narrate local tensions between religious, political and artistic practices, entangled sectarian agendas, and complex modalities of gendering and exclusion.

Weavers' encounters with men's religious iconographies were complicated. On one hand, developing tapestries from their designs suggests constraints on women's individual expressions and imbalances of gender participation implicit in the practice, the sheer size of works like *Paul* and *Shembe* giving greater voice to male artists, turning their aspirations into public proclamations. However, in transposing these laudatory designs into colour and texture, tapestry artists also renegotiated the meanings their male colleagues might have intended, most notably in the realm of African ownership of Christianity. Furthermore, reworking designs such as *Shembe* on an imposing scale took personal initiative and courage, the more so as the image was committed to a forbidden subject.

In showing how women like Philda Majozi navigated local hegemonies of white and male custodianship that had long been normalised on the mission field, my account also reveals that, whether as individual agents or in small alliances at the loom, these devout women's attitudes were complex, with exclusionary views of unconverted 'other' women, even though they fetishised them in their iconographies. Reflecting a degree of anxiety around their



economic foothold at the looms, weavers established limits for those they considered unworthy of sharing their employment opportunities. Furthermore, Abasizikasi women used the loom to assert their personal status in the face of reactionary church conventions forced on them by men.

Women's tapestries were at their most assertive in designs of their own. In works such as *The burial* and *Soweto Uprising* the modalities of imposed power that shaped their lives could be mitigated, the loom a domain in which women did not consider the authority of convention binding. Majozi's generation of weavers contested social norms by demarcating the warp as a site of creative immunity, in which restrictions could be challenged and transgressive concepts asserted vicariously. Whether covert or explicit, derivative or personally conceived, the tapestries reveal the creative agencies Majozi and others asserted within the limited scope of their personal freedom – an outlet for their voices through which resilience could be built and dignity reclaimed.

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