

## **Interwoven and Entangled – Provenance Research on the Textile Collection**

Textiles and the different techniques used to make them have been a focus area of research at the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) since the 1940s. For the purpose of studying fabrics, techniques and materials systematically, the Museum compiled an extensive collection of textiles from around the world. The paths along which they travelled on their journey to the Museum are just about as varied as the textiles themselves.

In this pop-up exhibition, we – the provenance research team – offer a glimpse into the kind of work we do. With the help of select examples, we show how closely the textile collection is interwoven with the development of MKB and its associated networks. In doing so, we show not only how the collection is entwined with colonial structures but also the great potential it holds for forging new relationships.

### **Fragments from the archive**

The museum's archival records reveal the strong interest in collecting textiles. Museum staff encouraged travellers to acquire textiles for the collection during their time abroad. Listen to excerpts from the correspondence or explore the original letters yourself in the archive box.

- 1      Listening Station and Archive Box**  
Correspondence from the MKB Document Archive | 1946–1957 | Audio  
production by Louis Rüegger and facsimile reproductions

### **Interwoven – Building Up the Textile Collection**

In assembling the textile collection, the staff at the museum were able to weave a dense web that linked Basel with the entire world. Their aim was to comprehensively describe techniques and procedures that people across the ages and throughout the world used to produce, decorate, and enhance fabrics, analysing techniques such as weaving, braiding, embroidery, knitting, and crocheting down to the last detail. Through their contact with collectors, scholars, and laypeople across the world, they were able to acquire ever more textiles and thereby enhance their classification system. Every new piece was meticulously placed within this framework of knowledge, thus gradually transforming the fabric of the collection. What we see in the collection is above all movement: a continuous interweaving of materials, knowledge, and relationships.

## How did the MKB's focus on textiles come about?

The development of the MKB's textile focus is closely linked to Alfred Bühler (1900–1981). He served as curator from 1938 and as director of the museum from 1950 to 1964. A key starting point was his research trip in 1935 to Timor, Flores, and Rote (now East Timor and Indonesia). There, he assembled a large collection of approximately 4,500 objects and took about 3,700 photographs. Bühler's approach had a lasting impact on the museum's collection. Crucial to this was the systematic documentation of entire production processes, which established a focus on textile techniques.

In 1935, the regions Bühler traveled through were under colonial rule. Visas issued by the Dutch and Portuguese consulates document this. They enabled to enter the colonized territories. He received support from colonial officials and missionaries. At the same time, he maintained contact with local rulers. Local translators sometimes traveled with him. Without these connections, it would have been virtually impossible for Bühler to acquire such a large number of objects.

### 2 **Passport**

Issued to Alfred Bühler | ca. 1927 | MKB Document Archive, Inventory Number 08-0026

Bühler recorded his whereabouts, encounters, and research findings in his travel diary. In it, he also vented about mishaps and bureaucracy. On May 19, 1935, he wrote: "Over the past few days, I have been particularly focused on compiling a complete collection and production process of weaving and pottery. I have succeeded almost entirely in both, and I hope to acquire the rest as well." The notes provide little context regarding the acquisition and leave open exactly how the transfers of ownership took place.

### 3 **Travel Diary**

Alfred Bühler | 1935 | Reproduction | MKB Document Archive, Inventory Number 08-0028

During his research career, Bühler was particularly interested in textile dyeing techniques, including the ikat technique. In ikat textiles, the threads are tied off in certain places before dyeing, so that the dye is not absorbed by the yarn in these "reserved" areas. The intricate patterns then emerge only during the weaving process. According to Bühler, the pattern on this women's sarong depicts a bird motif.

### 4 **Women's Sarong | *taiss***

Amanuban region, West Timor, Indonesia | ca. 1935 | cotton, woven, dyed (ikat technique) | unidentified maker from the Atoni community; acquired in 1935 by Alfred Bühler in a manner unknown to us; purchased by the museum in 1935 | IIc 4577

Bühler sought out all materials and objects related to the production of ikat textiles, from the cotton plant to the finished textile. The 1935 expedition was the first research expedition organised by the museum in which textiles were systematically acquired and their production techniques comprehensively documented.

### 5 **Strand | *aub nonoff***

Kupang, Amarasi, Wimar, Indonesia | ca. 1935 | cotton, spun | unidentified

makers from the Atoni community, acquired in 1935 by Alfred Bühler in a manner unknown to us, purchased by the museum in 1935 | IIc 4485

6      **Dyed Strand**

Laranatuka, Flores, Indonesia | ca. 1935 | cotton, dyed (indigo) | unidentified maker from the Lamaholot community; acquired in 1935 by Alfred Bühler in a manner unknown to us; purchased by the museum in 1935 | IIc 3370

7      **Spindle**

Kupang, Amarasi, West Timor, Indonesia | ca. 1935 | wood, cotton | unidentified maker from the Atoni community; acquired in 1935 by Alfred Bühler in a manner unknown to us; purchased by the museum in 1935 | IIc 4475a

8      **Ikat Binding Pattern**

Kupang, Amarasi, West Timor, Indonesia | ca. 1935 | lontar, woven | unidentified maker from the Atoni community; acquired in 1935 by Alfred Bühler in a manner unknown to us; purchased by the museum in 1935 | IIc 4503

Weaving looms were of great interest for the analysis, as the manufacturing processes could be particularly well discerned from the works in progress. In the final report for the Museum Commission, Alfred Bühler wrote: “Particular emphasis was placed on obtaining the most complete evidence possible for each craft and technique – raw materials, tools, semi-finished goods, and finished products – so that vivid production processes could be exhibited. In this way, very detailed series were collected, especially for spinning, dyeing, and weaving.”

9      **Backstrap Loom | *teténuk***

Tudameda region, Rote, Indonesia | ca. 1935 | wood, cotton, gebang fibre, water buffalo leather | unidentified makers from the Rote community; acquired by Alfred Bühler in 1935 in a manner unknown to us; purchased by the museum in 1935 | IIc 4223a-d

The analyses were incorporated into the textile classification system authored by Alfred Bühler together with his wife, Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim (1915–1976). The publication is based on the collection of the St. Gallen merchant and textile expert Fritz Iklé-Huber (1877–1946). Techniques are classified, described, and explained using sketches and photographs. In the years that followed, various museum specialists expanded this approach. Under the technical term Basel Textile Classification System, the research gained international significance and remains to this day the standard reference for the analysis of textile techniques.

10      **First Edition of the Basel Textile Classification System**

Authored by Kristin and Alfred Bühler-Oppenheim | 1948 | Reproduction

(sg)

## The Iklé-Huber Collection: Trends and Systems of Collecting

Alfred and Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim maintained close contact with Fritz Iklé-Huber. The experts engaged in intensive exchanges on textile techniques. Iklé-Huber primarily collected textile samples and regularly donated examples of manufacturing techniques to the museum. After his death, the remaining collection – comprising over 700 pieces – was transferred to the museum, thereby becoming the foundation of the “Basel Textile Classification System”.

The Iklé-Huber Collection also includes late antique textiles from Egypt, such as this neckline fragment from a burial robe. Fritz Iklé-Huber had inherited some of these items from his father, Leopold Iklé, who was a textile merchant and collector. Tracing the provenance of such textiles is often challenging. In many cases, they come from undocumented excavations, which means there is a lack of knowledge about their historical context. The context of this neckline’s discovery, however, is known: it comes from an excavation conducted by the French archaeologist Albert Gayet in the late 19th century.

### 11 Neckline of a Tunic

Deir-el-Dyk, Egypt | 5th–6th century | wool, knitted fabric, linen | makers unknown to us, discovered by Albert Gayet before 1899, in the Leopold Iklé collection until 1922, passed by inheritance to Fritz Iklé-Huber in 1922, bequeathed to his widow Hedwig Iklé-Huber in 1946, donated to Alfred and Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim in 1946, donated in 1947 to the museum | III 479

Around the turn of the century, Gayet organised a series of spectacular exhibitions of his finds at the Musée Guimet in Paris and at the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris. In doing so, he shaped the perception of “Coptic textiles” in Europe and achieved fame himself. The exhibitions also sparked widespread enthusiasm and a surge in demand for such textiles among European collectors. Leopold Iklé served on the international jury of the World’s Fair and subsequently acquired part of Gayet’s collection, including this piece. Historical “fashions” in collecting are thus reflected in the holdings of the MKB through its links to private collectors.

### 12 “Le costume en Egypte” (Dress in Egypt)

Albert Gayet | Paris | 1900

### 13 “Le panorama de l’Exposition de Paris 1900” (Panorama of the 1900 Paris World's Fair)

Artist unknown | Paris | 1900

On loan from Zentral- und Hochschulbibliothek Luzern

Like his father Leopold, Fritz Iklé-Huber combined his passion for collecting and his interest in textile techniques with close ties to various Swiss museums. The networks of private collectors shaped museum collections not only through the transfer of objects into museum holdings, but also through the exchange of knowledge, interests, and collecting perspectives. The influence of Iklé-Huber, his views on textiles and his systematic collecting practices on the collection of the Basel museum is evident in this obituary, written by Alfred Bühler.

### 14 Manuscript for Fritz Iklé-Huber’s Obituary

Alfred Bühler | undated | reproduction | MKB collection file IV\_0233

(dm)

## Textile networks during the Second World War

Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim was employed at the museum from 1942 to 1946. Among other responsibilities, she was in charge of the European department, where she brought her expertise in textiles to bear on the museum's work. She maintained a wide network that contributed to the expansion of the textile collection. The textile researcher and cultural scholar Gertrud von Palotay (1901–1951) in Budapest was part of that network. Bühler-Oppenheim acquired textiles from Hungary and Romania for the museum through her.

In 1944, Gertrud von Palotay sold twelve textiles to the museum for 174 Swiss francs. These included two pieces of embroidery as well as a colourful crocheted shirt trim from what is now Romania and Hungary. She also sent a list detailing the origin, use, and significance of the textiles. Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim initially delayed payment for the textiles, a decision likely related to the Second World War in Budapest.

15      **Hem of a Men's Shirt**

Kalotaszeg, Transylvania, Cluj, Romania | before 1944 | cotton, woven (plain weave), embroidered (openwork, straight satin stitch) | unidentified maker from a Hungarian community; acquired by Gertrud von Palotay before 1944 in a manner unknown to us; purchased by the museum in 1944 | VI 17073

16      **Embroidered Strip**

Kalotaszeg, Transylvania, Cluj, Romania | before 1944 | cotton or linen, woven (plain weave), embroidered (openwork, straight satin stitch) | unidentified maker from a Hungarian community, acquired by Gertrud von Palotay before 1944 in a manner unknown to us, purchased by the museum in 1944 | VI 17072

17      **Crochet Lace**

Mozökövesd, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Hungary | before 1944 | cotton, crocheted | unidentified maker, acquired by Gertrud von Palotay before 1944 in a manner unknown to us, purchased by the museum in 1944 | VI 17075

After a hiatus of more than two years, Palotay wrote to Bühler-Oppenheim again in 1946. She described the dire postwar situation in Hungary, which was marked by loss, scarcity, and yet also hope. Due to the inadequate food supply in Hungary after the Second World War, she asked Bühler-Oppenheim to pay for some of the textiles intended for the museum with food packages. The letters bear witness to Palotay's attempt to reconnect with her work and relationships from the (pre-)war period.

18      **Letter**

Gertrud von Palotay to Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim | March 10, 1946 |  
Reproduction | MKB Document Archive, Inventory Number 04-0083

In a book review, Palotay praised the work of her colleagues: "The work of the Bühler couple is a fundamental systematization of all textile techniques. It stands as a worthy successor to the earlier works by Dr. Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim on the same subject and follows the methodology and systematization she had already developed. Dr. Alfred Bühler's extensive ethnographic knowledge, gathered firsthand in the field, provides a welcome explanation of the use of the objects, the application of the techniques, and so on."

19      **Letter**

Gertrud von Palotay to Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim | September 11, 1946 |  
Reproduction | MKB Document Archive, Inventory Number 04-0083

(bb)

## Woven connections

When a textile changes hands, a moment of contact between people is created. Such transfers of ownership range from brief moments of purchase to longer-term connections. In many cases, these relationships are difficult to reconstruct, and the people involved remain invisible. In the case of this silk scarf, which arrived at the museum from Afghanistan in 1971, however, the relationships are woven directly into the textile.

*dastmāl* are square cloths from Afghanistan. They were often made as gifts and inscribed with names, dedications, or messages of congratulations. The weavers themselves would also frequently leave their names on the fabric. This cloth bears the inscription: “For Margrit 1347 [1968] from Khalifa Hassan.” Who were Margrit and Khalifa Hassan? And why did their paths cross in Herat nearly 60 years ago?

### 20 **Cloth | *dastmāl***

Herat, Afghanistan | 1968 | Silk, woven (tabby), weft-patterned, brocaded |  
Inscription: “For Margrit 1347 [1968] from Khalifa Hassan” | woven by Khalifa Hassan, acquired in 1968 by Marguerite Reut, purchased by the museum in 1970 | IIa 4722

Marguerite Reut (1924–2018) worked at the Swiss Embassy in Tehran from 1951 onwards, where she developed a keen interest in Iran and Afghanistan. In order to pursue her studies, she had to leave the diplomatic service. Financing her research on silk production in Afghanistan proved difficult. The sales of textiles provided Reut with a source of income and, at the same time, expanded the museum’s textile collection. However, her efforts to secure a position at the museum were in vain, and as a result, only a small portion of her knowledge related to the textiles found its way into the museum.

### 21 **Letter**

Marguerite Reut to Gerhard Baer | April 8, 1970 | Reproduction | MKB Document Archive, Inventory Number 04-0112

Can we see the hands of the weaver Khalifa Hassan in the photographs? While we can learn quite a bit about Reut, we know little more about Hassan than the name woven into the fabric. Between 1968 and 1971, Reut documented textile workshops and techniques in Afghanistan. According to former colleagues, the fact that these images also hung on the walls of her Paris apartment reflects the respect she had for the artisans. For Reut, Afghanistan was more than just a field of research, and she remained connected to the country and its people throughout her life. She supported humanitarian initiatives in Afghanistan and refugees in Switzerland.

### 22 **Photographs**

Herat, Afghanistan | 1968–1971 | photographed by Marguerite Reut, in her dissertation: “L’Elevage du ver à soie en Afghanistan et l’artisanat de la soie à Herat” | Paris | 1976

(dr)

## Entangled – The Coloniality of the Textile Collection

Although Switzerland never had colonies of its own, many of the country's institutions and people were closely intertwined with colonial structures, politically, economically, culturally, and scientifically. This also goes for MKB and its collections. In our role as provenance researchers, we disclose how the acquisition of individual textiles was impacted by colonial power relations. The history of these textiles is rooted in scientific expeditions, missionary work, even colonial conflicts. Some collectors from Switzerland were immediately complicit in colonial rule, while many embraced European notions of superiority. In view of this, we believe it is all the more important to point to such instances in which the agency, knowledge and strategies of the people who produced, wore, used, and transferred these textiles become apparent.

### Science and appropriation in the Caucasus, 1912

In 1912, the Basel physician Fritz Egger (1863–1938) took part in the “Swiss Caucasus Expedition.” The two-month research expedition took 40 participants through regions of the Russian Empire that had been conquered just a few decades earlier and had since been administered as colonies. The textiles collected by Egger make it clear that collecting also means appropriation: of personal property as well as of artisanal knowledge and motifs, which were studied in the museum and subsequently imitated by industry.

At a bazaar, having already purchased several items of headwear from a vendor's stock, Egger went on to buy the cap straight off the vendor's head. He also acquired shoes and jewelry directly from people's bodies. This practice was not an isolated incident. According to the logic of “original collections”, objects were considered particularly valuable if they were taken directly from use on site and allowed collectors to acquire, as directly as possible, fragments of their original owners' lived environments.

#### 23 **Cap**

Yerevan, Armenia | ca. 1912 | cotton, woven (plain weave), quilted, embroidered | makers unknown to us, purchased in 1912 by Fritz Egger, donated to the museum in 1912 | IIe 62

In addition to numerous objects, Egger brought back an album containing around 300 photographs from the journey. The Armenian physician Haikanducht Chachmachyanz (1879–date of death unknown), who had studied in Zurich and accompanied the research expedition, appears repeatedly in these photographs. She served as an intermediary between the travellers and the local population, translated, and organised purchases. The photographs illustrate just how heavily the research relied on the work of local intermediaries.

#### 24 **Photo Album**

Around 1912 | Prints from stereo glass slides in an album | Photographs by Fritz Egger, donated to the museum in 1912 | Reproduction | fot\_1005

Via Chachmachyanz, Egger was able to acquire tablet woven textiles. The ribbons and belts were used as garment trimmings, garters, or belts. Once they arrived at the museum, the ribbons were sent to a private textile collector who had permission to cut pieces from them. Cutting them up created new comparison specimens. In return, the museum received

ribbon fragments from Iceland and North Africa. From the museum's perspective, the value of the ribbons lay not in their completeness but in the diversity of their patterns.

25 **Tablet Woven Ribbons**

Tbilisi, Georgia | ca. 1912 | metal and silk threads, tablet woven, cardboard | unidentified makers, purchased in 1912 by Haikanducht Chachmachyanz, transferred to Fritz Egger in 1912, donated to the museum in 1912 | IIe 99

Egger's interest in the ribbons was directly linked to Basel – and to global capitalism. In his notes, Egger recounts a weaver whom Chachmachyanz had met. The weaver complained about his craft being displaced by industrially manufactured products. Egger himself provided evidence of this: in addition to the ribbons from the Caucasus, he also donated imitations of these motifs produced by Basel's silk ribbon weaving industry – one of the region's most important economic sectors at the time.

26 **Industrially Manufactured Ribbons**

Basel, Switzerland | before 1912 | metal and silk threads, woven, cardboard | manufacturers unknown to us, acquired in 1912 by Fritz Egger in a manner unknown to us, donated to the museum in 1912 | IIe 105

(dr)

### **Cross-dressing in colonial Cameroon**

The Basel Mission became active in Cameroon in 1886, two years after the beginning of German colonial rule. Its mandate to spread Christianity went hand in hand with the devaluation of local cultures and a so-called “civilising mission.” This also extended to ideas about dress. For the missionaries, European clothing represented “civilisation”. Historical photographs, however, show missionaries wearing garments that were traditionally reserved for local dignitaries. The garment displayed here illustrates how different actors negotiated their social positions in colonial Cameroon through dress.

In Bali Nyonga, voluminous robes served as status symbols for authorities and elites during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their distinguishing features included not only their size but also an embroidered neckline, a triangular panel extending down the chest, and imported fabrics. The checked textile was machine-made in Europe, reflecting the economic entanglements of the period. Its transformation into a garment in Cameroon represents a process of local appropriation.

27 **Gown**

Bali Nyonga, Northwest Region, Cameroon | before 1938 | cotton, woven (plain weave), dyed, hand-sewn, embroidered (chain stitch, loop stitch) | unidentified makers, acquired between 1902 and 1911 by missionary merchant Link in a manner unknown to us, received by the Basel Mission Museum in 1938, on deposit with the current MKB since 1981, donated to the MKB in 2015 | III 26467

The Basel Mission put together an ethnographic collection, which it used for educational purposes and for its missionary propaganda. “Housemaster” Karl Käser (1854–1926) recorded all acquisitions in inventory books. These are among the most important sources in provenance research, as they contain information about the donors and the origin of the objects. The entry for the garment indicates that a missionary merchant named Link brought it to Basel. Exactly who this person was and how he came to possess the garment remains unclear.

28

**Inventory Book**

Basel Mission. compiled by Karl Käser | 1913 | MKB Document Archive,  
Inventory Number 05-0066

Photographs from the Basel Mission archive document how missionaries asserted their influence by dressing in European clothing. They also attest to the agency of Cameroonian actors. A prominent example is King Njoya, who created a Prussian-inspired uniform. In 1902, the ruler of Bali Nyonga, Fonyonga II (1901–1940), presented a robe to a missionary to forge an alliance. However, the background of the robe on display is not documented. Did the missionary merchant have the robe made? Did he want to present himself as a ruler?

29

**Historical Photographs and Archival Records**

Produced between 1902 and 1912 by missionaries of the Basel Mission | Bali Nyonga, Cameroon | Reproductions | © Mission 21, reference numbers BMA E-30.03.032, E-30.25.041, E-30.26.037, E-30.05.017, E-30.25.017, E-30.25.039, E-30.29.043, QS-30.001.1101.01, QS-30.001.1356.01, BV4\_1638, BV5\_2080

(ib)

**Colonial rule and resistance in the Congo Free State**

Erwin Federspiel (1871–1922) served as an officer in the Congo Free State between 1898 and 1907. He was one of more than 200 young Swiss men who participated in establishing and enforcing colonial rule. Federspiel's diaries, letters, and publications make it possible to reconstruct his activities within the colonial state. At the same time, other contemporary sources document the violence and exploitation on which colonial rule was based, as well as the resistance of the affected communities.

In 1953, this textile was regarded by the museum as an outstanding example of “primitive textile patterning.” The fine black lines were created by folding and partially covering the cloth before dyeing. While textile research focused on its production technique, provenance research asks different questions: Who made this textile? Under what conditions did it enter the museum's collection? Its history reveals the colonial power relations that enabled the textile's journey to Basel.

30

**“Primitive Stoffmusterungen” (Primitive Fabric Patterns)**

Guide to the Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerische Museum für  
Volkskunde Basel (today MKB) | Basel | 1953 | Reproduction

Information about the bark cloth in the museum is sparse. The inventory card merely lists the Mabali as the community of origin. They lived northeast of Stanleyville, where Federspiel was stationed between 1898 and 1907. During this time, he collected numerous items for the museum in Basel. How he acquired this cloth is not recorded. However, from his diaries and correspondence, we know that Federspiel imposed the colonial state's system of forced rubber collection on the Mabali. After two decades, this left behind a devastated country and a population decimated by violence, forced labor, and starvation.

31

**Cloth**

Ituri, Democratic Republic of the Congo | before 1901 | bark, beaten, dyed (fold-resist technique, “tie-dye”) | unidentified makers of the Mabali community,

acquired by Erwin Federspiel before 1901 in a manner unknown to us, purchased by the museum in 1901 | III 1308

Colonial rule and exploitation established in the Congo Free State was met with widespread international condemnation. In Switzerland, too, humanitarian organisations denounced the violence and challenged the accounts of Swiss nationals who had served in the Congo and claimed to have witnessed nothing of the abuses. Federspiel fit this pattern: after his return, he publicly defended the colonial state and denied having committed acts of violence himself.

32        **“Wie es im Congostaat zugeht” (What It’s Like in the Congo State)**

Erwin Federspiel | Zurich | 1909 | Reproduction

33        **“Das Schicksal des Kongo in Gegenwart und Zukunft” (The Fate of the Congo in the Present and Future)**

Hermann Christ-Socin, commissioned by the “Swiss League for the Protection of the Natives in the Congo State” | Basel | 1908 | Reproduction

Throughout the colonial period, communities in the Congo resisted forced integration into the colonial economic system. In 1907, the Mabali mounted armed resistance, which Federspiel, as district commander, had brutally suppressed. From Federspiel’s letters, we learn of the fighting and its numerous fatalities. At the same time, the letters document the Mabali’s strategies: to escape forced labor, taxation, and military attacks, they left their villages and retreated deeper and deeper into the rainforest.

34        **Letter**

Erwin Federspiel to Hedwig Stöckli | September 11, 1907 | Reproduction | Basler Afrika Bibliographien BAB, PA.40

(dr)

## **Sudan in the colonial imagination**

In 1894, the Basel merchant Emanuel Iselin (1849–1914) donated a Sudanese robe (*jibba*) to the museum. He had purchased it in Aswan during a trip through Egypt. *jibbas* were the uniform of the Mahdist army. Between 1881 and 1899, the Mahdist movement rebelled against Egyptian rule in Sudan and established a state. Egypt had been under British control since 1882, and the Mahdist movement and the conflict were followed with great interest in Europe. This influenced the perception of the *jibba* in the museum.

The *jibba* is made of quilted cotton fabric and features various patches of industrially manufactured European fabrics. Muhammad Ahmad (1844–1885), the leader of the Mahdist movement, had established the *jibba* as the uniform for his followers. The garment is based on the clothing of Sufi believers, who would mend their torn robes with patches, thereby expressing their asceticism and religious devotion. As a uniform, the *jibba* was also intended to highlight these virtues for the followers of the Mahdi.

35        **Tunic | *jibba***

Sudan | Late 19th century | cotton, woven (plain weave), quilted, wool, appliqué | Makers unknown to us, acquired in 1894 by Emanuel Henry Iselin in Aswan, Egypt, donated to the museum in 1894 | III 521

The museum’s annual report described the *jibba* as “the most interesting” object of the donation. It was likely the patches made of European fabric that fascinated the museum

staff, for according to notes on the object's index card, they suspected that these had been made from captured European clothing. When the Mahdist army conquered the capital, Khartoum, in 1885, the city's fabric stores are said to have been among the spoils of war. The museum staff presumably associated the *jibba* with this famous event.

36            **Museum Annual Report 1894**  
Julius Kollmann | 1895 | Reproduction

The fall of the Sudanese capital Khartoum to the Mahdist army in 1885 and the killing of the British General Charles George Gordon (1833–1885), who was stationed there, was a major media event throughout Europe – including Switzerland. Gordon became a martyr, and the Mahdi's victory in Khartoum shocked the European public. The story was so well known that in 1889, the Basel Zoo even held an ethnographic exhibition titled "Warriors of the Mahdi," which exhibited people from Sudan.

37            **Coverage of the Conquest of Khartoum**  
Various authors, Neue Zürcher Zeitung | 1884–85 | Reproduction

Egypt was already a popular travel destination for wealthy Europeans in the 19th century, and tourism went hand in hand with the colonial penetration of the region. The purchase of antiquities and ethnographic objects was often part of these trips. The Baedeker travel guide, for example, provided advice on shopping. Particularly after 1896, when the reconquest of Sudan by Anglo-Egyptian troops was in full swing, large quantities of war booty found their way into European museums. However, the route by which the *jibba* arrived in Aswan remains unknown.

38            **Baedeker Travel Guide**  
Karl Baedeker | Leipzig | 1898 | Fourth revised edition | Reproduction

(dm)

## Linking Up – The Future of the Textile Collection

The historical sources rarely offer insight into what the textiles meant to the people who made and used them. What personal stories, memories, and cultural practices were associated with them? When the fabrics entered the collection, these associations were often lost or replaced by new ascriptions: the main focus was on how they fitted into the museum's taxonomy of textile techniques. Today, a wide range of stakeholders engage with the textile collection, thus opening it up to a multitude of interpretations. For this they enter into dialogue with us or we, in turn, reach out to various communities with the intention of jointly working on different topics, perspectives and histories. Provenance research enables us to tie up loose ends – turning each fabric into a potential starting point for new relationships.

### Heirlooms from Ticino

Alois Blättler (1887–1972), a train driver from Uri, spent his vacations in Bosco Gurin in the canton of Ticino during the 1940s and 1950s. There, he acquired numerous items from residents, which he later sold to the museum. Through collaboration with the museum Walserhaus in Bosco Gurin – a museum dedicated to Gurin's history and culture – we were

able to identify the previous owners: Sisters Maria Lucia (1868–1963) and Maria Elisabeth Della Pietra (1877–1965) sold Blättler numerous personal items and heirlooms.

In 1951, Blättler sold five children's bonnets to the museum for six francs each. The bonnets belonged to the Della Pietra sisters, with whom Blättler stayed during his vacations.

According to Blättler, some date back to the time of the sisters' grandmother. The yellow baptismal bonnet likely belonged to Joseph Theodorus (1904), who died shortly after his birth. His mother, Maria Lucia Della Pietra, had made the bonnet for him.

39      **Christening Bonnet | *Chenduchâppi***

Bosco Gurin, Vallemaggia, Ticino, Switzerland | ca. 1904 | cotton, silk, woven (tabby), hand-sewn | maker: Maria Lucia Della Pietra; owned by the family of Joseph Theodorus Tomamichel and Maria Lucia Della Pietra; acquired by Alois Blättler in a manner unknown to us between 1940 and 1951, purchased by the museum in 1951 | VI 19535

40      **Children's Bonnet | *Chenduchâppi***

Bosco Gurin, Vallemaggia, Ticino, Switzerland | ca. 1890 | wool, silk, cotton, woven, (plain weave), hand-sewn | unidentified maker from the Gurin community, owned by the families of Maria Lucia Della Pietra and Maria Elisabeth Della Pietra, acquired by Alois Blättler in a manner unknown to us between 1940 and 1951, purchased by the museum in 1951 | VI 19536

41      **Children's Bonnet | *Chenduchâppi***

Bosco Gurin, Vallemaggia, Ticino, Switzerland | ca. 1890 | silk, cotton, woven (plain weave), hand-sewn | unidentified maker from the Gurin community, owned by the families of Maria Lucia Della Pietra and Maria Elisabeth Della Pietra, acquired by Alois Blättler in a manner unknown to us between 1940 and 1951, purchased by the museum in 1951 | VI 19537

42      **Children's Bonnet | *Chenduchâppi***

Bosco Gurin, Vallemaggia, Ticino, Switzerland | ca. 1890 | cotton, woven (plain weave), hand-sewn | unidentified maker from the Gurin community, owned by the families of Maria Lucia Della Pietra and Maria Elisabeth Della Pietra, acquired by Alois Blättler in a manner unknown to us between 1940 and 1951, purchased by the museum in 1951 | VI 19538

43      **Children's Bonnet | *Chenduchâppi***

Bosco Gurin, Vallemaggia, Ticino, Switzerland | ca. 1890 | wool, cotton, woven (plain weave), hand-sewn | unidentified maker from the Gurin community, owned by the families of Maria Lucia Della Pietra and Maria Elisabeth Della Pietra, acquired by Alois Blättler in a manner unknown to us between 1940 and 1951, purchased by the museum in 1951 | VI 19540

After a visit seven years later, Blättler reported that access to the items he coveted had become more difficult and that prices had risen. The younger Gurin residents were no longer willing to sell their belongings. The older residents, however, were still in need of money. Blättler therefore tried his luck with the Della Pietra sisters, who were by then 81 and 90 years old, by helping them with haymaking. When they nevertheless refused to sell their belongings, he withdrew his help.

44

**Letter**

Alois Blättler to Robert Wildhaber | August 8, 1958 | Reproduction | Collection file MKB VI\_2818

Hans Tomamichel (1899–1984) was among those who opposed Blättler’s collecting activities. He was born in Gurin and worked as a graphic designer. The advertising character Knorrli, which he developed in 1944 for the Knorr company, became famous throughout Switzerland. Tomamichel was a co-founder of the Walserhaus, established in 1936. Blättler reported that Tomamichel had followed him and threatened to search his luggage. In a letter to the museum in Basel, Tomamichel later inquired about Blättler and his intentions.

45

**Letter**

Hans Tomamichel to Alfred Bühler | March 29, 1960 | Reproduction | MKB Document Archive, Inventory Number 04-0092

Bosco Gurin is considered the only German-speaking municipality in the canton of Ticino. The dialect spoken by the people of Gurin also attracted the interest of linguists. It was in this context that the 1954 recording of Maria Elisabeth Della Pietra, one of the two former owners of the children’s bonnets, was made. In it, Della Pietra recounts her daily life and offers us a shift in perspective, allowing not only the museum or the collector to have their say, but the former owner herself.

46

**Audio Recording**

Maria Elisabeth Della Pietra | Recordings of Swiss dialects by William G. Moulton | 1954 | Phonogram Archive of the University of Zurich

(bb)

**A connection to sacred places**

The couple Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1912–1994) and Alicia Dussán (1920–2023) conducted archaeological and anthropological research in the Colombian Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountain range, including research on textile production. In 1958, Reichel-Dolmatoff donated 22 textiles and textile-processing tools to the museum that had been made by members of the Kankuamo people. In his letters to Alfred Bühler, he recounts his visits and offers items he acquired there under currently unknown circumstances.

Today’s communities of the Sierra Nevada – the Kankuamo, Kággaba, Ika, and Wiwa – see themselves as descendants of the Tairona culture (ca. 900–1600) and guardians of their ancestors’ land: the mountain range, *gonawindua*, is the heart of the world, where the threads that connect all forms of existence converge. With colonisation and missionary activity, sacred and culturally significant objects were torn from their context. Researchers brought large quantities of such items to European museums. This has profoundly altered local social structures and practices.

47

**Spindle**

Atanquez, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia | before 1958 | wood, fruit shell, cotton | unidentified makers from the Kankuamo community, acquired

before 1958 by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff in a manner unknown to us, donated to the museum in 1958 | IVc 9388

In 2025, members of the Kággaba – including José Shibulata Zarabata Sauna, one of the most important spiritual leaders, and José Manuel Sauna Mamatacan – visited the MKB. The discussion about the cultural heritage of the Sierra Nevada held at the museum highlighted its significance and opened up new perspectives. In the communities' system of knowledge, the spindle holds spiritual significance: the wood from which it is made and the cotton thread wrapped around it connect the spindle to the sacred sites of *gonawindua*, which provide the plant material.

48      **Photographs**  
Visit by José Shibulata Zarabata Sauna and José Manuel Sauna Mamatacan |  
Photographer: Omar Lemke | Basel, Switzerland | 2025 | Reproduction

(js)

### **Embroidered cloths from Afghanistan as carriers of memories**

Embroidering a *dastmāl* is a time-consuming process that requires precise knowledge of colours, materials, embroidery stitches, and motifs. Stories and memories are tied to each piece of embroidery. At the MKB, the question arises as to how these meanings can be made visible again today. Exchanges with members of the Afghan diaspora open up new perspectives and evoke personal and shared memories.

In 2026, the Afghanistan Institute in Bubendorf donated a collection of Afghan textiles to the MKB. Among them are 24 embroidered cloths that WHO physician Franz Gremliza (1912–2001) had collected in 1968. Patients then gave them to him as a gift after he had treated them. This highlights the social function of these embroideries: they create and strengthen relationships.

49      **Cloth | *dastmāl***  
Afghanistan | before 1968 | synthetic fibre, woven (taffeta), embroidered (satin stitch, box stitch, cross stitch) | unidentified maker, gifted to Franz Gremliza in 1968, donated to the Afghanistan Institute in 2004, donated to the museum in 2026 | currently being catalogued

50      **Cloth | *dastmāl***  
Afghanistan | before 1968 | cotton, woven (plain weave), embroidered (running stitch, cross stitch, stem stitch) | unidentified maker, gifted to Franz Gremliza in 1968, donated to the Afghanistan Institute in 2004, donated to the museum in 2026 | currently being catalogued

51      **Cloth | *dastmāl***  
Afghanistan | before 1968 | synthetic fibre, woven (taffeta), embroidered (satin stitch, stem stitch) | unidentified maker, gifted to Franz Gremliza in 1968, donated to the Afghanistan Institute in 2004, donated to the museum in 2026 | currently being catalogued

52      **Cloth | *dastmāl***  
Afghanistan | before 1968 | synthetic fibre, woven (taffeta), embroidered (laid stitch, braid stitch, cross stitch) | unidentified maker, gifted to Franz Gremliza in

1968, donated to the Afghanistan Institute in 2004, donated to the museum in 2026 | currently being catalogued

53 **Cloth | *dastmāl***

Afghanistan | before 1968 | cotton, woven (plain weave), embroidered (box stitch, running stitch, cross stitch) | unidentified maker, gifted to Franz Gremliza in 1968, donated to the Afghanistan Institute in 2004, donated to the museum in 2026 | currently being catalogued

54 **Cloth | *dastmāl***

Afghanistan | before 1968 | synthetic fibre, woven (taffeta), embroidered (satin stitch, stem stitch, overcast stitch) | unidentified maker, gifted to Franz Gremliza in 1968, donated to the Afghanistan Institute in 2004, donated to the museum in 2026 | currently being catalogued

55 **Cloth | *dastmāl***

Afghanistan | before 1968 | cotton, woven (plain weave), embroidered (satin stitch, stem stitch, cross stitch) | unidentified maker, gifted to Franz Gremliza in 1968, donated to the Afghanistan Institute in 2004, donated to the museum in 2026 | currently being catalogued

Today, we know very little about the makers and owners of the *dastmāl* in the MKB. This makes the perspectives of contemporary stakeholders all the more important. Together with photographer Roqia Alavi, we examined the embroideries and inquired about their meanings. As a member of the Hazara, an ethnic and religious minority in Afghanistan, they evoke many memories for her. In this way, the *dastmāl* demonstrate how textiles can foster connections to one's own history across generations and in the context of displacement and migration.

56 **Film**

Visit with Roqia Alavi in the museum's storage facility | Filmed by Corinne Kramer | Basel, Switzerland | 2026

(js, dm, dr)

## Translation

The introductory texts were translated by Nigel Stephenson. All other texts were translated by the research team.

**Thank you for returning the handout.**