
Water Production

Investment into water resources development has made water a costly resource that can no more be treated as a free gift of God, and the cultural attitudes toward this resource need to be changed.

—*LESOTHO: SECOND STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT REPORT, 2002*¹

In April 2014, I went on the official tour of the ‘Muela Dam at the offices of the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA), the administrative body charged with building and maintaining the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP).² The tour includes a visit to a large room with posters, diagrams, and models that describe the structure and construction process of the LHWP; a visit to an overlook above the reservoir; a guided tour of the dam facilities; and a fifteen-minute informational video. Being situated in the relatively accessible lowlands and containing power-generating machinery of interest to infrastructure tourists, it is one of the more frequently visited LHWP sites. White South Africans in Land Rovers packed with camping gear pass through on their way to the highlands, and Basotho schoolchildren are ferried there by the busload to learn about their country’s signature engineering project.

I had made a special appointment for the tour, so I sat alone in the exhibition room as the tour guide started the DVD player and then left the room. The video opened with reconstructed images of dinosaurs passing through a watery, Jurassic environment, shifting to others of King Moshoeshoe I of Lesotho, the founder of the Basotho nation. The water we drink today, the video explained, is the same that was drunk by the dinosaurs and by King Moshoeshoe I himself. It then narrated a series of videos and images of people doing quintessentially “Bosotho” activities: women collecting shrubs for cooking fuel and threshing wheat, men with blankets riding horses, herders tending a flock. The narrator intoned, “As if time had stood still, oxen plough the fields.” It showed the impressive Maletsunyane Falls, another common tourist destination, and segued to an overflowing Katse Dam, as though equivalent expressions of something distinctly emblematic of Lesotho. Overflowing with images of crystal-clear water babbling over stones in mountain tributaries

or bursting over the Katse Dam wall when at overfull capacity, the video threaded water through a well-known national mythology. Water, it implied, brings Basotho people into communion with their ancestors. Basotho subjectivity, Lesotho's national identity, and Lesotho's territory are anchored in a watery past, carried forward by this water project. Lesotho's water, the video instructs, is primordial, cultural, sovereign, and abundant.

I had encountered this conception of water before. Lesotho government publications, tourist brochures, and corporate advertisements—including the popular pictorial calendars that are handed out throughout the country by aid organizations, grain wholesalers, and life insurance companies—invoke it widely. So commonplace, it feels like it has always been around, but in fact it's a recent innovation.

Since the LHWP began, a new discourse about water in Lesotho has emerged. It is "abundant" (*metsi a mangata*); it brings development; it is a symbol of national identity; and it is a driver of "regional economic integration."³ LHWP promotional materials and speeches by its proponents are filled with the cliché metaphors and symbols of water: *metsi ke bophelo* (water is life), or *khauta e tšoeu* (white gold).⁴ Suggesting that the nation's water can fuse progress with culture, images of reservoirs and rivers act as a backdrop for tar roads, high-tension power lines, San "bushmen" rock paintings, herds of cattle, and traditional thatched-roof housing. At the heights of phase 1 construction of the Katse and Mohale Dams, such as during my time as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer from 2003–5, LHWP Toyota Hilux trucks were regular sights on the streets of the capital, Maseru, a commonly understood sign of the project's wealth and significance. Early phase 1 promotional materials figured the reservoirs as tourist destinations, featuring pictures of white people on Jet Skis and motorboats. The tourism industry has been particularly fond of this image of a watery Lesotho. This passage from the government of Lesotho's website is typical: "Mountains, valleys, and rivers provide memorable scenery for tourists. This is where Lesotho gets its crystal clear water as well as green pastures for livestock. . . . [Tourists] enjoy playing around in the clean water of Lesotho's mountains. This is one of the biggest source [*sic*] of income to the country."⁵

The video ended, and I was taken upstairs to the main lobby of the office and into the main control center of the hydroelectric station, a glass-walled room inside another room. It was filled with computer monitors and a large panel, the focal point, which was complete with diagrams of the reservoir flow process, and red, digital displays indicating the amount of electricity being generated and the height of various reservoirs. I was given a lesson in the role 'Muela plays in the LHWP. The guide explained that water is carried by tunnel from the Katse Reservoir, passing through hydroelectric turbines as it flows into the 'Muela Reservoir. 'Muela is a small "tailpond" reservoir that holds water temporarily before it falls vertically into a bell-shaped intake and passes through a tunnel under the border with South Africa. In this tunnel two instruments—one ultrasonic, one magnetic—are used to determine how much water passes out of Lesotho. From there, the water

resurfaces at an outfall on the Ash River near Clarens (see map 2) and passes into the Vaal Reservoir south of Johannesburg.

I had heard that farmers in South Africa's Free State Province, through which the Ash River passes, illegally extract water from the river before it reaches the Vaal Reservoir, so I asked the tour operator about whether she thought that was true. She replied by saying that they do not know—but anyway, “It’s not Lesotho’s problem what happens to the water after it crosses the border.”

While the video downstairs pronounced the primordial and essential nature of water in Lesotho, the people upstairs clearly treated water export as a kind of commodity exchange. I suppose this was to be expected from these technocratic agents of the LHWP, but after having watched that video, I found her response striking. It was as if two different kinds of water—one self-consciously cultural, one unabashedly commodified—were being presented in two parts of this same building. What, I wondered, could be the relationship between them?

These two contradictory depictions are of a piece. “National water”—my shorthand for the primordial, abundant, sovereign, cultural water depicted in the video—and abstract water commodities rely upon each other for conceptual stability. The connection between these two different versions of water become clear when we look closer at how Lesotho was made into storage infrastructure for South African industry in the first place, whom this system serves, and how “national water” aligns with actually existing water in Lesotho. That’s where we’re headed in this chapter.

Efforts to commodify or privatize water—to nullify its status as a public good—have intensified globally in the past several decades.⁶ Activists have lobbied hard in response to assert that water is a “human right.”⁷ Meanwhile, scholars have argued that water is intricately stitched into a social and cultural fabric, and it must be ripped from this fabric if it is to be sold. Anthropologists have led this charge, drawing on Marcel Mauss’s conception of the gift as a “total social fact” to envision water as a phenomenon in which “all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time”: religious, moral, economic, and more.⁸ This “holistic” view of water stands as a case study for the violence of private property: all of these connections are severed in commodification. And, anthropologists say, the obstacles encountered by those who try to commodify water speak to the local specificity of water, meaning that one can learn about *culture* by looking at those obstacles.⁹

The commodification of Lesotho’s water does not simply rip water from an intricate sociocultural fabric, however, but in fact creates a fabric from which to rip it. Standing in the glass-walled control room at the ‘Muela Dam, this looks like proper commodified water—what Jaime Linton calls “modern water,”¹⁰ a water abstracted from a local context through hydrologic science and capitalist logics. No doubt, too, it is part of a shift toward water privatization in postapartheid South Africa.¹¹ Yet, commodification has been contingent upon the LHWP’s ability first to *link* water to those local contexts, visible in the video screening room downstairs. The LHWP depicts water in Lesotho as a form of national patrimony

and an abundant resource, but no such thing as “Lesotho’s water” existed beforehand. Few people in Lesotho would describe the country as water-abundant, given that household water access is poor, drought is common, and water is mostly confined to rivers in the northeastern highlands where LHWP dams are sited. Nor is it seen as a national patrimony. Instead, it is depicted as violent and destructive, as rainfall often comes by torrential downpour, particularly in recent years when climate change has been shifting Lesotho’s weather patterns for the worse.¹²

Having internalized the cultural lexicon of holistic water put forward by anthropologists and activists, the LHWP *fabricated* linkages between water and Lesotho’s landscapes. That is, rather than merely alienate an otherwise cultural water through commodification, the LHWP generated a cultural water that could be alienated and exported. It is not just commodified water that would be foreign to Basotho, then, but also this harmonious, connective, cultural water that anthropologists and activists work to safeguard.

The new type of water created by the LHWP—one that is cultural, abstractable, and unfamiliar to everyday people—helps us see something else, as well. It exposes the fantasy that water export represents a neutral economic exchange between two sovereign parties when in fact Lesotho’s position is tenuous. Whereas South Africa’s Bantustan labor reserves were dissolved with the end of apartheid, Lesotho remained intact, and it continues to struggle with the “paradoxes of its sovereignty”:¹³ that its sovereignty is contingent upon its subordinate relationship to South Africa. The production of national water—that is, the nationalization, culture-ification, commodification, and export of water—remedies this by teaching citizens to recognize themselves as party to a kind of national project in spite of that subordinate relationship. It is pedagogic, as in the South African case described by Antina von Schnitzler.¹⁴ The LHWP has been used as an occasion to produce other, more concrete kinds of national heritage, too, as Rachel King shows,¹⁵ from the construction of national parks to the establishment of historical heritage sites.

To explain how the production of national water works, I need to start by describing the setting—a mountainous and mono-ethnic constitutional monarchy, surrounded by a multiethnic republic with steep racial hierarchies—and by outlining a two-step historical process that scaffolds the chapter’s plot: the transformation of Lesotho over the past 150 years first from a self-sufficient agricultural producer to a labor reserve and, later, to a water reservoir.

FROM GRANARY TO LABOR RESERVE . . .

Seen from the vantage of the water-export era, it almost seems as though the Senqu catchment were an organic unit of political space in the partitioning of Lesotho’s territory, with national boundaries mapping precisely onto the Senqu headwaters—as though it were naturally a water-exporting country.¹⁶ More so, it is a product of Basotho defense of their mountain stronghold.



FIGURE 3. The Lesotho highlands. Photo by author.

Lesotho is generally described in terms of two geographical regions: the lowlands and the highlands.¹⁷ These regions look and feel dramatically different as cultural and physical landscapes. Both are mostly treeless. The lowlands resemble the southwestern United States, with reddish-brown soils, rolling hills, and periodic mesas that formed from a sandstone, sedimentary geology.¹⁸ They make up less than a third of Lesotho's surface area, just a crescent of land in the country's west, but they contain most of its arable land and 80 percent of its 2.2 million citizens.

By contrast, the highlands are deeply incised, high-altitude grasslands, made of a volcanic, basalt geology (see fig. 3). They resemble the windswept Scottish Highlands or the Andean Páramo, reaching altitudes of over thirty-one hundred meters above sea level. They consist of two chains running more or less north and south, which converge in the north of the country: the Maloti Chain to the west, and the Drakensberg Chain on Lesotho's eastern border with South Africa.¹⁹ When cold air drifts in from the eastern coast of South Africa and meets the steep escarpment of the Drakensberg, it produces orographic precipitation in the highlands, which Lesotho now sells to South Africa.

In the highlands, Basotho refer to the lowlands as "Lesotho," as though it were another country altogether. It points to the remoteness of these areas and hints at a time when the highlands were mostly uninhabited. Today, there are several sizable towns in the highlands, including the district capitals of Mokhotlong, Thaba-Tseka, and Qacha's Nek. At the turn of the twentieth century, these were nonexistent.

The mountains and western foothills were spaces of refuge during the colonial period, and spaces that Basotho could defend against settlers. The area was very

sparsely populated until refugees fleeing the early nineteenth-century Zulu wars on the southeastern coast retreated inland, to the opposite side of the Drakensberg mountains.²⁰ Just to the west of them, white Afrikaner settlers were arriving in the area after fleeing British rule in the Cape.²¹ These refugees fended off Afrikaner (and British) efforts to seize their land, partly through alliance with French and Swiss missionaries.²² Though they were an amalgam of different “clans” (*liboko*), they eventually coalesced under a chief named Moshoeshe into a single group called “the Basotho,” the inhabitants of “Basutoland.” The Afrikaners called their own territory the Orange Free State, signaling their Dutch ancestry and their independence from the Cape.

Basutoland became a major agricultural producer, exporting grain to the Orange Free State—today thought of as the breadbasket of South Africa—where the Afrikaners had been struggling to farm successfully. One missionary observer writing during a serious drought in 1863 referred to Basutoland as the “granary of the Free State and of part of the [Cape] Colony.”²³ Upset with this dependence on Basotho and eager to take hold of more land, Afrikaners fought to increase their territory.²⁴ After several decades of conflict, Moshoeshe was compelled to request “protectorate” status under Great Britain in 1868, effectively becoming a British colony. He also signed away a large tract of fertile land to the Afrikaners as part of this negotiated compromise—today, these “conquered territories” (see map 3) are a source of ongoing consternation for Basotho.²⁵ The annexure of Basutoland not only gave the British a territory but insured themselves against the increasing power of the Orange Free State. South Africa, after all, had not yet been unified and was instead a set of contested territories.

At that very moment, the world’s largest diamond and gold deposits were discovered at Kimberly (1866) and the Witwatersrand (1886), respectively. Basotho went to work in the mines so they could purchase consumer goods that were newly available, such as plows and guns.²⁶ The plows helped Basotho increase their agricultural production even in spite of having lost territory to the Afrikaners, exporting even more grain to the booming mining towns around Kimberly and the Witwatersrand. The guns helped them fend off additional threats from Afrikaners and the British. When the colonial administration of the Cape attempted to disarm the Basotho, they ignited the Gun War of 1880–81. Safe in their mountain redoubt, they rebuffed the soldiers from Cape, which spent a staggering 4.75 million pounds with nothing to show for it. The Basotho retained all of their weapons and even refused to pay the license fee that was imposed afterward.²⁷ It was an extraordinary act of anticolonial resistance.²⁸

In addition to being *pulled* to work in the mines by plows and guns, however, they were also *pushed*. This happened in at least two ways: a “hut tax” imposed by the British, and tariffs on Basutoland grain imposed by South Africans.²⁹ The colonial administration forced Basotho to pay a tax for every dwelling, and mining labor was one of the few ways to earn cash.³⁰ Tariffs from the 1880s onward then

undercut Basutoland's agricultural exports, while cheap U.S. and Australian grains flooded South African markets. Making matters worse, a rinderpest epizootic decimated Basotho cattle used for ploughing, and crippling droughts followed.

Across Southern Africa, these taxes and tariffs combined with land seizures to force many Africans into exploitative wage labor. With the 1913 Natives Land Act, for example, 93 percent of South African territory was reserved for whites, including the most productive agricultural lands. Africans were forcibly relocated to impoverished ethnic reserves known as "Bantustans" or "homelands," and later legislation such as the 1923 Urban Areas Act made it impossible for them to reside in the city centers without a pass, defining Africans as "temporary sojourners" in white lands.³¹

The scholar-activist Harold Wolpe articulated the overarching structure and implications of this arrangement:³² Africans were both drawn into an exploitative industrial center and expelled to a barren geographical periphery, trapping them in an endless, oscillating migration. The Bantustans of Venda, Bophuthatswana, and Transkei were later "granted independence" in the late 1970s, but these "countries" were not recognized by the United Nations, which understood them as mechanisms for segregation and exploitation. Mining recruitment centers were established in Basutoland's district capitals, where work permits could be issued before arriving in South Africa. Pass laws for South Africans and work permits for Basotho made it possible to control the flow of workers, creating what Karl Marx called "an army reserve of laborers."³³

Lesotho had been transformed within a century, as Colin Murray famously put it, "from granary to labor reserve."³⁴

. . . AND FROM LABOR RESERVE TO WATER RESERVOIR

As exploitative as the migrant labor system was, it is seen nostalgically by some people in Lesotho.³⁵ From the late 1980s onward, Basotho employment in South African industry plummeted. Mines mechanized. The price of gold dropped. Even in the early 2000s, when the gold price rebounded, domestic pressure on the South African government meant that domestic workers were favored over foreign nationals. Citizens of Lesotho hoping to work in South Africa were left with domestic work (for women), illegal mining in abandoned shafts (for men), and other work in the "informal economy." The one hundred twenty nine thousand Basotho mineworkers in South Africa in 1979 dwindled to just nineteen thousand by 2018.³⁶ The proportion of households that have at least one member working in South African mines declined from 50 percent in 1952 to just 12 percent in 2002.³⁷ No new work contracts have been given to foreign mineworkers in South Africa since 2003.³⁸ Mining employment went from a standard expectation to an elusive goal.³⁹

There has been little else to make up for these declines in Lesotho's economy. A textiles industry has been largely propped up by trade agreements that must be periodically renewed. Garment factories can disappear literally overnight when companies no longer find the profits they had hoped for. Some revenues come in through the South African Development Community (SADC) revenue sharing agreement. A few diamond mines in the highlands make sporadic if sometimes lucrative finds. Foreign aid continues to be one of the main sources of economic activity.

The decline of the mining labor economy has run parallel to the emergence of the water-export economy with the signing of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project Treaty in 1986. Providing the largest source of foreign exchange and one of the largest sources of foreign revenues altogether after remittances and foreign aid,⁴⁰ the LHWP is a rare bright spot for the country. Phase 1 of the project was completed in 2004. It included the construction of two large dams at Katse and Mohale, as well as a smaller tailpond dam at 'Muela and a weir at Matsoku. Some 120km of tunnels connect these reservoirs, and 72MW of electricity are generated at 'Muela before the water passes into South Africa, nearly satisfying Lesotho's domestic needs. By the end of 2020, a total of 16.401 billion m³ of water had been transferred to South Africa, generating 11.265 billion Maloti (USD 771 million) in royalties.⁴¹

But serious questions about who benefits from the project have been correctly raised.⁴² Most employment associated with the LHWP was temporary. Only a handful of people are required to manage and operate the field operations branches at 'Muela, Katse, and Mohale, and a small executive staff remains permanently in Maseru.⁴³ Rural electrification has moved extremely slowly, meaning that, while electricity prices have stayed low thanks to the 'Muela hydroelectric station, many areas of the country cannot take advantage.⁴⁴

Impoundment of Katse Dam displaced more than two thousand people who were resettled in neighboring villages or in the capital. Another twenty thousand to twenty-five thousand people lost croplands, rangelands, fuelwood, and medicines.⁴⁵ Because of the steep slopes and thin soils found in the country, Lesotho does not have much arable land,⁴⁶ so the valleys inundated by LHWP reservoirs were a significant loss, especially the fertile croplands along the valley floor. The LHWP provided compensation for those who were affected, but many have reported that compensation was inadequate. For example, compensation funds for commonly held resources like grazing land were pooled, and communities were advised to spend them on failed development initiatives such as flour mills that quickly went into disrepair. Some people were paid in grain—which was eaten and then gone.⁴⁷

It's important to note that the benefits and burdens of the LHWP are shared unevenly in South Africa, too, where water prices have been raised significantly to buy Lesotho's water.⁴⁸ South Africa, unlike Lesotho, does not have access to cheap loans from the World Bank, so it has funded construction and purchases of water supply partly through raising end-user water prices.⁴⁹ This, even as South Africa

fails to fix its water infrastructure and limit its need for transfers from afar. One estimate suggests that as much as 37 percent of South Africa's water is lost because of leaky pipes.⁵⁰

The LHWP is a storage and extraction project. Phase 2 is expected to deliver water beginning in 2027 and gradually increase from the current 780 million m³ per annum to 1255 million m³.⁵¹ Its centerpiece is the Polihali Dam, which nearly doubles Lesotho's water storage by adding another 2.2 billion m³ of capacity. When phase 2 was initially proposed, it was slated to include a 1,000MW pump-storage hydroelectricity system at Kobong, a major selling point for Lesotho, which could produce enough electricity to export.⁵² But this pump-storage scheme has been deferred. That Kobong—the phase 2 component most beneficial to Lesotho—is no longer planned underscores a sad truth: the LHWP's primary function is not hydroelectric generation for Lesotho, but rather as a water storage tank for South Africa.

The country has been transformed from labor reserve to water reservoir.

SOVEREIGNTY AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF WATER ABUNDANCE

Lesotho's status as storage infrastructure has prompted some in the country to advocate for a South African annexure of Lesotho as a tenth province.⁵³ Each year around Lesotho's commemoration of independence on October 4, stories in the print and radio media can be found reporting on Lesotho citizens' discontent with Lesotho's independence. During the 2010 Independence Day festivities, the principal chief of Thaba Bosiu stated that "celebrations today have lost their old spark; they are so low-key. Basotho are not even proud of this day anymore."⁵⁴ I met many people during my field research who advocated "incorporation," and some of Lesotho's politicians such as former prime minister Thomas Thabane have campaigned on such a position.⁵⁵ A petition with thirty thousand signatures was submitted to the South African High Commission in 2010 by the Lesotho People's Charter Movement for incorporation, but the issue has stalled for the likely reasons that the move would all but erase the authority of Lesotho's government ministers, chiefs, and civil servants.

From the South African side, there is little incentive to incorporate Lesotho as a tenth province. It is true that Lesotho has some natural resources and skilled, educated citizens. But South Africa currently admits as many Basotho workers as it likes, has favorable access to Lesotho's water, and has broad powers to shape Lesotho's economic policy through the Southern African Customs Union.⁵⁶ Lesotho's currency (the Loti; pl. Maloti) is pegged one-to-one to the South African Rand, too. This provides Lesotho with monetary stability, but prevents it from using monetary policy to manipulate its position with regard to trade deficits and inflation. The same is true for interest rates and minimum agricultural prices.⁵⁷

Water commodification responds to this malaise,⁵⁸ and the notion of “water abundance” is a critical conceptual vehicle for doing so.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the LHWP Treaty was signed by a military government that ten months earlier had overthrown prime minister Chief Leabua Jonathan in a coup. The coup was likely supported by South Africa: Jonathan had resisted the water project for some time and had been harboring anti-apartheid activists. Despite these inauspicious beginnings, national elites advanced the misleading notion that the LHWP could improve Lesotho’s political and economic position as it harnessed the power of its water. The chief spokesperson for the LHDA explained in a 1988 interview printed in the *Toronto Star*:

“It’s going to change the face of Lesotho,” he says. “Once we are supplying South Africa with water, it won’t be so easy for them to do things like blockade our borders.” Then, in an aside that seems to underline Lesotho’s vulnerability, Sephoko looked out his office window, across the dusty, potholed streets of Maseru, towards the nearby South African border. “Years ago, when I was a herd-boy tending cattle and sheep in the mountains, I never imagined anything like this,” he said. “I thought we in Lesotho would have to depend on South Africa for generations.”⁵⁹

An LHDA brochure from 1986 stated categorically that “Lesotho must control, store and redirect its water. Only in this way can Lesotho ensure that proper use is made of its water within the country and that a proper payment is received for the large quantities of water leaving Lesotho [which will] give Lesotho effective control over its water resources.”⁶⁰ The legal scholar Patrick McAuslan pointed out that, in fact, the treaty explains clearly that Lesotho *loses* control over its water by putting it under the administration of an international body, namely the Lesotho Highlands Water Commission.

After the signing of the 1986 treaty, the World Bank was being pressured to rescind its support because of international economic sanctions on South Africa. King Moshoeshoe II published a 1988 op-ed in the *New York Times*, imploring the international community to allow financing of the LHWP to go forward. He urged the world to “punish Pretoria, not Lesotho.” Lesotho is not blessed with natural resources like its neighbor, he said—but it does have “abundant water.”⁶¹

Not only is Lesotho’s water abundant, supporters of the LHWP explain, but the country is unable to actually “use” it. The government of Lesotho’s website suggests that “unfortunately [*sic*] river discharge statistics show that most of this water is lost to Lesotho in the form of run-off.”⁶² Consider how water is framed in the LHWP Feasibility Study:

Water is one of the few resources which Lesotho has in relative abundance. Even allowing for possible irrigation projects and for general expansion and improvement in living standards, Lesotho’s total water resources far exceed its likely future requirements. The average total water available in Lesotho is of the order of 140 m³/s compared with Lesotho’s present consumption of approximately 1.5 m³/s. The LHWP would confer substantial value on the water which is surplus to Lesotho’s

requirements by turning it into an exportable commodity, albeit to a single buyer. It is to be noted that South Africa receives the water in any event, since all water originating in Lesotho but not used in Lesotho, flows into South Africa.⁶³

In other words, the country has so much water it might as well sell it—and anyway Lesotho should be happy to do so because the water ends up in South Africa either way. They fail to mention that this water enters South Africa at too low an elevation for use in Gauteng, where it is needed: expensive pumping would be required to move the water from the Free State to Johannesburg.

“Water abundance” is not simply a hydrological fact, but rather a political tool,⁶⁴ as well as an object of rumor and fantasy.⁶⁵ It’s true that Lesotho’s territory is relatively well watered compared with its neighbors. It is commonly cited in project-related documents that four countries (Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, and Lesotho) depend on Senqu/Orange River basin—but whereas 46 percent of the basin’s mean annual runoff originates in Lesotho, the country contains just 3 percent of the basin’s total land area.⁶⁶ A promotional booklet for the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project, a failed effort to establish conservation zones in Lesotho’s alpine wetlands, conjures Lesotho as a “water factory” of the subcontinent as a means of justifying the construction project, citing mean annual rainfall figures of 1,800–2,000mm.⁶⁷

As extraordinary as the hydrological figures may be, they obscure the fact that water abundance is highly localized in Lesotho. Lesotho has an extremely diverse topography, leading to diverse rainfall patterns and a patchy geography of water. The northeast highlands feature high rainfall rates when compared to the lowlands, which receive less than the foothills. Parts of the mountains, too, are affected by a “rain shadow” in the lower Senqu River of Qacha’s Nek District. The rain shadow is caused by its position far enough inland to be shielded from low-pressure systems reaching the Drakensberg Range to the east, meaning that the southern highlands are almost as dry as the lowlands. In addition to being localized spatially, water in Lesotho is localized temporally, with high seasonality of rainfall and regular droughts stemming from the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO).⁶⁸

The massive dam reservoirs of Katse and Mohale seem to proclaim water abundance by their very existence. Yet, ironically, dam reservoirs themselves have become indices of drought for everyday people and in national discourse (e.g., news media), as drops in their levels expose barren soil that help one visualize the extent of a drought. The Katse Reservoir has not been at full operating capacity since 2013. During my field research in the summer of 2019, reservoir levels were dangerously low: Mohale was at 17 percent, Katse was at 40 percent. This meant that the total storage currently was only somewhere around 30 percent according to an LHDA water engineer I spoke with.⁶⁹

Neither does alleged water abundance translate into general availability of water for households. Even villages sited immediately beside LHWP dam reservoirs may lack well-maintained water taps or any form of irrigation and are prohibited from

extracting water from the reservoir for consumption or irrigation.⁷⁰ In some cases, people near dams have seen their taps dry up as a (presumed) result of underground shifts in hydrology triggered by the reservoirs' incredible weight against mountainsides.⁷¹ Small earthquakes known as "reservoir-induced seismicity" were recognized just one month after impoundment at Katse Dam.⁷² Country-wide, most people (51.9 percent) in rural areas get their water from a shared public tap, with nearly a quarter (23.8 percent) getting it from springs.⁷³ The situation is not much better in urban areas where most services are located,⁷⁴ though it has improved somewhat with the 2015 Metolong Water Scheme, a lowlands dam that provides water to lowland urban centers. Back in the highlands of Mokhotlong, employees from the Rural Water Supply (RWS), the government agency responsible for building and maintaining water taps in rural areas, told me that they had a multiyear backlog of village complaints regarding taps that were needed, dried up, or broken. Additionally, many people do not have the money to purchase rainwater storage tanks, nor the metal-roofed houses needed to use them.

In short, "water abundance" contradicts everyday lived realities in a country where droughts are common, rain is localized, and water access is spotty. Yet, the iconography of national water has been deployed across Lesotho as though abundance is spatially even, a quintessential property of Lesotho. Water abundance links together culture, territory, and a rationale for the LHWP in the face of its various costs, including resettlement, loans from the World Bank, and more.

"WATER IS A GIFT THAT DESTROYS"

If that notion of abundance is a recent coinage for the water-export economy, how does it articulate with existing ideas about water? When I began my research on water in Lesotho, I wanted to address just that question. I wanted to track how water was talked about in light of the LHWP. What, I wondered, might a vernacular notion of water in Lesotho look like, and how might Lesotho's water economy be changing it? But my probing questions about water came to little. If I asked someone whether Lesotho had a lot of water, they would typically respond in the affirmative, understanding that I was probably referencing the LHWP. The conversations went nowhere. My early fieldnotes express deep frustration on this point. If I asked specifically about the LHWP and whether it benefited people or not, I could start a conversation but it would not be particularly interesting. Some in the mountain areas would cite the benefits of roads built as part of the LHWP or the royalties paid by South Africa to Lesotho for water; others would explain how those royalties were "eaten" by politicians. But few of these conversations elicited strong emotion or felt particularly revealing of how people might spontaneously talk about water outside the usual tropes. Instead, I felt as though I had already learned these perspectives from reading newspaper stories about the project, or even in reading about healthy river activism elsewhere in the world.

This changed, to my surprise, when I attended a workshop in Mokhotlong, the main town in the mountainous area where my research was mostly sited. My friend in a government conservation agency invited me to the workshop, which was put on by the Disaster Management Authority (DMA), a government agency created with royalties from the LHWP to coordinate other government agencies on “disaster preparedness.” The DMA was presenting its Disaster Risk Reduction Policy to local government councilors and civil servants. After a prayer and introductions, the DMA staff outlined the basic tenets of the policy for around thirty minutes, after which time audience members had the chance to ask questions and comment on the policy.

Mostly, they ignored the policy document and complained about what the government should do to fix roads, bridges, and other infrastructure under threat from natural disasters. There were complaints about the government’s failures to clear roads and culverts of sediment after storms—and how flooding within the town of Mokhotlong was damaging the foundations of homes. There were concerns about the dangers posed to schoolchildren when crossing flooded rivers, and demands that the government build and repair more bridges to protect them. There were lamentations for the topsoil in people’s agricultural fields carried away by storms. There was an extended discussion of the village of Khahleti, where a flooding river in 2013 led to the collapse of a large riverbank on which a graveyard was sited (see fig. 4). The storm was undeterred by the array of gabions that had been put in place to reinforce the bank, and the graves of twenty-one people were carried downstream, reburied in sediment or strewn across riverbanks and unidentifiable. More “diversion furrow” ditches, they said, were needed upstream to redirect runoff water and protect the cemetery.

I came to realize that nearly every discussion about natural disasters was actually about surface water and the dangers it posed when left to its own devices. It occurred to me that these cases articulated a notion of water quite distinct from the water depicted in LHWP propaganda documents or water activism. Whereas those documents depict pure, life-giving water, flowing transcendently from above, the water discussed at the DMA meeting was something different: it was violent, unpredictable, and deeply mixed with the soils through which it passed. Instead of flowing, connective, and productive, this water was disruptive, disjunctive, and dangerous.

The destructive quality of water should not have surprised me. It is referenced regularly in everyday life. Just two weeks prior to the DMA meeting, a woman taught me a Sesotho proverb (*maele*) as we stood in a shop taking shelter from a violent thunderstorm that quickly brought water flashing through the town drainage ditches before our eyes: *metsi ke mahlopha-a-senya* (“water is a gift that destroys”).⁷⁵ When I visited the destroyed riverbank cemetery at Khahleti with the government conservation agency, one of the conservation bureaucrats used this same expression as we looked upon the wreckage. After having learned it, in fact, I would hear the phrase with some regularity during my research.



FIGURE 4. Collapsed streambank after a storm in the village of Khahleti. Photo by author.

I saw this kind of water everywhere after that meeting. Lesotho's roads are tormented by it: during storms, piles and piles of sediment wash over roads that must be cleared by front-loader tractors. Gullies carve away at roadsides, undermining bridges and culverts. It is like a signature scrawled across Lesotho's landscapes. Even on my way to the ministry office on the very morning of the DMA meeting, I stopped to look at some gullies and diversion structures and was struck by the dramatic ways in which this landscape had been shaped both by soil erosion and soil conservation. Around every corner, a gully, a rut, a culvert, a gabion, a silt trap, signs of road repair, and other testaments to the unruliness of Lesotho's water. *Metsi ke mahlopha-a-senya*.

And it is not simply rural people from the highlands who identify this quality of water. Most of the DMA workshop attendees were from the urban lowlands, after all. At a separate government workshop on watershed conservation in the lowlands town of Hlotse, a consultant to the ministry said of Lesotho's water in a PowerPoint presentation, "Our water is disruptive" (*Metsi a rona aa lukeha*), as though it were its natural condition. The statement spoke to his overarching point: that water in Lesotho must be brought under control through watershed management in order to prevent it from damaging crops, homes, and livelihoods. Water is a gift that destroys.

This is a long-standing notion—long enough to be immortalized in a proverb—but also one that is sharpening amid climate changes. The rains used to be much

better in Lesotho, as just about anyone in the country will tell you. They used to start in September or October, falling most commonly as *pula ea molupe*—slow, drizzling rains that percolate into the soil and nourish the forage and agricultural crops upon which most people in rural Lesotho depend. If the sun shines after a *molupe* rain, the rangelands seem to transform before your eyes, with new grass shoots coming up green. Livestock will become so giddy, one herder told me, that they'll scamper around, making it hard to catch calves or foals.

These days (*linakong tseña*), people said to me repeatedly, the rains don't arrive until December or January and only then as *pula ea sekhahla*—torrential downpours that fall on lands denuded of vegetation by drought and starving livestock, carrying away the soil.⁷⁶ The "water simply slides over the surface" (*metsi aa thella feela*), as some described it. The seasons are being pushed out of order. These days, snow might fall in the middle of the summer, as it did in 2017 in the highlands of Mokhotlong. You can't tell if it's winter or summer anymore, one elderly man told me.

Rainfall data from the Lesotho Meteorological Society support these perspectives.⁷⁷ Though total annual precipitation has not changed much over the years, with annual rainfall totals more or less consistent at decadal time scales (albeit highly variable from year to year), the country has witnessed a delayed onset of summer rainfall and longer periods without rain during the rainy season (see fig. 5). That is, the dry season is getting longer but it is broken by heavy rains that ultimately stabilize annual rainfall totals. To make matters worse, it is also more common to see sustained periods of high temperatures. The lowlands occasionally experience fourteen straight days at over thirty degrees Celsius, a heatwave that is unheard of in recent memory. As temperatures rise, evapotranspiration increases, meaning that soils and vegetation do not hold moisture as long.⁷⁸

These days, if Lesotho's water doesn't come crashing downslope, it gets evaporated before it can be utilized.

CONCLUSION

Far from a neutral economic exchange, the sale of water to South Africa stands as an example of South African domination of its smaller neighbor. Lesotho has been fashioned as South Africa's storage vessel—once for laboring bodies and now for water bodies.

As with the commodification and export of Basotho labor, the commodification and export of water from Lesotho is part of a regional infrastructure of economic production. This infrastructure requires maintenance—forms of material, social, and symbolic engineering upstream. For one, commodification relies on aesthetic, symbolic work to make water export between these two countries thinkable. Water must be made conceptually *as a resource* before it can be exploited.⁷⁹ Supporters of the water project have drawn water into Lesotho's national iconography, describing it as fundamental to the territory, spatially even

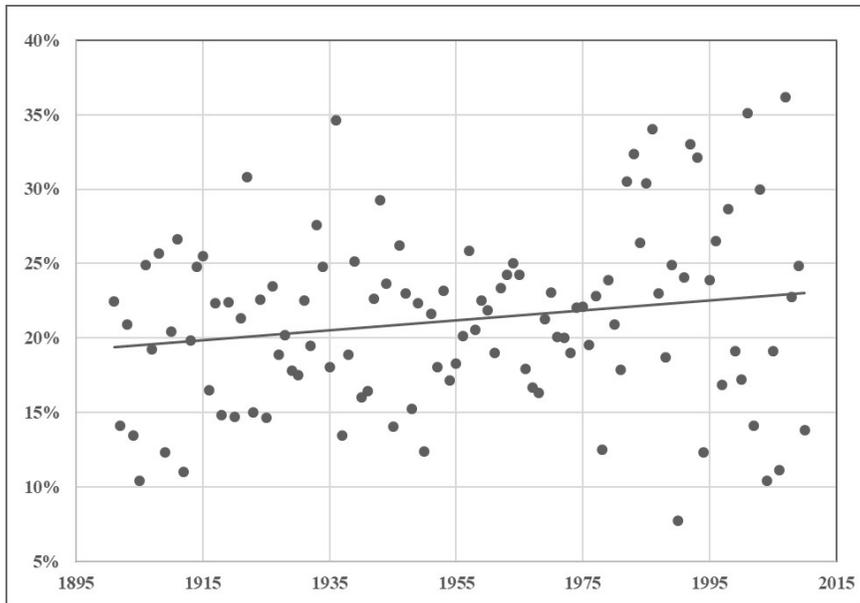


FIGURE 5. October–November rainfall as percent of annual total, 1900–2010. Source: World Bank (2016).

across the nation, and abundant. They created a new category of water: national water. In rendering Lesotho “water abundant,” its water became underutilized and exporting it to South Africa became a logical consequence, even necessary: by selling water that it “does not use,” as they described it, Lesotho’s geopolitical position would be bolstered.

Under the highly unequal terms of exchange between Lesotho and South Africa, sovereignty was declared as both a precondition for and product of the LHWP. But rather than testifying to Lesotho’s sovereignty, the export commodification of Lesotho’s water illuminates its weakness as the country shifts from labor reserve to water reservoir. Ironically, national water is foreign to ordinary people. For anyone not actively promoting the LHWP, water is scarce, localized, and threatening. National water clearly contradicts Lesotho’s actually existing fluvial regime, in which staccato rainstorms yield low soil infiltration and high rates of overland flow. National water, then, is foreign water that has been contrived as local. Rather than rendering water as an abstract category to extract it from its local, material contexts, as described by critics of water privatization, the LHWP first produces a locally emplaced water for the purpose of extraction.

The LHWP’s conceptual development of “national water” also exposes a weakness in anthropology’s conceptual development of water as a total social fact,⁸⁰ the antithesis of which is commodified water. Literature on the topic figures water as transcendent, as being in harmonious connection with society

prior to its violent extraction and alienation under capitalism from that cultural substratum—a kind of Edenic fall from grace. While I am careful not to discount the deep imbrication of water in human life, nor the violence that can accompany commodification, I worry about the ease with which we tell stories of water's Edenic fall, particularly when efforts to commodify water in Lesotho draw upon Edenic imagery and when ethnographic subjects emphasize a nonharmonious, disjunctive water—a gift that destroys. The holistic interconnectivity envisioned by anthropological accounts of water needs to be provincialized, then.

Not only should anthropologists do more to document the creativity with which capitalists manage to commodify water, and question the conventional tropes used to contest it; they should also do more to account for water's different modalities, including surface water, rainfall, tap water, glaciers, condensation, reservoir water, and so on.⁸¹ For example, national water is principally volumetric, and during production comes into conflict with surface water—fluvial water. Had the LHWP boosters learned more about the local qualities of Lesotho's fluvial water, they might have avoided problems currently being experienced by the LHWP, in fact. It turns out that the water flowing over land as runoff and cutting erosion gullies into the soil could render the LHWP nonoperational in a matter of decades. The dam reservoir at 'Muela is facing serious sedimentation problems as a result of soil erosion in the upstream catchment,⁸² and a multimillion-dollar effort is now underway to dredge the reservoir.