

## Bureaucratic Ecology

Conservation bureaucrats in Lesotho rely on two measures to manage soil erosion: physical structures, which I described in the previous chapter; and social structures, which I describe in this one. Whereas the physical structures are designed to slow the flow of water manually as it courses downslope, social structures such as grazing associations are said to get “to the source,” as Tau put it in chapter 3, preventing land degradation that is the cause of accelerated flow in the first place. The management of rangelands in far-away mountain landscapes may at first blush appear tangential to the work of producing water for export to South Africa, but it is central.

Reconciling the contradictions of Lesotho’s water-export economy—namely the competing terrestrial demands of water production and livestock production—means that conservation bureaucrats must translate between an ecology and a sociology. This chapter excavates the bureaucratic work done to make that translation.

How does one devise land reforms in which theories of ecological process articulate well with theories of social process? How does one give bureaucratic shape to the spatial and temporal parameters of an ecosystem? For example, what kind of authority best suits these vast and remote rangelands? Should chiefs be in charge of managing grazing as has historically been the case, with their specific set of tools for enforcing rules and resolving disputes, or some other institution? What might be the political ramifications of promoting one or the other? Should some kind of permitting and registration be put in place? Also: How many animals should be allowed to graze in a particular area? Which types, and for how long? What happens if the year is particularly rainy or dry? Questions such as these converge like locusts upon conservation efforts in Lesotho.

The answers supplied to them and the actions that follow point toward a “bureaucratic ecology.” By this, I mean the ecological process imagined by

bureaucrats and its effects on the landscape. Bureaucrats inherit and reproduce this bureaucratic ecology, but they are not entirely in control of it. They sometimes struggle against it, as do livestock owners. Even livestock and vegetation are subject to its pressures and idiosyncrasies. This work of translation between a human sociology and a more-than-human ecology therefore demonstrates how social processes entwine ecological processes.<sup>1</sup> Commonly understood to occupy sites such as offices and archives, bureaucracy ramifies in ecosystems as human and nonhuman subjects are forced to contend with its incentives, categories, and contradictions.

The conservation bureaucrats I depict below work as rangeland professionals, seeking to administer the principles of rangeland ecology. This subfield of ecology probes the hazy boundaries of nature and culture in “rangelands,” a term that refers to any uncultivated land that supports grazing and browsing animals, whether grasslands, savannas, shrublands, or deserts.<sup>2</sup> Theoreticians and practitioners work to discern how best to maintain rangeland health while producing livestock.<sup>3</sup> They address questions about the effects of different management regimes; the relative importance of management versus environmental factors such as climate in determining rangeland condition; and what constitutes “good condition” in the first place (e.g., forage abundance, plant species diversity, etc.).

Below, I describe two, connected efforts to rearrange the spaces and times in which livestock are grazed. In the first, conservation bureaucrats attempted to impose a controversial rotational grazing method devised by Allan Savory called Holistic Resource Management. They hoped this would improve range condition generally, relieving grazing pressure on the alpine wetlands of concern to water export. In the second, they attempted to reclassify the grazing lands around their project so they could increase the fines for those who failed to follow their rules. In both cases, debates about social roles loom: whether the behaviors of herders and chiefs, for example, are fit to this rangeland ecosystem in the water-export era.

Having presented these two episodes, I parse out the historical and cultural circumstances that made them possible. These circumstances also destine present efforts to failure—and future efforts, too. They entail the manipulation of social institutions: for example, the reworking of the chieftaincy and its grazing-land responsibilities during colonial “indirect rule,” the introduction of local government councils and grazing associations as checks on chiefly power, and the introduction of various other institutions with some mandate for rangeland management. Each institution represents at one and the same time an organic, local social form, a foreign imposition, and a matter of national debate. My story is anchored in a bureaucratic critique, so that is where I’ll need to start.

## THE LOG BOOKS

Institutions for managing land in Lesotho today are subject to what, in a different context, has been called “projectification”<sup>4</sup>—the execution of social and environmental programs through time-bound, often-foreign-funded initiatives: “projects.” A common approach has been to introduce “user associations” (*mekhatlo*), sometimes called “cooperatives,” which conjure a sense of community ownership and empowerment. Here’s how it works. A development or conservation project alights upon a village, and introduces one of these associations. Not confined to conservation, these cooperatives can work toward a variety of goals: handicraft groups to sell art objects to tourists, youth groups to engage young people on HIV/AIDS education, egg circles for local food access, and so on. People sign up, interested in the opportunities that might come of it. Constitutions are written, modest annual dues are paid, executive committees are established. As the project wends its way toward completion and dissolution at the end of its funding cycle, the association also slowly erodes away.

But it never fully dissolves. It might stop paying its annual registration to the government. Its members might stop paying their annual dues and attending monthly meetings. But a core group of members always remains, enshrined in their log books: the black, hardcover “exercise” books with red binding tape that are ubiquitous in Lesotho, stored and carried in plastic bags, and a requisite for the executive committee members of user associations. The group lies more or less dormant until yet another project comes along. That subsequent project—even sometimes one seemingly unrelated in its goals and scope—will learn of the existing association in the course of “mapping out stakeholders,” understanding it to be a relevant constituency or partner. Their project must either be built around the existing user association, supplant it, or, most typically, incorporate it in the name of inclusion. During my time in Lesotho, because I often asked about these associations, I routinely encountered people who were part of associations of one sort or another, particularly because scores were created in the project areas of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) dams.<sup>5</sup> If I asked while at their home, they would often fetch a plastic bag from a chest or cupboard, pull from it a black notebook with red binding, and show me this list of members, a constitution, a government registration. These were invariably codified in proper legal language, with officers, protocols, and purview well defined.

These log books point to the *contingent* power of bureaucracy. Scholars in bureaucracy studies have long described bureaucratic institutions as tending to expand their reach, drawing ever more practices and persons under their jurisdiction: think “mission creep,”<sup>6</sup> or “the iron cage.”<sup>7</sup> Virus-like, bureaucracy ensures that social life serves the form of its protocols rather than the substance of its original rationale. But the quality of that bureaucratic reach is neither even nor assured. It’s true that bureaucracy can operate as an engine for structural and state

violence,<sup>8</sup> but foregrounding only that tendency risks granting it more power than it has.<sup>9</sup> There are lots of times and spaces in which it does *not* operate, or in which it operates only in fits and starts. Bureaucratic power is defined by its patchy and contingent spacetimes: universalizing, but never universal.<sup>10</sup>

Institutions to manage grazing in Lesotho are useful for thinking about these expanding and universalizing qualities of bureaucracy because of their dramatic proliferation in the country over the past half-century or more.<sup>11</sup> At nearly every turn in Lesotho's history, even before the advent of the development and conservation industry, interventions have been made to rationalize and democratize rangeland use.<sup>12</sup> Energized by donor funds and new-fangled bureaucratic forms, these institutions have extended themselves across rangelands, each with their own spatial and temporal protocols, ecological imaginaries, forms of documentation, concepts, stakeholders, and so on. Funding dissipates. The institution recedes. And subsequent rangeland conservation projects must reckon with the institutional architecture of these previous reforms, limited in power but persistent across time—each perched haphazardly upon the ones that came before it.

The interventions into Lesotho's rangelands that I describe in this chapter don't extend the state or a bureaucratic logic further and further into everyday life.<sup>13</sup> Instead, they create a scattered geography of sporadic bureaucratic power that compromises each subsequent intervention. Not an iron cage, nor a labyrinth—bureaucracy is a perilous wasteland of yesterday's discarded plans.<sup>14</sup>

In the course of translating between a sociology and an ecology, then, conservation bureaucrats stumble over this "imperial debris."<sup>15</sup> Like the subjects of their programs, they navigate a landscape cluttered with what the geographer Stephen Turner has described as Lesotho's "gradually evolving, and gradually decaying" institutions for rangeland management.<sup>16</sup>

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During my field research in Lesotho, conservation bureaucrats envisioned "management" as the critical dynamic impacting land condition rather than climate or some nuanced account involving multiple factors. In this, they worked in accordance with received wisdom from the colonial period about rural livestock production and its impacts on land in Africa.<sup>17</sup>

Revisionist work in environmental history and rangeland ecology from the 1980s and 1990s challenged such a view.<sup>18</sup> It argued that arid and semiarid ecosystems in Africa, which feature strong variation in rainfall from year to year, were responsive primarily to climate. Management decisions in such systems had little effect on land condition—whether defined by species richness and diversity, forage abundance, or vegetation structure—because of the overriding importance of rainfall. It is not entirely clear how relevant these findings are for the Lesotho highlands, which features a semihumid climate (i.e., more annual rainfall than a

semiarid or arid climate), but its high interannual variability in rainfall suggests that climate is highly determinant. Yet, the possibility that Lesotho's systems are rainfall-dependent was not a notion that was taken up widely among conservation bureaucrats in Lesotho, whether they worked at the ministry, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, or foreign organizations.<sup>19</sup>

Bureaucrats were not resistant to considering novel ways of envisioning rangeland ecologies, however, so long as management remained at the center. This next section turns to describe how they incorporated a rotational grazing program developed by the controversial Zimbabwean ecologist, Allan Savory. Whereas decades of conservation thought had suggested that overgrazing was rampant on African rangelands, Savory's program instead argued that *undergrazing* was the problem for reasons I explain below.<sup>20</sup> But while Savory's method is typically applied in heavily circumscribed settings with a system of paddocks to promote concentrated grazing, Lesotho's fenceless, extensive rangelands would demand additional measures.

First, they would need to rouse herders from their perceived laziness, encouraging them to herd "actively" rather than "passively," as I show in this next section. Second, they would need to redefine the rangeland space to better control which areas were open to grazing, the point I turn to in the subsequent section.

It would be a tall order. Even despite the urgent need for soil conservation to save the water-export economy, these attempts were unlikely to succeed. Efforts to improve the condition and management of Lesotho's rangelands become ensnared in—and ultimately undone by—the debris of earlier imperial designs. Rather than improve land condition, management reforms make improvement-through-management impossible into the future.

#### THE SAVORY ROTATIONAL GRAZING SYSTEM

*Motébong ha ho lisoe*: "At the cattle posts, one does not herd." I first came across this phrase—a Sesotho proverb (*maele*)—in the ethnographic literature: Hugh Ashton's *The Basuto*.<sup>21</sup> It refers literally to the notion that herding is unnecessary at the "cattle posts,"<sup>22</sup> where animals are thought to simply leave the kraal, graze where they please, and get retrieved in the afternoon. More than that, it captures the slow flow of life at *motébong*, the remote cattle posts where herders stay with their herds for months on end. So distant from the village, herders truly live on their own terms there. The proverb's passive construction carries with it a second connotation in an alternative translation: "At the cattle posts, one is not herded."

My next encounter with the proverb came in a conversation with Sepheo, an employee at the Khubelu Sponges Project. This was a conservation scheme initially funded by the German state aid organization (GIZ) and later taken up by the Lesotho government. It was aimed at protecting the LHWP by preserving the wetlands

in the highest reaches of the mountains, based on the logic that the wetlands could retain and slowly release water into LHWP reservoirs better if they weren't subject to so much grazing. Improving range condition in general, they felt, would release pressure from the wetlands.

It was early in my field research, and I met Sepheo at his office in Mokhotlong to learn what he knew about wetland degradation—its symptoms, causes, and solutions. He and his organization sought a way to prevent herders from grazing their animals on the wetlands, and he was encountering mostly dead ends. The rangelands are vast; fences are taboo because of widespread and passionate commitment to preserving common land tenure; getting buy-in from chiefs and livestock owners is difficult due to skepticism about reforms; it's even a challenge simply to gather herders together for a workshop, because they can't leave their animals unattended for long.

But in Lesotho's fluvial economy, bringing livestock production into harmony with water production is key, and Sepheo was working extremely hard in my observation to do so. He was taking an intellectual approach, thinking deeply about the ecology and trying to line up all of the human interests and considerations. He related to me what he felt was one of the central challenges to his effort: the fact that herders do not actually "herd" their animals but instead allow them to graze as they please. Laughing, he said in English, "There is this phrase in Sesotho: *motebong ha ho lisoe*."

For Sepheo, the saying distilled a truth about herders in Lesotho: that they are lazy and mostly just sit around all day playing the *sekhankula* (a makeshift violin) or napping. It was a perception shared by many in Lesotho, in fact. This laziness manifested in a particular spatiality of grazing, with livestock highly dispersed in the pasture, selectively eating the plants they choose. (Readers will recall a story in the introduction about Tankisi discussing this problem.) The challenge of herder laziness needed to be overcome, Sepheo thought, and he had been persuaded in this by a consultant the Sponges Project hired to evaluate rangeland condition and to suggest management options. The project wanted to encourage herders "to work by the signs of the plants," he said. Farmers tend to prioritize livestock over the range, he explained, and the Sponges Project sought to reverse that trend. I half-expected him to lapse into the old complaint about overstocking—that people keep huge herds of livestock simply because it grants them social status. But he surprised me.

While many believe the rangelands to be overgrazed,<sup>23</sup> he said, in fact they are *overrested*. There are a lot of animals, but their selective grazing is the true problem. Rather than being dispersed throughout the pasture, livestock should be herded tightly so that they graze intensively on one small area, eating palatable and unpalatable plants alike before moving to another area. There could be many more animals on the landscape if herders were more active in their herding. A rotational grazing system is crucial to improving rangeland condition, he said.

I remarked that this approach sounded similar to one I had read about, developed by Allan Savory. His face lit up: “Exactly! This one!”

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The Savory Rotational Grazing Method (also called Holistic Resource Management) was proposed by Savory in 1980.<sup>24</sup> Born in 1935 in Zimbabwe—at that time a colonial territory called Southern Rhodesia—he developed his method while working as a colonial conservation officer. The method features multipaddock rotations, where livestock move regularly from one paddock (or, pen) to another, grazing and browsing the vegetation fully before being moved. This forces livestock to eat the unpalatable as well as the palatable vegetation, ensuring that “decreasers”—those palatable, typically perennial grasses that livestock prefer—do not get replaced by “increasers”—the less palatable annual grasses (or shrubs) that increase with heavy grazing.<sup>25</sup> His rationale was to mimic what he saw as the natural grazing and browsing regime of African savannas, whereby large herds of ungulates consumed or trampled most of the vegetation available to them, depositing nutrients through defecation and urination as they moved.

The method was met by excitement in parts of the lay and applied rangelands community, with its spare and compelling ecological rationale. In 2011, Savory gave a TED talk that has been viewed over twelve million times.<sup>26</sup> In the presentation, he described with an evangelical optimism how his method could reverse the trend of desertification in many parts of the world, showing images of brown, barren land alongside others of verdant and lush stands of trees and grasses.<sup>27</sup>

In the *scientific* rangeland ecology community, by contrast, Savory was met with widespread skepticism since his early publications.<sup>28</sup> Some of the most well-respected range ecologists published responses to Savory’s TED talk, including one titled, “The Savory Method Can Not Green Deserts or Reverse Climate Change.”<sup>29</sup> There, they refute him and contend that his unsubstantiated claims have the potential to undermine the credibility of rangeland professionals at large.

What is more, Savory’s system problematically suggests that ecosystems benefit from very intense livestock grazing, when in fact few measures of ecosystem health would be served by it—a possible Trojan horse for ranchers to overturn conservation regulations.<sup>30</sup> Taken independently of empirical data, one might also question its basic logic. If livestock were to consume or trample everything, the exposed and compacted soil could reduce infiltration, encourage runoff and therefore lead to erosion, particularly given the punctuated rainfall regime of Lesotho described in chapter 2. It seems unclear, too, whether nutritious, perennial grasses would be more likely to establish in the fully grazed paddock than the unpalatable annuals and shrubs that typically colonize heavily disturbed sites. Finally, as I’ll explain in chapter 6, the Lesotho highlands likely did not feature large herds of grazing ungulates prior to human settlement in line with Savory’s theory.

Beyond its lack of supporting evidence and its specious ecological rationale, the method is also impractical in Lesotho. First, it's worth noting that farmers in Lesotho are generally risk-averse, given the absence of credit and high levels of poverty.<sup>31</sup> Second, the method was designed to be used in intensive settings with a costly network of paddock fences—not extensive, open rangelands governed by common tenure. Sepheo recognized the well-known fact that fences are impossible in Lesotho—not only because of the cost, but also because they are seen as hostile to common property arrangements.<sup>32</sup> Paddocks were therefore not an option. According to Lesotho's rangeland commons, no person can be barred from accessing pasture (although there are conventions that practically place limits on use).<sup>33</sup>

To address this problem, the consultant recommended “active herding”—continually encircling the animals so they graze in a tight bunch. This would be a way to mimic the paddocks, they thought.<sup>34</sup> “Active herding” seemed unlikely to me, given the effort this would require of herders. But he had been spending time, he told me, patiently trying to understand how herders move their animals around and what their interests might be. Armed with that information, he thought, he might be able to encourage them to move according to his modified Savory plan.

A less intensive rotational grazing system in fact already exists in Lesotho, and it has been in place since the earliest days of the country, when King Moshoeshoe I established areas for pasture resting (*maboella*) and seasonal grazing in the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> As land pressure increased, good forage was found further from villages and increasingly higher in the foothills and highlands. This would eventually manifest in a form of “vertical transhumance,” in which livestock were taken to higher-altitude cattle posts for summertime grazing and returned to lower-elevation areas near villages during wintertime. That transhumance pattern was then formalized as the “A-B-C system” after the 1935 Pim Report, which designated soil erosion a national emergency (see chapter 2), and such a system today governs livestock movements countrywide.

The “A” grazing zone corresponds to summer cattle post areas on the high-elevation plateau (>2900masl), open to grazing during the months of January to March; the “B” grazing zone refers to winter cattle posts at a subalpine elevation (2290–2900masl), open to grazing from April to December; the “C” grazing zone corresponds to the areas surrounding villages, where livestock are only permitted while birthing, for ploughing, for milking, or when subsisting on fodder.

The Savory-inspired rotational grazing method proposed by the Sponges Project was built to work within the A-B-C system, with active herding to take place at these various zones. They also considered dividing the winter rangelands into three subsections, across which herders would move every two months. But this revised spatial logic failed to take account of a variety of factors that determine herder movements. For one thing, herders are directed by the owner of the herd they manage. If the livestock owners tell them to stay in the B rangelands (winter cattle posts) throughout the summer months, then they must do so. They are also



motivated to move the animals in a way that ensures the animals are well fed, as livestock owners demand this. Within the immediate vicinity of their cattle post, they typically choose between four to five different routes, each of which will allow the herders to easily water the animals once in the morning and the afternoon, and to get livestock to where the forage is good, where the winds are not too strong, and where they can be observed easily. Sometimes, they also try to visit areas near to another herder, where they can sit and talk while keeping the herds separate.<sup>36</sup>

These problems should not obscure an important point: that Sepheo and other conservation bureaucrats at the ministry demonstrated an openness to new forms of ecological theorizing. They saw management as the primary problem facing Lesotho's rangelands—unlike the weather it was something they could control, after all—but were not inflexible as to what form management should take. For all its shortcomings, Savory's grazing program helped them to solve a problem: by suggesting that undergrazing was the problem rather than overgrazing, the flow of water across the landscape could be improved without reducing the number of livestock.<sup>37</sup>

To make it work, they'd need to do more than simply inspire herders to graze actively. They would need to enhance their enforcement of rules against grazing animals in rested pastures, as I describe in this next section. Their thought was to leverage a political distinction that defines Lesotho's dualist system of government. Lesotho has both a chieftaincy and a state government, whereby chiefs bear the responsibilities of "governance" (*puso*) and the state has the responsibilities of "development" (*ntlafatso*). Rangelands typically fall under chiefly control (a matter of "governance"), but bureaucrats hoped to designate pastures where conservation work was taking place as a matter for the state—a "development" area. In redefining grazing reform areas, that is, they hoped to reterritorialize ecological process, extricating it from "governance" and bringing it in line with "development."

#### THE IMPOUNDMENT

The Sponges Project's vehicle for carrying out this Savory rotational grazing program was a grazing association (*mokhatlo oa phuliso*) that existed in their project area. A grazing association is a "community-based" institution that aims to devolve grazing management from chiefs to "the people," even though chiefs also sit on the associations. They include women and young people, but mostly in my observation consist of adult men. Grazing associations came about in the early 1980s, as the development and conservation industries came into full bloom, and they were propagated across the country.<sup>38</sup> As one early proponent put it, these would "improve range condition and livestock productivity on Lesotho's rangelands by mobilizing collective management of communal grazing areas."<sup>39</sup> Per the design at that time, each grazing association managed a "range management



FIGURE 13. A grazing association meeting. Photo by author.

area” that mostly mapped onto the territory of one of the twenty-two principal chiefs, which I explain below. In addition to controlling the schedule of livestock rotations, associations were supposed to promote improved livestock breeds and encourage owners to sell their animals at livestock auctions.

This particular association targeted by the Sponges Project was only started in 2000 when an international conservation project suggested the idea.<sup>40</sup> The association members couldn’t remember the name of that project when I spoke with them in 2014—something about improving the rangelands, one of them said. Membership was substantial at the outset, but declined through the years. The association became moribund.

Then, in 2013, the Sponges Project came to the area and held a public meeting (*pitso*, see fig. 13). They felt compelled to engage the association, given its relevance to their rotational grazing scheme. In their estimation, chiefs were failing at enforcing rules about pasture-resting, and they needed a more engaged set of local partners. Ministry officials and the police were present at the *pitso*. They told livestock owners that they were going to be very serious about impounding livestock found grazing in closed pastures or those without association-issued permits—the livestock would be taken to the chief’s corral and the owner would have to pay a fine to get them back. After that meeting, their membership shot to 285, but it fell again to 87 the next year. I asked some of the association members

why they thought membership had declined. They explained that people came to think the association wasn't serious. There were some impoundments initially, but then accounts began to circulate of uneven enforcement—that some livestock without permits were not impounded. The association, it seemed to them, was not in charge. People became sour and disregarded the association once again, declining to renew their membership.

I saw one example play out in living color just a few weeks after that conversation. Some cattle were impounded when they passed into the area that was closed to grazing for the Sponges Project and a ministry *fato-fato* program (see chapter 3). I was stunned to learn that the animals belonged to Tankisi, the assistant chair of the grazing association, which was responsible for deciding when to open and close the area. I described Tankisi in the introduction of this book, a rural man who was often called upon by development and conservation bureaucrats seeking participants for their initiatives. It obviously would not play well with the community at large if Tankisi thought he could get away with this on account of his position in the association. Holding him accountable would be important to ensure that others respect the order to close the pasture.

I attended the next monthly meeting of the grazing association, interested to see how they would handle the issue of Tankisi's animals. In its plot and characters, the scene captures the tangled nature of rangeland interventions like the Savory-inspired Sponges Project and their implications for the water-export era. I describe the scene here before breaking down its significance in the following section.

At *moreneng*, the part of the village where the chief lives and where such meetings are held, people milled about as usual. Young men leaned against the stone kraal as they waited to buy or sell animals; men and women sat and stood near the small, two-room building where *lekhotla* (the village court) would be held. Several horses wandered about around the area, grazing on the closely cropped grasses growing around homes. It was sunny, windy, and cold.

Committee members were rolling in slowly. Tankisi had arrived, as had Ntloko, the chair of the grazing association, and a conservation ministry official named Tefo. The councilor was out of town for a professional training and couldn't make it. We waited for the chief. As we waited, I chatted with Ntloko when my friend Motlokoa sauntered over from his home up the hill. Motlokoa had expressed to me his dislike of the grazing association many times before. A somewhat confrontational person, he interrupted our conversation to ask Ntloko a question, rolling a cigarette and peering up periodically at Ntloko: "What's the point of the association? Isn't it true that I can graze anywhere I want there [gesturing toward the mountainsides around us], and nobody can refuse me?"

The rangelands are commonly held and fundamentally under the remit of the chief, he was implying. His tone was characteristically jovial but blunt. Ntloko seemed intimidated and defensive. He couldn't manage to justify the existence of the association with anything more than some reference to how he and the other

members are trying to improve the rangeland. Ntloko would tell me later that it's people like Motlokoa who make the grazing association's work difficult by refusing to cooperate.

The meeting began. The association members and the chief lamented the fact that, while this was an executive committee meeting, only three of the seven committee members were present. After a prayer, the meeting started with Ntloko explaining that the main order of business: to tell the public that the area called Moella would be reopened to grazing for one month.<sup>41</sup> This was also where the Sponges Project and another ministry rangeland improvement project were taking place (also where Tankisi's animals were found). People must procure permits to graze there. The only problem, he said, was that they were all out of the permit forms—he asked Tefo, the ministry officer, to get them some.

The chief then interjected with a pointed question, essentially upbraiding the association for failing to prevent people from grazing in the closed area: "What *exactly* is your work up there?"

Ntloko replied that they are trying their best but "the association has fallen apart," he said.

The conversation then turned to Tankisi's impounded animals—although, of course, they had been talking about Tankisi all along. Tefo was particularly hard on Tankisi, who defended himself by claiming that other people's animals were also grazing in the area but not impounded. (This was not true—I was there and did not see any others.) Why, he asked, were only his impounded? Then he quickly followed with the crucial part of his defense. Besides, he said, the animals were not impounded by an order from the chief, so the impoundment was not legitimate.

Tefo countered as though he'd been waiting for just such a moment: they were impounded in an area undergoing a rangeland improvement project, meaning that it was a "development" (*ntlafatso*) area. Therefore, it was legal for them to impound without a chief's order. Not only that, his fine should be much higher because of that *ntlafatso* designation.

The application of the term *ntlafatso* by Tefo was hugely significant. As I briefly noted above, Lesotho has a legal dualist system of government in which a chieftaincy exists alongside the state. The state is locally represented by elected councilors (and administered by the ministries that constitute the civil service). The responsibilities of the chieftaincy and the state are generally distinguished by reference to two terms: *puso*, meaning "governance," is the charge of chiefs; *ntlafatso*, meaning "development" (or "improvement"), is the charge of councilors. One man explained it to me like this: "If there were a project to build a road, for example, then it would be the councilors who manage the process of selecting workers. Chiefs, on the other hand, would sort out any disputes between people about that selection." In short, councilors make improvements, and chiefs keep the peace.

One of the powers of chiefs in grazing management is to close pastures for rest. Conservation bureaucrats at the Sponges Project and in government believed that

chiefs too often looked the other way, and also that the current fines for grazing in these areas were too low to deter herders. Recently, they had begun arguing that larger fines could be imposed for impounded livestock in areas designated *ntlafatso*—some fifty times the chiefly amount or more. According to the 1986 Grazing Regulations, fines for impounded livestock had been fixed at M4 for each head of cattle (around 50 US cents at the time of research), and Mo.60 for small stock. After three decades of inflation, these fees were becoming meaningless. The Sponges Project and the ministry sought to work around the existing fee schedule by instituting categorical distinctions: fines in *ntlafatso*-designated land would be higher than in *puso*-designated land. Tefo said that Tankisi's fine could be as much as M900 (over USD 100), a big sum of money for him. But this new fee schedule was a recent, ad hoc imposition and was highly controversial. The look on everyone's faces was one of shock and concern.

Tankisi was ultimately scolded by the chief—but not fined. It was confusing to me that the meeting fizzled to an end after so much drama, and I asked Tefo later why Tankisi wasn't fined. He told me with resigned frustration it was clear the chief wanted to avoid it. The chief probably knew that Tankisi couldn't pay the fine without selling off some of his animals. If Tankisi couldn't pay, the chief would've had to send Tankisi to jail, which was simply too drastic a measure.

I'll turn now to peel apart this impoundment scene layer by layer, in the spirit of Max Gluckman,<sup>42</sup> examining what the basic events of this "social situation" reveal about an underlying system of relationships prevailing upon rangeland conservation. The scene may appear mundane at first blush, but its tensions, ambiguities and maneuverings have profound implications for the water economy. They speak to the elaboration over decades of a set of management structures that, since the colonial period, have become increasingly baroque—the proposed solution to which has been more management structures. They go beyond the water-export economy, too, striking at the heart of political authority in Lesotho. Addressing the water project's land problems therefore entails a confrontation with hotly contested questions of political representation and participation, national identity, and more. This is the terrain into which the Savory program and its spatial logics were to be introduced.

#### PUSO, NTLAFATSO, AND THE PROJECTS

Attempts to square a sociology with an ecology in Lesotho bump up against partisan national politics, their colonial admixtures, and the development-conservation industry. A key to the story is the advent of Lesotho's "legal dualist" system of government in the late nineteenth century,<sup>43</sup> which created an opposition between traditional authorities (i.e., chiefs) and the state or "statutory" government (i.e., elected politicians like local government councilors).<sup>44</sup> The system is a legacy of British colonial rule, but also represents a substantive national debate about how best to carry out the work of government in this constitutional monarchy.

These political systems—the chieftaincy and the state government—are fundamentally different in their structure and legitimacy. The chieftaincy is a hereditary aristocracy: a nested hierarchy that descends from the king of Lesotho (*Motlotlehi*), an influential though mostly powerless figurehead, through to twenty-two principal chiefs (*marena a sehloho*) and a thousand or so ward chiefs (*marena a sebaka*) and headmen (*bo-ramotse*). The state government is elected in a multi-party parliamentary system descending from the prime minister to cabinet ministers, members of parliament, and local government councilors.<sup>45</sup>

Though officially a dual system of government, in practice one form has been privileged over the other at different moments in Lesotho's history, often in relation to issues of land use.<sup>46</sup> Since missionaries and British colonists introduced or imposed European systems of thought and governance into Basotho life, there has never been agreement among Basotho over how (or whether) to incorporate them. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the debate cut along class lines and urban-rural lines. Wealthier, urban, western-educated Basotho were much more likely to endorse European systems. Poorer, rural Basotho were more likely to endorse the chieftaincy as a foundation of Basotho culture and thought. But neither institution is purely “foreign” or “indigenous,” as I’ll show.<sup>47</sup> In the three following subsections, I describe the historical trajectories of these institutions, each in shifting states of growth and decay, so as to explain how they converge upon the Savory-inspired effort to reorganize grazing for the water-export era.

### *Institution 1: Chiefs (Puso)*

The chieftaincy antedates colonialism, but the institution has morphed over time. For example, the British strategically supported the chieftaincy during the colonial period through their policy of “indirect rule.” They affirmed chiefs’ powers of tribute extraction, such as through *matsema* work parties where commoners were conscripted to work on chiefs’ agricultural fields.<sup>48</sup> They also affirmed chiefs’ authority to manage land, including the *leboella* system by which chiefs determined how livestock would be rotated to allow for pasture-resting—and by which chiefs received payment for fines when animals were caught grazing in closed pastures.<sup>49</sup> The British eventually even paid them a monthly salary. In return, chiefs helped them to collect taxes and fines, while also disseminating British policy.

The legitimacy of chiefs came under attack in the early twentieth century from two sides: urban, mission-school educated citizens, and a poorer rural citizenry. The urban class established the Basutoland Progressive Association (BPA) in 1907, which spoke out against chiefs. They criticized an increase in the number of chiefs and alleged that chiefs were abusing their power in the issuing of fines, land allocation, the calling of *matsema* work parties, and more. In rural areas, a separate movement of Basotho, also critical of the chieftaincy, called the Lekhotla la Bafo (“Commoners League”), was led by Josiel Lefela. But whereas the BPA pushed for slow reform toward western-style democracy, the Commoners League was radically anticolonial, antimission, and protradition.<sup>50</sup> According to Lefela, the BPA



elites had been poisoned by missionary education—they were out of touch with everyday people and the social order that accompanied precolonial political organization. Lefela was also critical, however, of the chieftaincy's capitulation to the colonial authorities, seeking a return to an uncorrupted chieftaincy.

After the soil erosion crisis of the 1920s and 1930s, Alan Pim's 1935 report on land condition (see chapter 2) formalized the concerns of the BPA into concrete recommendations for a reform of the chieftaincy. The number of chiefs had increased dramatically over the previous decades, as the second and third sons of chiefs began settling relatively uninhabited areas in the foothills and highlands—villages where they would become chief. This complicated British efforts to disseminate and enforce centralized rules regarding land use, not to mention to collect taxes. Pim famously stated that, "there are now as many chiefs in Basutoland as there are stars in the heavens."<sup>51</sup> His report recommended a "gazetting" program that would mark an inflection point in the establishment of British indirect rule in Basutoland. According to the program, a significantly reduced number of chiefs—from twenty-five hundred to around twelve hundred—was officially recognized in the government gazette. "Gazetted" chiefs would be constrained in some ways, but newly empowered in others. For example, they were curtailed in their ability to issue some court fines, but because court fines were critical to chiefs' income, the national treasury compensated for this loss by issuing them a monthly salary. Chiefs not gazetted by the administration could not issue fines, solicit *matsema* labor, impound livestock, nor hold courts for serious criminal matters.<sup>52</sup>

This was the status of chiefs at independence from Britain in 1966, when Basotho would make important decisions about how to build a postcolonial democracy: they were seen as emblematic of Basotho culture and they possessed real power, but many corners of society were frustrated with their abuses of authority. The legitimacy and power of *puso* was in question.

#### *Institution 2: Councilors (Ntlatfatso)*

In advance of 1965 elections to form a postcolonial government, the British promoted a conservative party whose leader appeared most amenable to future cooperation with the British government.<sup>53</sup> The Basotho National Party (BNP) was led by Leabua Jonathan and narrowly won the elections over the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP), which had a more adversarial stance toward the British. The BCP won next election in 1970, but instead of ceding power, Jonathan declared a state of emergency, crafted a new constitution, and purged BCP supporters from government and civil service positions.<sup>54</sup> He would rule until being overthrown in a military coup in 1986.

Jonathan, who was a chief himself, was sympathetic to the chieftaincy, while his opposition was not. His supporters came to be known as the "National" movement, and the opposition was known as the "Congress" movement. The National movement was not only prochieftaincy and represented by the BNP, but also conservative and mostly Catholic. By contrast, the Congress movement was

TABLE 1 A Political Divide in Lesotho's Postcolonial National Politics

National Movement	Congress Movement
Prochieftaincy ( <i>puso</i> )	Prostatutory government ( <i>ntlafatso</i> )
Catholic	Protestant
Conservative	Liberal
Represented by the Basotho National Party (BNP)	Represented by Basotho Congress Party (BCP) and its off-shoots

sympathetic to the state government, represented by the BCP, liberal, and mostly Protestant. The National and Congress movements have become scrambled in today's electoral landscape,<sup>55</sup> but still have purchase for Basotho—especially older Basotho—many of whom self-identify as being on one side or the other of the debate.

Embodied in this differing posture toward the chieftaincy and the state government, these “National vs. Congress” party politics helped to install *puso* and *ntlafatso* as reference points for postindependence everyday life (see table 1). When Tefo asserts that Tankisi's livestock were impounded on *ntlafatso*-designated land, wresting it from chiefly control and rendering it a matter of state control, he was calling forward this partisan history.

It must be said that Jonathan supported the chieftaincy strategically, just as did the colonial government. For example, the village development committees (*likomiti tsa ntlafatso*) that he created as local political organizations for the BNP grew to take over certain responsibilities of chiefs, carrying forward his effort to entrench his power through “development,” as described by James Ferguson.<sup>56</sup> Immediately after the coup in 1986 these committees were given fuller legal authority, eroding chiefs' power in land and other matters.

When a BCP government came to power in 1993 after seven years of military rule, it built on that architecture and advanced “decentralization” as one of its primary objectives—eroding chiefs' power further by transforming those village development committees into “local government councils” to handle the work of government that the BCP felt chiefs had failed at.<sup>57</sup> Shortly after the election, they began developing councils that were legally established through the Local Government Act of 1997 to work alongside chiefs. The authority and reach of these councils were then extended in 2005 during the first local council elections and again in 2014 with the National Decentralisation Policy,<sup>58</sup> which increased their funding and responsibilities. It is significant, for example, that the councilor could not attend the grazing association meeting about Tankisi's impoundment because he was away at a training. There are few such trainings for chiefs. The process of “decentralization” has not always taken account of chiefs' input, leading to disputes and the perception among them that their power was being “whittled away.”<sup>59</sup>

Land has always been at the center of debates about the legitimacy of chiefs and the state government.<sup>60</sup> Common land tenure is regularly described by



development projects as one of the primary obstacles to national development,<sup>61</sup> and responsibility for managing land was partially transferred to councilors in 2005. But chiefs have worked to maintain their power of land allocation and rangeland management.<sup>62</sup> This is why Tankisi called upon the “chief’s order” to support his case against having his animals impounded. And, any initiative that looks like a threat to the commons will also be received with hostility by livestock owners (e.g., Motlokoa’s confrontation with Ntloko), who then reaffirm chiefly control over land.<sup>63</sup> For example, the Lesotho government has for decades (since a USAID-inspired effort) hoped to institute a grazing fee for the use of rangelands, which could be used for rangeland improvement and possibly to lower stocking rates.<sup>64</sup> But the fee has proven a third rail of Lesotho politics. During military rule in 1992, advocates came closest, getting the legal language drawn up and establishing the support of some politicians.<sup>65</sup> Livestock owners have resisted these fees as an assault on the commons and found general sympathy from chiefs (most of whom are also livestock owners).<sup>66</sup> After the government was elected during democratic elections in 1993, the responsible minister dropped the issue.<sup>67</sup>

More than a devolution of authority from chiefs to councilors, then, decentralization has resulted in an interdigitation and confusion of authority. As I’ve shown above in these dizzying historical movements, many of the rules and concepts that concern pasture management today predate colonial rule but were formalized under the British through their efforts to configure the chieftaincy in their favor, affirming chiefs’ power in land management. But chiefs were also undermined along the way after becoming perceived by some everyday Basotho as colonial sympathizers. Chiefs were then further undermined by the efforts of reformers from outside Lesotho and within who were frustrated by their enduring control over rangeland management. The result is that, today, chiefs are on the back foot. They are paid a small monthly stipend, but it is less than councilors receive. Chiefs are often depicted by government bureaucrats I spoke with as important community figures but sometimes unknowledgeable and uneducated, yet councilors are given regular trainings on new legislation or government programs—trainings that take place in hotels in the provincial capital, where participants are well fed.

### *Institution 3: Projects*

Overlaid upon this institutional matrix—the chieftaincy and the state government’s local councils—one finds a mosaic of political figures and institutions converging on rangelands with competing mandates, spatial reach, and social theory. Development and conservation organizations have come and gone, leveraging and manipulating these structures. From targeted workshops to multiyear initiatives like the Sponges Project, they endeavor to improve rangelands, whether by educating herders on rangeland management techniques, by proposing new institutions, or by proposing new *coalitions* of existing institutions.<sup>68</sup> Alongside them,

civil servants at the Ministry of Agriculture have served as “technical advisors” to chiefs and councilors, being ostensibly trained in the technical skills of rangeland assessment. This, even as the ministry fragmented over the years to cultivate networks of elite patronage, including the Department of Livestock, the Department of Rangeland Resources Management, the Department of Soil Conservation, the Department of Environment, and others, all of which have had something to contribute to rangeland management.

The water-export economy has only intensified this proliferation and fragmentation of rangeland authority. Grazing associations, for example, had been instituted intermittently until, as Stephen Turner puts it, a “more focused rationale” for them emerged with construction of the LHWP, and they were instituted country-wide.<sup>69</sup> Their legitimacy has been in question, however, as was seen when Motlokoa confronted the chair of the association, Ntloko. They lack true legal authority, after all, instead managing pastures *on behalf of* chiefs.

Not only that, but grazing associations have proliferated in such a way that they come into conflict. Associations with distinct territories and responsibilities were created in the 1980s by USAID; in the late 1990s by the Maloti-Drakensberg Trans-frontier Project; and in the 2000s by the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. One 2012 report by a sustainable land management project from the United Nations Development Programme proposed to “harmonize” these and other associations into a *new* set of user associations, arguing that, “Poor governance is the root cause of degradation of the range resource complex.”<sup>70</sup>

Bureaucratic reforms come to the rescue of bureaucratic reforms.

Recall the impoundment scene once again briefly. The assistant chair of the grazing association, Tankisi, had his livestock impounded in an area managed by that association (on behalf of the chief and councilor). The association was initiated by a foreign conservation effort in the late 1990s, but it went into a dormant state until being resuscitated by a more recent conservation project seeking to protect Lesotho’s water economy, the Sponges Project. Bureaucrats at the state government’s conservation ministry advocated the Sponges Project’s rotational grazing plan, inspired by Allan Savory’s controversial theories of rangeland ecological change. To make that grazing plan work, the ministry and the Sponges Project sought to reclassify the pasture where Tankisi’s animals were impounded, deeming it a state “development” (*ntlafatso*) area, outside of chiefly control and therefore subject to higher fines. It was a kind of ad hoc attempt at decentralization. Like the conservation bureaucrats, however, Tankisi also sought to creatively use and exploit differences and possibilities in these legal regimes.<sup>71</sup> He appealed to “governance” (*puso*), suggesting that the rangeland space was still under chiefly authority, and the impoundment was unlawful because it didn’t result from a chief’s order. With the councilor away at a training and just a few grazing association officials attending the meeting, the chief effectively sided with Tankisi, chiding him rather than fining him. Had the councilor been present, things may have gone

differently—they also sit on these associations.<sup>72</sup> The decision likely had consequences for how others would view the threat of impoundment and the authority of the grazing association. As a high-ranking member of the grazing association, Tankisi's actions threatened the institution from within, and possibly future institutions, too.

## CONCLUSION

Seemingly far away from the action of the water project, meetings and initiatives like the ones I described above are where the rubber meets the road for water production in Lesotho.<sup>73</sup> There, agencies try to reconcile the contradictions of water production: that it requires minimal livestock impact on the land, while leaving livestock production as one of just a few possible livelihoods for people living in the upstream catchments. And they do so atop the ruins of so many earlier efforts.

Developed while he worked as a colonial conservation officer in Rhodesia, Allan Savory's simple and compelling ecological story appealed to conservation workers in the way it privileged *management* as a tool for improving rangeland condition. It also solved a problem for them. Because the system envisioned *undergrazing* rather than *overgrazing* as a problem, the presence of humans and their livestock on the landscape was no longer an issue to be resolved.

Savory's approach acquired a significant following in Southern Africa in spite of its many problems and its many detractors. His ideas form the basis for several rangeland management consultancies, such as the one hired by the Khubelu Sponges Project. One long-standing conservation ministry bureaucrat told me about how he invited Savory to visit the ministry in 1988 and remembered the visit with fondness, even saving the letter that Savory wrote to him in response. Savory gave a keynote at the annual meetings of the major wool and mohair growers association in South Africa in 2013, too. In the audience was none other than the king of Lesotho, Letsie III, an avid sheep farmer himself. Their joint presence was highlighted in *The Silo-Lisiu*,<sup>74</sup> the dual-language, English-Sesotho livestock industry magazine sold in the checkout lines (where I found it) at most supermarkets in Lesotho.

The intensive form of management required by the Savory system conflicted with generations of herding practice, however, and was unlikely to succeed in the upland areas of concern for Lesotho's water production. The ministry officer Tefo must have known its prospects were grim. Even Sepheo from the Sponges Project must have known. No doubt, their offices' own spacetimes got in the way—the spending deadlines and project milestones and reporting cycles critically configured their work.<sup>75</sup> Like most projects, money needed to be spent during specific periods, or the project might have been discontinued. Sepheo used some of the early, exploratory phase funds for a consultancy, just as he was set to explore the options for rangeland improvement in Lesotho. That costly international

consultant armed with Savory's program helped set their agenda, captivating them with an ecological theory. A path was charted and there was no turning back. Even if the plan later seemed unworkable, there was not room within the project timeline to change course. And anyway, it was the ecological theory that drew Sepheo and his colleagues in. It articulated so well with a social world in which livestock production was critical to rural people, even if that social world would need to be adjusted: herders would need to become more active, and the resting of pastures would need to be enforced through higher fines.

The call for new and improved institutions is loud in Lesotho, as in other postcolonies where land is managed by traditional authorities. The water economy has only amplified them. With rangelands reconfigured as water-production infrastructures, social orders became unfit to the ecological order. Calls for reform partly stem from an influential Euro-American myth of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that institutional reform projects like the ones described above are antidotes to African traditionalism gone wrong. That myth suggests that Lesotho's political institutions, charged with executing postcolonial democratic procedures, are but hollow figures of the real thing—corruption, the tragedy of the commons, and patrimonialism continually undermining efforts at reform.<sup>76</sup> The Sponges Project's attempt to circumvent chiefly authority in imposing their conservation program was emblematic of this. Not only were fines in *puso*-designated land too low, they felt, but chiefs too often neglected to enforce them. Yet, the decline of chiefly power in Lesotho is not a story of "modernization" or the withering of tradition. It is one of the endless fragmentation and manipulation of Basotho social orders by colonists, development experts, and local politicians—but also of a substantive national debate among Basotho with differing opinions. Basotho society is heterogenous and conflicted, like any society. As Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch asks: "How far back do we have to go to find the stability alleged to be 'characteristic' of the [African] pre-colonial period?"<sup>77</sup>

It is not a failure of traditional institutions that makes reforms necessary. Instead, it is the failed reforms, programs, and projects strewn across Lesotho's landscapes that—through their partial success—have ensured the need for subsequent reforms. They also ensure the failure of those subsequent reforms.

Within and beyond these bureaucratic ecologies, herders and livestock owners make a living. I turn to their stories now.