

## HISTORY MATTERS

# Water and History in Southern Africa

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### Abstract

How has water shaped the history of a region that is bordered by ocean, brimming with ephemeral rivers, and yet prone to drought? This article explores water histories in Southern Africa over the past two hundred years. Using oral traditions, epic poetry, archival sources, and secondary anthropological and archaeological literature, I examine how Africans and Europeans related to, claimed, and used different bodies of water. In the first section I discuss how water was central to isiNguni conceptions of social and political life. In the second section I discuss how European empires used water to enclose and dispossess African land and to build hydropolitical colonial orders over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I conclude by reflecting on afterlives of these water histories in the present.

**Keywords:** Southern Africa; rivers; rain; drought; dams; environment; imperialism

The highveld region of Southern Africa, perhaps best known as the location of some of the richest seams of gold in the world, is an arid one, particularly during the dry winter months from May to August. The cradle of the gold deposits, the Witwatersrand Mountains and basin, also form part of a continental watershed across the southern tip of the continent. The streams that flow south off the geological breakpoint turn westward, and eventually join the Orange River which forms part of the international border between South Africa and Namibia, and drains into the Atlantic Ocean. The streams that flow north of the Rand turn eastward. They eventually merge and join the Crocodile and Limpopo Rivers that drain into the Indian Ocean, north of Maputo in Mozambique. In the human histories of these arid and semiarid landscapes, water has shaped life and death, and the rise and fall of communities, kingdoms, and empires.

In this article, I examine Southern African environmental histories centering water as a historical agent which has shaped the social and political life of precolonial communities and states, the making of the colonial order, and which continues to shape contemporary development concerns and international disputes. Political histories of Southern Africa tend to focus on land based processes of dispossession and colonial rule.<sup>1</sup> As a result, histories of colonialism and decolonisation can reproduce land-centric understandings of the past and present. However, water was central to conquest and the formation of early colonial states, and it remains a site of power in the present. Without an

<sup>1</sup>Scholars have focused on the relationship between land dispossession and sovereignty in the making of colonial orders in Southern Africa and across the world. See Richard Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Steven Press, *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Jill E. Kelly, *To Swim with Crocodiles: Land, Violence, and Belonging in South Africa, 1800–1996* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.14321/j.ctv8j4fj>; Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

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adequate analysis of water as an important environmental and historical site and force, we under-value how conquest reshaped both terrestrial and aquatic spaces.<sup>2</sup>

Conflicts over water have shaped major transformations and accelerations in Southern Africa over the past two hundred years. Water has shaped food security through the success or failure of crops due to rainfall. Its absence as drought has impacted patterns of movement, political rupture, and centralization. At a grand scale, the Atlantic and Indian Oceans shaped routes and networks of travel and exchange, facilitating the expansion of merchant and racial capitalism across the region. Water was both space and technology of conquest — central to the construction of race and difference, shaping imperial enclosures and the racialization of land ownership. Later still, water was essential for mining and processing diamond and gold in Southern Africa's mineral revolution, and the making of the early colonial order. Colonial powers used rivers to claim imperial possession and to demarcate colonial borders. And the control of waterways such as the Limpopo and its tributaries fomented conflict between indigenous groups and colonial powers. In the sacred realm, water has been central to social practices of healing.<sup>3</sup>

### IsiNguni Waters

Before the Witwatersrand became the center of a great gold rush and imperial land grab in the late nineteenth century, it had many other wondrous lives. Small rivers connected an arid but dynamic landscape of political fission and fusion, a place of movements and entanglements. Sovereignty was not tied to bounded territory, or to static ideas about political tradition and succession. One scholar has traced the wide and connective processes bringing together people and ideas through networks of incorporation and accommodation, arguing that a highveld dynamism and popular politics shaped a vast but interconnected region over the past five centuries.<sup>4</sup> The formation and dissolution of homesteads, villages, chiefdoms, and small states shaped a landscape of regular migration throughout the region from the Tugela River in the south across the Limpopo River, connecting the highveld and lowveld regions, and up to the Sabi River further to the north.<sup>5</sup> Sociopolitical structures were fluid and flexible — adapting to changing conditions, expanding, contracting, and incorporating different peoples in tandem with shifting ecological and economic processes.<sup>6</sup>

Southern Africa is a semiarid subtropical region with a high rainfall variability. Before 1900, climatic conditions supported widespread crop production and animal husbandry, particularly of cattle. Conditions were optimal for growing sorghum, a drought tolerant cultivar and staple food item across the region.<sup>7</sup> Due to climate variability, and the effect of widespread and recurrent drought, transhumance was practiced widely. Farmers moved their livestock along well-established routes between seasons and through climate regimes.<sup>8</sup> While the highveld and lowveld offered better conditions for farming, coastal regions also supported the cultivation of a wide variety of crops.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Recent work has explored the relationship between imperialism and water in South Africa, focusing in particular on the Indian Ocean and the port city of Durban during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Isabel Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022). Here I am interested in sounding out an earlier history reaching back to the eighteenth century, and across broader aquatic landscapes than just the coast and port.

<sup>3</sup>Penelope S. Bernard, "Living Water' in Nguni Healing Traditions, South Africa," *Worldviews* 17 (2013): 138–49.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup>Alan Kent Smith, "The Struggle for Control of Southern Mocambique, 1720–1835" (PhD Dissertation, Los Angeles, University of California, 1970), 11.

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Eldredge, *Kingdoms and Chiefdoms of Southern Africa - Oral Traditions and History, 1400–1830* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>Mphethe I. Tongwane, Teke S. Ramotubei, and Mokhele E. Moeletsi, "Influence of Climate on Conflicts and Migrations in Southern Africa in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries," *Climate* 10, no. 8 (2022): 2–3.

<sup>8</sup>P. J. O'Farrell et al., "Human Response and Adaptation to Drought in the Arid Zone: Lessons from Southern Africa," *South African Journal of Science* 105, no. 1–2 (2009): 34–39.

<sup>9</sup>In 1784, Friar Francisco de Santa Teresa noted that the land close to Maputo Bay produced excellent rice in abundance, plenty of legumes of which there were diverse kinds, beans, broad beans, peas, grains and seeds, large cabbages, lettuces,

Droughts were widespread and frequent. They disrupted traditional agriculture, were sometimes followed by famine, and prompted migration in search of water to support livestock and crop production.<sup>10</sup> In general, dry times were historically intense. Food insecurity, famine, and conflict tended to increase the stakes and temperature of political and economic relations, and sociopolitical change could accelerate. The beginning of the nineteenth century was marked by one such period, remembered as *sekoboto* in Sesotho and *mahlatlule* in isiZulu oral traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the arid ecology of Southern Africa, rain and inland waters were a central feature of isiNguni politics and cosmology. Rainmaking rituals infused sociopolitical organization and religious cosmologies, entangling communities, and politics across vast distances from the Mzimvubu River emaMpondoseni through kwaZulu and Eswatini to Maputo Bay. Bikwayo ka Noziwawa recalled in the early twentieth century how amaZulu communities made rain during the nineteenth. In times of drought, black oxen would be killed at Nobamba and Siklebeni, and at the burial sites of chiefs and kings, where people would *ukuketa*, asking the ancestors to bring rain. Rainmakers from Hamu's district and amaNdwandwe country were remembered for making good rain. However, in times of deep crisis, they "sent" to Eswatini, where the "sky thunders greatly," and the rainmakers were especially renowned. According to Bikwayo, amaSwati "get rain from among Dokolwane's people near the Nkomati River," towards the east near Maputo Bay.<sup>12</sup> Among Setswana, isiNdebele, and Sepedi-speaking communities, graves of previous chiefs were sites for rainmaking in times of drought.<sup>13</sup> Rainmaking also tied together agriculturalist and hunter-gatherer communities. Since the early to mid-1700s, amaMpondomise incorporated hunter-gatherer rainmakers into new-year and first-fruits ceremonies to provide legitimacy to the ruling lineage and naturalize their authority.<sup>14</sup>

Like rain, rivers have been central to isiNguni conceptions of political and social well-being and sovereignty. In Mazisi Kunene's account of a fictional meeting between uShaka Inkosi yamaZulu and Morena e Moholo oa Basotho Moshoeshe, the kings convey to each other warmth and friendship. And the "People said it was through Ancestral guidance / That the two great houses should give to each other water."<sup>15</sup> During the ceremony of the Queen Mother's return in *Emperor Shaka the Great*, the high priest Mqalane completed sacred rites at the riverbank, and said:

As you flow away, great river,  
Carry with you all the debris of our lives;  
Let us sink deep into the bowels of the ocean.  
Begin again where the source is pure and is of the earth.  
This way, too, each generation of humankind begins.  
Do not let the sun cut your body over the stone.

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onions, and sugar cane. He noted that sugar was not processed from the cane. 'Plano e Relação da Baía denominada de Lourenço Marques, na costa do Natal ao Norte do Cabo da Boa Esperança. junto ao Promontório, na latitude de 26 graus; e não menos das terras adjacentes, seus habitantes, Reis, rios, comércio e costumes', por Frei Francisco de Santa Teresa, 1784. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon, Portugal – Moçambique, cx. 47, doc 16.

<sup>10</sup>Over the nineteenth century there were six major drought occasions across southern Africa: 1820–27; 1831–35; 1844–51; 1857–65; 1877–86; and 1894–99. M. D. D. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 254.

<sup>11</sup>Tongwane, Ramotubei, and Moeletsi, "Influence of Climate," 5.

<sup>12</sup>James Stuart, *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Colin Webb and John Wright (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1976), 69.

<sup>13</sup>Retief Müller and Frans Kruger, "Rain and Water Symbolism in Southern African Religious Systems: Continuity and Change," *Exchange* 42, no. 2 (2013): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341261>.

<sup>14</sup>Gavin Whitelaw, "'Only Fatness Will Bring Rain': Agriculturalist Rainmaking and Hunter-Gatherers," *Southern African Humanities* 30 (2017): 119.

<sup>15</sup>Mazisi Kunene, *Emperor Shaka The Great: A Zulu Epic*, trans. Mazisi Kunene, New Edition (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017), 227.

May your waters give nourishment to the earth.  
 On the soft shores the seed of our future is buried.  
 He took the soil that was mixed with plants  
 And threw it into the centre of the river.  
 By this rite he called on the earth and water and plants to merge.

...

Mqalane made the king repeat the sacred words.  
 When he finished he put on his forehead the mark of the sun,  
 Making the king declare: "I swear by all my Ancestors  
 This land is not mine; all in it belongs to them.  
 The power to rule is not mine, but for the Forefathers."<sup>16</sup>

Popular and sovereign power, as well as conceptions of time and history were entangled not only with water ecologies, but with plants, the earth, and the dead. The final proclamation by the king attests to the foundation of sovereign power in the continued approval of the ancestors.

Water has also been a central component of isiNguni ritual practice. While water was an important ecological factor shaping ideas about agricultural security and fertility, social, and political organization, it was also a medium and site of healing, which gave life to the dead. The creative power of the healer in isiNguni healing traditions is often figured in relation to water.<sup>17</sup> Healers are sometimes called beneath the surface of bodies of "living water," including deep pools, natural lakes, and waterfalls in order to obtain the practice and knowledge of healing. Ancestors speak to healers within living water, communicating and reproducing social order and memory.<sup>18</sup>

With a few exceptions, the ocean did not play a major role in conceptions of isiNguni social and political life. While the region to the south of Maputo Bay and east of the Drakensberg is relatively fertile, the "immediate coastal area was largely avoided by the inhabitants of the region who had no need for fish to provide protein in their diet."<sup>19</sup> In some instances, it was considered dangerous. According to oral tradition, the Baloyi migrated along the Limpopo River to the coast of the Indian Ocean. However, when they saw the ocean, they were uneasy, and turned back inland towards where they had travelled from.<sup>20</sup> Xitsonga origin stories hold that the first humans emerged from reeds far in land, and travelled down the valley of the Limpopo River to the coastal region in remote times.<sup>21</sup>

IsiNguni waters were shaped by the ubuntu ecosophical tradition. Mogobe Ramose has theorized the ethical maxim *motho ke motho ka batho* or *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye bantu* which is found in Bantu languages across Southern Africa. It is a maxim based on the ontological view that "motion is the principle of be-ing," and at its center is the "obligation to recognize, respect, protect, and promote life in all its manifestations, including the sphere of human relations."<sup>22</sup> This is evident in its

<sup>16</sup>Kunene, 347–48.

<sup>17</sup>Here I refer to David Schoenbrun's distinction between the creative power of healers and the instrumental power of kings in the Great Lakes region before 1500. *Kubandwa* was a form of spirit possession and an institution which could operate on a territorial scale as part of a broader healing complex, combined instrumental and creative power through discursive control over key social problems such as fecundity and fertility, and offered a competitive threat to the centralization of power at the king's court or tribunal. David Lee Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 245.

<sup>18</sup>Bernard, "Living Water."

<sup>19</sup>Newitt, *A History of Mozambique*, 149.

<sup>20</sup>Henri Alexandre Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe* (2nd edn, London: Macmillan, 1927), 22.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>22</sup>Mogobe B. Ramose, "Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho, an African Perspective on Popular Sovereignty and Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*, eds. Leigh K. Jenco, Murad Idris, and Megan C. Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 260–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190253752.013.43>.

ecosophical dimension in the opening stanzas of Kunene's *Unodumehlezi Kamenzi*, during a feast at Jama kaNdaba's royal house.<sup>23</sup> An *isangoma* or diviner is speaking at the royal house, offering prophecy with the voices of the ancestors who speak through her. Kunene renders the lines as follows in his English translation of the epic:

Look! The fierce contest of the hurrying rivers;  
 One river swallows the other near the ocean,  
 Turning itself into a gigantic river  
 To enter the ocean triumphantly  
 Provoking a towering mountain of waves.<sup>24</sup>

The diviner uses the river and ocean as metaphors to explore the movement of political and social organization among amaZulu. The river is a metaphor for time, the movement of history, and the relationship between the living, the dead, and the not yet born. It is an example of the centrality of the ubuntu conception of motion as the principle of being, as well as its ecosophical dimension of being within the universe as a complex wholeness involving the multidimensional movement and interaction of entities, as theorized by Ramose.<sup>25</sup>

### Colonial Waters

Whereas isiNguni sovereignties were linked primarily to inland and fresh waterscapes, imperial power was often conceived in relation to oceanic waters. Conceptions of imperial sovereignty were fundamentally linked to maritime technology and power. Occupation, jurisdiction, borders — these ideas were articulated in relation to the ocean, ship technology, hydrology, and the nascent international legal order.<sup>26</sup> The mid-eighteenth century intensified interimperial competition on a global scale. This stimulated interest in and attention to the problem of territorial boundaries, and strategic enclaves and corridors of control.<sup>27</sup> Euro-American empires developed new modes and networks of movement and connection, structures of power, and conceptions of difference.

Of the many ways European conquest and colonialism remade African environments, several watery processes were significant: hydrographic surveying, riverine border-making, hydrological engineering, and dam building. Hydrographic surveying constituted a legal tool of empire used to dispossess African land and impose Eurocentric conceptions of territorial sovereignty.<sup>28</sup> For example, the hydrographical and geographical survey conducted by the British along the East African coast in the 1820s was used throughout the nineteenth century to contest imperial

<sup>23</sup>Jama kaNdaba was the leader of amaZulu in the late eighteenth century (1763–81), preceding Senzangakhona kaJama, father of Shaka kaSenzagakhona.

<sup>24</sup>Kunene, *Emperor Shaka The Great: A Zulu Epic*, 2. For the isiZulu version, see Mazisi Kunene, *Unodumehlezi Kamenzi: I-Ephiki yesiZulu* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>25</sup>Mogobe Ramose, "Ecosophical Aspects of Botho/Humanness in African Philosophy," in *Humanism Toward the Third Millennium II*, ed. Fons Elders (Brussels: Vrije Universiteit Brussel Press, 2001); Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, Revised Edition (Harare: Mond Books Publishers, 2005).

<sup>26</sup>Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). Carl Schmitt's *Land and Sea* offers useful insight into the Eurocentric conception of sovereignty, power, and space in relation to the dynamic between land and ocean. European sea powers were constituted through their domination of the sea through navigational and nautical technologies via the ship. Through the compass and the gun, European powers transformed the ship into a technology of global conquest and warfare. Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea - A World-Historical Meditation*, ed. Russell A. Berman and Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, trans. Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2015), 22–23.

<sup>27</sup>Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>28</sup>For more on material and technological tools of European empires see Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

sovereignty and claim territory from the Portuguese.<sup>29</sup> Colonial powers also used rivers to mark the boundaries of their territories — the Orange River separated colonial South West Africa from the Union of South Africa while the Limpopo defined the limits between Bechuanaland, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa. Border-making differentiated, expropriated, and racialized, producing Africans as colonial subjects in their own land, and limited indigenous mobilities practiced since time immemorial through invented boundaries.<sup>30</sup>

Using hydrological engineering, colonial powers projected their force and authority further inland. The construction of dams and irrigation infrastructures ushered in a hydrological revolution central not only to the material but also to the ideological project of empire. White power tied itself to flowing, ordered, and industrializing waterways. Colonists were altogether frustrated by the “hydrological deficits” of Southern Africa’s arid landscapes. In the late 1950s, the Rhodesian government built Lake Kariba by damming the Zambesi River, creating the second largest water reservoir in the world at the time. White colonists celebrated what they perceived to be the beauty of the lake, and, after reconciling its “artificial waterscape” with the “myth of wild Africa,” used it to integrate “themselves more deeply than ever into Africa’s environment.”<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most conspicuous examples of the colonial will to manage and control Southern Africa’s arid waterscapes were the major infrastructural damming projects of the high-imperial era. Hydroelectric dam projects marked a significant moment in the history of twentieth century water infrastructure and colonial rule. Colonial dams displaced communities, sometimes flooding agricultural land or sacred burial sites. They also depended on regimes of horrendous labor exploitation.<sup>32</sup>

The Cahora Bassa hydroelectric project in central Portuguese Mozambique was the largest of these. Built in the 1970s, the dam constituted the last major colonial infrastructure project on the continent.<sup>33</sup> Because Southern Africa’s hydropower potential is limited by regional aridity, the project drew interest and intervention from beyond colonial Mozambique’s borders. In South Africa, only the Orange River “carries enough water to supply medium-scale hydropower stations such as the one at the Gariep Dam, which has a capacity of 360 megawatts.”<sup>34</sup> There are several other smaller hydropower stations including the Muela hydropower station in Lesotho. However, South Africa had to look beyond its borders to meet the increasing demand for electricity sourced from hydropower in the mid-late twentieth century. Through financing and construction, South African interests contributed to the deterritorialization of Cahora Bassa, incorporating the dam as “an outpost of [South African] empire.” Even today, “most of the electricity generated [at Cahora Bassa] is exported to South Africa, at a price that remains a state secret.”<sup>35</sup>

African communities and polities resisted imperial and colonial ecological logics. And despite major transformations in waterscapes across Southern Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth

<sup>29</sup>Anjuli Webster, “Inter-Imperial Entanglement: The British Claim to Portuguese Delagoa Bay in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of World History* 35, no. 1 (2024): 1–20.

<sup>30</sup>For more on colonial racism, and the denial of African humanness, see Mogobe Ramose, “An African Perspective on Justice and Race,” *Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy* 3 (2001), <http://them.polylog.org/3/frm-en.htm>.

<sup>31</sup>David McDermott Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), xiii.

<sup>32</sup>The Kariba dam displaced 57,000 Batonga farmers, “destroying more habitat than any single human action ever had before.” David McDermott Hughes, “Whites and Water: How Euro-Africans Made Nature at Kariba Dam,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, no. 4 (2006): 823–38.

<sup>33</sup>Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development: Cahora Bassa and Its Legacies in Mozambique, 1965–2007* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013).

<sup>34</sup>Sören Scholvin, “South Africa’s Energy Policy: Constrained by Nature and Path Dependency,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 1 (2014): 191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2014.889361>.

<sup>35</sup>Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, “Extending South Africa’s Tentacles of Empire: The Deterritorialisation of Cahora Bassa Dam,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 3 (2015): 541–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2015.1039408>.

centuries, there remained continuities in indigenous water praxis. For example, *mhondoro* spirit mediums and rainmaking were prominent in the Dande region of Zimbabwe through the colonial and postcolonial eras. The relationship between mediums and guerrilla fighters in the war for independence drew on and reproduced relations between ancestors and the living, the past and the present. This association continued, if transformed, in the relationship between the Zimbabwean state and *mhondoro* after independence.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

Water — as rivers, dams, rain, and drought — has been central to colonial and postcolonial state making.<sup>37</sup> Rivers and hydrological surveying were important in interimperial disputes over the definition of borders in the nineteenth century, and hydroelectric power was central to the making of the colonial order in twentieth-century Southern Africa. IsiNguni social and political life developed in relation with the shifting climate and ecology of the region. Political structures were necessarily flexible in order to better respond to and manage regular cycles of drought and ecological crisis. However, these plural and fluid sets of human, infrastructural, and environmental entanglements were rapidly bounded, centralized, and monetized through the making of the early colonial and racial capitalist orders. In the process, colonial powers constructed and imposed inhuman borders, while seeking to control and manage African waterscapes. In the process, they curtailed the elasticity and resilience of indigenous modes of accessing fresh water in an arid land.

Understanding water histories is crucial for making sense of the present moment, shaped as it is by scarcity and inequality. We live in a world in which industrial and commercial activities, including mining, agriculture, manufacturing, and energy production are increasingly water-intensive.<sup>38</sup> Both tangible and intangible pasts configure contemporary water resource management in this context.<sup>39</sup> Fresh water is increasingly corralled, channelled, and transported to urban and industrial areas to those who can pay a higher price for it. And yet major water infrastructure projects do not necessarily economically benefit the communities where they are built, or even secure access to water for them. For example, the Batonga communities living alongside the Kariba Dam in Zimbabwe “have minimal access to the dam’s fisheries” and experience “perpetual water shortages.”<sup>40</sup>

An urgent regional issue is access to fresh water itself.<sup>41</sup> Decreasing rainfall and increasing water pollution are escalating shortages in potable water across Southern Africa.<sup>42</sup> Some hydrological projections estimate that “water-rich Lesotho will enter a period of scarcity by 2062,” while others predict “grave water stress could be reached even earlier.”<sup>43</sup>

The stakes of access to water in the region are clear in international tensions surrounding the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP). In 1986 Lesotho and South Africa signed a treaty securing a multibillion-dollar project to build dams and tunnels to transport water from Lesotho’s highlands to South Africa’s industrial and commercial center in the arid highveld.<sup>44</sup> The first of the

<sup>36</sup>David Lan, *Guns & Rain: Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: J. Currey, 1985).

<sup>37</sup>Joost Fontein, *Remaking Mutirikwi: Landscape, Water and Belonging in Southern Zimbabwe* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2015), 11.

<sup>38</sup>Colin Hoag, *The Fluvial Imagination: On Lesotho’s Water-Export Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 2.

<sup>39</sup>Johann Tempelhoff, Heather Hoag, and Maurits Ertsen, “Water History and the Modern,” *Water History* 1, no. 2 (2009): 82.

<sup>40</sup>Terence M. Mashingaidze, “The Kariba Dam: Discursive Displacements and the Politics of Appropriating a Waterscape in Zimbabwe, 1950s–2017,” *Limina* 25, no. 1 (2019): 1.

<sup>41</sup>Laurence C. Smith, *Rivers of Power: How a Natural Force Raised Kingdoms, Destroyed Civilizations, and Shapes Our World* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2020), 59.

<sup>42</sup>Oscar Gakuo Mwangi, “Hydropolitics versus Human Security: Implications of South Africa’s Appropriation of Lesotho’s Highlands Water,” *Daedalus* 150, no. 4 (2021): 182, [https://doi.org/10.1162/daed\\_a\\_01879](https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01879).

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>44</sup>Hoag, *Fluvial Imagination*, 1.

dams, the concrete arch Katse Dam, was completed ten years later in 1996. In 1998, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), under the auspices of “counter[ing] a military rebellion triggered by vote-rigging allegations,” sent a clandestine force of paratroopers in attack helicopters to capture the Katse Dam.<sup>45</sup> Seventeen Basotho and two South African soldiers died in the skirmish, which took place far distant from any elections unrest. Only after the dam was captured and secure did the SANDF force proceed to Maseru to quell the unrest, the apparent reason for the attack. The Katse Dam was the first of five planned to “impound runoff from the headwaters of the Senqu (Orange) River and, via transfer tunnels, deliver some 2.2 billion cubic meters of water annually to Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Vereeniging, the industrial heartland of South Africa.”<sup>46</sup> One scholar has argued that the export of Lesotho’s abundant water to South Africa’s industrial heartland “reinscribes the racial nationalism that has long governed the subcontinent.”<sup>47</sup>

Waterscapes continue to be sites of political contestation, sources of power, and fields of risk. Colonial waterscapes, infrastructures, and regulatory frameworks established during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continue to shape political ecologies and restrict human mobilities in Southern Africa today. If we do not properly grasp the political and material histories of water in Southern Africa, we risk misunderstanding the acute crises of equitable access to and management of fresh water in a rapidly drying world. The history of water in Southern Africa over the past two hundred years has relevance for navigating contemporary problems of resource equity and transboundary water governance in a water-scarce and drought-prone region. And in grappling with the environmental afterlives of empire, we might learn how to better manage human and non-human networks in a world of pronounced ecological crisis.

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<sup>45</sup>“SA’s Lesotho Massacre ‘Cover-Up,’” *The Mail & Guardian*, 17 Mar. 2000, <https://mg.co.za/article/2000-03-17-sas-lesotho-massacre-cover-up/>.

<sup>46</sup>Smith, *Rivers of Power*, 61.

<sup>47</sup>Hoag, *Fluvial Imagination*, 4.