

# Hydropolitics versus Human Security: Implications of South Africa's Appropriation of Lesotho's Highlands Water

*Oscar Gakuo Mwangi*

favorable to the project. In this sense, it was an early warning of water wars, in which powerful states pressure their weaker neighbors for access to this increasingly scarce resource. It also reflects South Africa's long history of expanding its tentacles of empire in search of water, and energy derived from water, throughout the region. The Cahora Bassa Dam in Mozambique, as discussed by Allen Isaacman in this issue of

Tensions increased in December 1985 with the deaths of thirteen White South Africans killed by explosives allegedly planted by Lesotho-based ANC fighters.<sup>7</sup> Over the next two decades, the Lesotho ruler, under growing pressure from the Organization of African Unity and the broader international community, increasingly spoke out against the abuses of apartheid. Jonathan also expressed increased reluctance to proceed with negotiations on the transfer of water, although he did agree to a feasibility study in 1983. By 1985, he was publicly articulating strong reservations about the economic and environmental costs of the LHWP. To ensure his nation's sovereignty, he insisted that his government should retain exclusive control over the project and determine the amount of water exported to South Africa. Pretoria rejected both demands.<sup>8</sup>

For the apartheid regime, the situation was becoming intolerable. ANC freedom fighters had captured the imagination of millions of South Africans and water scarcity was posing serious challenges to its plans for industrial growth.<sup>9</sup> In December 1985, Pretoria ratcheted up the pressure, imposing an economic boycott on the land-locked country and intensifying anti-ANC activity raids inside Lesotho. This economic and political instability precipitated a bloodless military coup in Lesotho on January 20, 1986. South Africa immediately recognized General Justin Lekhanya's military government, many of whose members had a relationship with South African security forces, and lifted economic sanctions.<sup>10</sup> For its part, the junta quickly restored relations with South Africa and expelled ANC militants, prompting many critics to condemn Lekhanya's regime as a puppet government. Within nine months, it resumed negotiations on the transfer of water, and Lesotho succumbed to most of South Africa's demands. In return for increasing amounts of water at the end of each phase of the project, Lesotho was to receive modest annual payments and assistance in constructing the project and hydroelectric stations. The new military authorities and South Africa signed the LHWP Treaty on October 24, 1986, thus formally establishing the policy of the commodification of Lesotho's water.<sup>11</sup>

In essence, two illegitimate governments, the apartheid and military governments of South Africa and Lesotho, respectively, signed an international treaty concerning a transboundary resource. The close timing between the military coup in January 1986 and the signing of the treaty in October the same year has led several scholars to conclude that there was a direct linkage between the two events and that the military coup was, in fact, a South African sponsored "water coup."<sup>12</sup> Whatever the case, it is clear that Lesotho became further entrapped in South Africa's tentacles of empire. The treaty spelled out how the Senqu-Orange River and its tributaries would be diverted to supply the water needs of South Africa. It stipulated the design, construction, operation, storage capacity, and maintenance of the five dams in the Lesotho Highlands and the 200 kilometers of tunnels connecting the two countries and defined the annual minimum quan-

tities of water to be transferred to South Africa. The text also affirmed that the treaty will be reviewed at intervals of twelve years, calculated from the date it was signed.<sup>13</sup>

fense Forces (SANDF) launched a major attack with the stated objective of restoring peace and stability.<sup>17</sup> It is not inconsequential that one of the SANDF's first objectives was to secure control of the strategic Katse Dam, an area not controlled by

*Hydropolitics versus Human Security*



women as well as the health and well-being of the region's rivers. Those whose ancestors' graves were relocated had to travel long distances to pay homage to the deceased.<sup>37</sup>

Included in the litany of complaints are the traumatic social and psychological effects many of the displaced experienced. Elders complained of the diminished significance of kinship groups and social networks, strained family relationships, devalued belief systems, and a heightened sense of collective insecurity within their community.<sup>38</sup> One elder man captured this sense of collective anxiety: "[the dead ones] are going to rise up against us and say 'You leave us here so we can be drowned by the water?'"<sup>39</sup> A study conducted on the sociopsychological impact upon the resettled community of the Molika-lika area displaced by the Mohale Dam concluded that those who had been moved felt anxious and extremely vulnerable in their new environment.<sup>40</sup> They also stressed that competition for the best available agricultural or grazing lands or for forest products intensified conflict within and between communities. In some cases, the scarcity of grazing lands led to pitched battles among herders.<sup>41</sup>

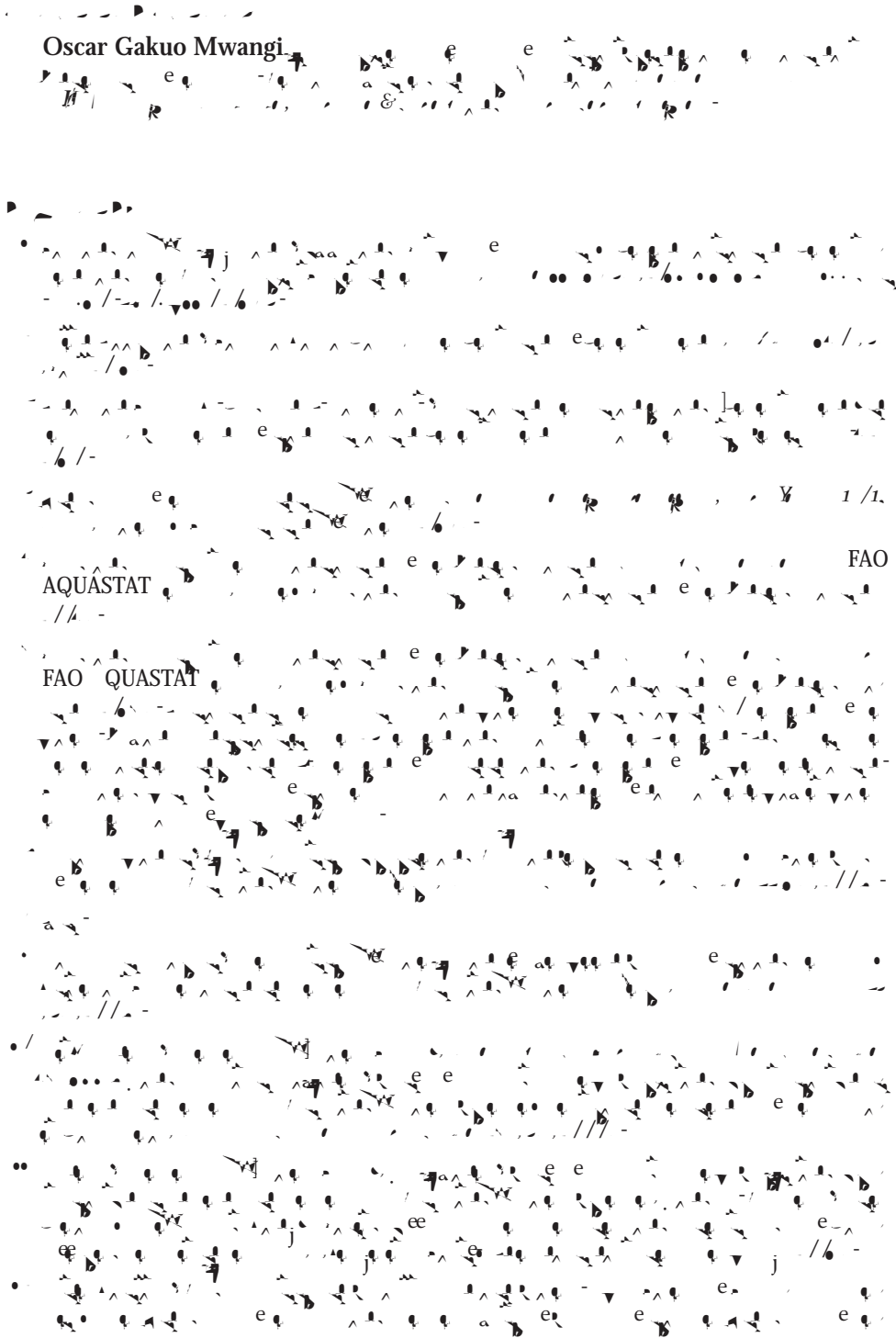
Both before and during each phase of the LHWP, state-appointed interdisciplinary teams of ecologists, hydrologists, biologists, engineers, social scientists, and construction company consultants generated lengthy reports assessing the potential impact of the project. They concluded that the environmental impact would be minimal and dismissed the critics' concerns.<sup>42</sup> As was often the case in such large development schemes, these experts' projections proved wrong. The LHWP has caused massive environmental degradation, which has led to the destruction of natural resources such as soil, water, and various species of flora and fauna. Consider the far-reaching impact of project-related soil erosion. Rivers downriver from the dams became nutrient-starved since most of the minerals and other organic material in the water were blocked by the walls of the dams. To compensate, the waterways pulled rich alluvial soils from the shoreline, eroding the banks. Poor drainage systems along project roads meant that runoff from these ditches created wider gullies. This, in turn, forced farmers to plow against the hillside contour, further exacerbating the erosion. Due to the decrease in grazing lands in the Highlands, herds of livestock are now concentrated on a significantly smaller area, depleting the soils there as well.

Much of the most valuable flora, including wild vegetables, medicinal plants, and valued grasses, ended up underwater as well. The dietary effects on the resettled communities were significant. Households were no longer able to gather wild vegetables from the inundated areas, which were significant nutritional supplements to their starch-based diet. They now either eat fewer vegetables, or must travel longer distances to gather them. As previously noted, many of the 175 species of medicinal plants disappeared from the area completely or became so scarce that it is no longer viable to search for them, as is the case with the leloli grasses.<sup>43</sup>





Oscar Gakuo Mwangi





*Hydropolitics versus Human Security*

