

Uncovering the Spiritual Dimension of the Basotho Objection to Resettlement

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Abstract

Experience shows that Africans are often, if not always, opposed to land-related projects which include resettlement as one of their concomitant effects. One project that has recently met this kind of opposition from some of the local people in Lesotho is the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. This is the project aimed at harnessing the water resources of the Highlands of Lesotho to the mutual benefit of both Lesotho and South Africa. This paper attempts to look at what spiritually may be taken as what underlies such opposition. The paper argues that underlying the Basotho's refusal to be resettled is the fact that for Africans there is more to land than appears on the surface. It attempts to explain this in terms of African holistic cosmology. The paper argues specifically that Basotho's veneration of their ancestors' graveyards, the dependence of the living upon their ancestors for their material welfare, and the Basotho's traditional healers' mystical identification with some aspects of nature, all of which give the spiritual value to the land, are the source of the problem.

Introduction

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project is one of the most ambitious and comprehensive schemes at present being undertaken in the Southern African region. A treaty on this project between the governments of Lesotho and South Africa was signed in Maseru, Lesotho on October 1986. The project is aimed at harnessing the water resources of the Highlands of Lesotho to the mutual benefit of both South Africa and Lesotho (LHDA 1990).

It is expected that when the project is completed, each of the two countries

will be allowed the opportunity to undertake ancillary development in its territory, including the development of other projects to generate hydroelectric power, the provision of water for irrigation, portable water supply and other uses and the development of tourism, fisheries and other projects for economic and social development (LHDA 1990).

An autonomous statutory body which has the responsibility for the implementation, operation and maintenance of that part of the project situated in Lesotho has been set up. This is known as the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA). The LHDA has implemented an Environmental Action Plan to ensure, as required by the Treaty, that the standard of living of individuals and communities affected by the project is improved (Moeti 1999; LHDA 1990).

As one of its sub-plans, the Environmental Action Plan has embarked upon what has been called Compensation Plan. The Plan includes, amongst other things, compensation policy and regulations for various losses incurred by those whose properties are affected by the Project. Examples of such losses are houses and trees in which case their compensation entails their being replaced by new ones of the same kind on a new site. Other losses include arable and grazing land. The compensation for these comes in the form of periodic cash payments since they cannot easily be replaced due to lack of readily available sites for their replacement. Graves constitute the final category of losses. To compensate for these, the LHDA pays for all costs incurred when exhumations and reburials are carried out (LHDA 1990). With the implementation of the Compensation Plan one would expect that there would be no problem in as far as the process of resettlement is concerned, but this has not been always the case. Many of those whose villages have been affected by the Project have shown some reluctance over their resettlement regardless of how much, materially speaking, they are compensated.¹

What then is the real problem? The answer to this question is found in what was said by the villagers of both Ha Mpiti and Ha Mohale (some of the villages affected by the Project), when they mentioned the loss of the graves of their ancestors as their excuse for refusing to be resettled.² One important fact to note here is that these villagers voiced this even though they were quite aware of the LHDA policy on exhumations and reburials. The policy made it very clear that LHDA would provide such items as a coffin, a grave stone, an animal, and the provision of supplies for a ceremony to mark the occasion (LHDA 1990). One important observation to note here is the materialistic approach used by the LHDA when dealing with the issue of compensating communities affected by the project. In fact, as Lenka has correctly observed, "the whole compensation scheme was designed to compensate material things, not anything else...The social aspects have been neglected" (Lenka 2006). The question is: Were these villagers really referring to the loss of the physical graves or to something else? This is the question which this paper will attempt to address in the following pages.

Approach

Reflecting critically on the information given by some of the villagers affected by the Project on their stance against resettlement (as found in the website given above) and on any other relevant information found in the LHDA documents on the Project, this paper will use an African idea of holistic cosmology to explain theoretically what should be seen as the underlying reasons behind the villagers' said objection.

An African Holistic Cosmology

For Africans, land is not a mere lifeless material commodity; but as Kiarie correctly puts it:

In African thought, all things visible and invisible have a life. Nothing can be termed inanimate because everything that is has the ability to affect the life of another being or thing, especially so, the life of man. Everything has some force, some power which can be tapped to increase or decrease the life span of man. These forces are organized into a hierarchy of interrelationships. Above all is God - creator of all things, then divinities, spirits, ancestors based on age; then man, animals, vegetation and other minor forces each reinforcing each other. The reality of their existence consists in their ability to reinforce each other in their web of interaction. (Kiarie 1979: 27-8)

As people living in a different continent with its own unique life situation and geography, Africans have their own worldview which makes them perceive reality differently from the way people in other parts of the world with different life situation and geography do. Africans maintain a monistic view of reality, meaning that for them, what is out there is a closed system of cause and effect. It is a single integrated totality of cause and effect in which different components (including humans) hang harmoniously together like threads of a spider's web. In fact, for them, as Tempels notes,

Nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. The world of forces is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network. (Tempels 1969: 60)

In this kind of a worldview some aspects of nature are separated out in order to give them a symbolic content or relationship. This makes it possible for them to

be reintegrated at a level beyond that of their actually experienced relationships, thereby acquiring religious significance (Cumpsty 1991: 276).

Most land-related problems experienced in Africa relate to this way of conceiving reality. African “cosmic view, that is, a way of perceiving the universe and life in general in relation to oneself” (Machobane 1995: 1) creates some kind of spiritual relationship between people and their land. This is not the kind of relationship anybody can just disturb without meeting a serious opposition from the occupants of the land concerned.

In Tanzania, the failure of the German colonial rule to realize what the land meant to Africans, led to the *Maji Maji* revolt of 1905-1907 (Iliffe 1967). In Kenya, this resulted in the emergence of the *Mau Mau* uprising of 1952-1956 (Itote 1967). Expressing the importance of land from the African perspective, President Kenyatta (as quoted by Ray) once said:

It supplies them with the material needs of life, through which spiritual and mental contentment is achieved. Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors lie buried... it is the soil that feeds the child through a life time, and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirits of the dead for eternity. Thus, the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwells in or on it. (Ray 1976: 166)

In South Africa, those who were forcefully removed from their homes by the Apartheid regime are now reclaiming their land. It is significant that they insist on being given back their land even when promised resettlement in better places in terms of infrastructure. Such an insistence can only be understood as having its basis in the significance the African people attach to the land, wherein the remains of their ancestors are buried. Even the exhumations carried out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had more to do with such significance. Here it has to be remembered that:

It is believed by Africans that a person whose dead body is not buried, that is, with due and correct rites, will not be admitted to the abode of the blessed departed ones, and therefore will become a wanderer, living an aimless, haunting existence. (Idowu 1974: 174)

Many of those exhumed through the help of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had not had proper and/or decent burials. Africans generally believe that it is only through a decent burial that includes a complete observance of all

burial rituals that the departed are enabled to enter the glory of ancestorhood. Therefore those who have not been properly buried and have as a result, failed to enter the glory of ancestorhood, are believed to be of no spiritual value to their relatives. They are believed to end up becoming lingering spirits that haunt the living.

In Swaziland, Swazi cultural beliefs in land's spiritual dimension "played a significantly retarding role in the advancement of technology in agriculture" (Sikhondze 1999: 109). They believed that the use of the plough and the tractor, both of which were not known to their ancestors, would profane the land and thus make it infertile. According to Sikhondze:

Traditionally, each planting season had to receive ancestral blessings, through sacrificial ceremonies which were conducted for Swazi cultivators to pray to ancestors for prosperity. Closely associated with this belief was that ancestral spirits had control over the use of oxen in ploughing which required communication with them prior to harnessing them for ploughing. (Sikhondze 1999: 109)

When the land failed to produce as expected, they blamed it upon their ancestors' disapproval of the foreign agriculture-related technology and the people's failure to perform the pre-season ceremonies in a correct way.

Resettlement Problems Encountered in Lesotho

Being Africans, Basotho are no exception to the way of conceiving the universe as discussed above. There are some aspects of the universe which they regard as religiously vital. These are what Eliade (1997) regards as hierophanies of the holy, that is, the things in or through which the holy or the sacred is manifested. "They are not for common or careless use, because they are considered to be sacred or holy" (Mbiti 1975: 144). It is precisely these type of items that they cannot afford to lose. These are special things or places with which they have developed a mystical identification – they are religiously attached to them. Below are some of the most important of them.

First, there are the graves of their ancestors and everything that is associated with them. For the Basotho, ancestors are the departed relatives who are believed to have entered the glory of ancestorhood and thus continue to take part and a lively interest in the affairs of their relatives' families. Assumed to be with God, they are believed to act as mediators between God and the living. They are also believed to pray for the needs of the living and pass their prayers to God. This is the reason why almost all the Basotho traditional prayers begin with the formula:

New Ancestor pray to the Old One (*Molimo o mocha rapela oa khale*). Apart from being intercessors, ancestors are also believed to be the protectors of the living against all perils of life. As long as a Mosotho believes to be under the protection of his or her ancestors, he or she feels secure and protected against such calamities as drought, hunger, poverty, deaths, lightning and all other sorts of problems in life. Based on the existing relationship between the living and the departed relatives, the Basotho culture has developed a number of sayings. For example, when one is seen to be plagued by all sorts of misfortune in life, various people say that his or her ancestors have deserted him or her (*o furalletsoe ke Balimo*), or that his or her ancestors are with him or her (*Balimo ba hae ba na le eena*) in such cases when one has mysteriously survived a serious danger. Moreover, it is the role of ancestors to enforce morality, which they are believed to accomplish by punishing all social deviants (those who depart from the socially approved way of life). The usual means of punishment consists of a series of misfortunes that will befall the culprit. Depending on the severity of an offence committed, ancestors are even able to impose death as a penalty to deter deviation from established societal norms.

For this reason many Basotho, who still hold to these beliefs, are very careful in whatever they do, not to offend their ancestors. Of all offences, there is nothing more serious than abandoning or neglecting one's ancestors' graveyard. The following words as uttered by one of the villagers say it all:

What I shall miss is the graves which I see that we are going to be separated from and leave behind. Even the dead are going to rise against us and say, "You leave us here, so we could be smothered by water?"... The dead will smother me, because they would be saying I left them to be smothered by water.³

In the life of the Basotho, the ancestors' graveyard is supposed to be the most sacred place, since it is viewed as the meeting place between the living and the dead. Nothing profane should take place at this site. If a person happens to either sit or stand on the grave unconsciously, he or she has to have his or her feet passed slightly over a brisk fire of grass which is believed to scorch off the misfortune which may befall the transgressors as an expression of the ancestors' displeasure (Sechefe n.d.).

It is not only the graveyard which is a matter of great concern to the Basotho ancestors. The land of the family is also of grave concern to the Basotho, since it is the property of the ancestors. Their living relatives are mere custodians of the land. Therefore the ancestors of the living custodians need to be consulted when the land is let out to other people by these living members. It is not uncommon in Lesotho to hear that so and so, who had already settled in some new place, has gone back to his or her original place, because they had been haunted by ancestral spirits (*O tsamaeloa ke Balimo*) who apparently disapproved of his or her

new residence. To desert one's original land or to sell it without one's ancestors' prior consent, is something believed to be sacrilegious to the ancestors who may in their discontentment turn one's life into a nightmare. However, in the case of an unavoidable resettlement or sale of the land, certain special rituals, which may include the shedding of sacrificial blood for ancestors, need to be performed by the family.

Second, there are the natural pools (*likoetsa*). Some of the Basotho traditional healers use pools for religious purposes. *Mathuela* or *Sangomas* are good examples in this regard. *Mathuela* are specialists in the sacred, who are believed to be possessed by spirit which enables them to heal and communicate with ancestral spirits and water snakes. Furthermore, it is assumed that they are able to divine or even to foretell events; and they generally possess incredible diagnostic skills. Intense religious experience which may involve a period of seeming madness, nearness to death, austerities, isolation and apparent spiritual transformation, is the starting point of the process of becoming a *Lethuela* (a singular form of *Mathuela*). Such a religious experience is of a possessional nature. An individual feels as if he or she is being invaded or seized by a spirit. This is often accompanied by dissociative mental phenomena such as visions, ecstasy, channeling the voices of spirits and uttering strange words at times, as well as displaying erratic, compulsive actions. Such actions may include: involuntary jumping, running, weeping, shouting and vigorous dancing in which the dancer makes quick jerky steps that include the trembling of the whole body during which the tempo gradually increases in speed.

In the Basotho culture, a person in such a state is described as being possessed by a spirit (*O na le moea*). In the visions, such a person is at different times expected to be shown, among other things, the identity of a traditional healer (*a senior Lethuela/sangoma*) who is thought to be the conduit of initiation into *Bothuela* (the state of being a *Lethuela*), and a natural pool where he/she will meet his/her ancestral spirits for guidance, and whatever he/she will need in his or her profession as a healer. Once he/she has completed his/her training, a *Lethuela* becomes mystically connected with this pool from which he/she is supposed to draw his/her spiritual insights. In this context the pool is understood and known as a hierophany. Thus to dispossess him/her of such a pool through resettlement is to destroy his/her spiritual guidance and ultimately the very profession through which he/she earns his/her living. For this reason, it is not surprising that some Basotho, especially those who are practicing traditional healers, remain opposed to resettlement. For them, being resettled does not only mean losing land, but it also signifies the loss of something critical to their success as healers, their hierophany.

Therefore removing an African (Mosotho) from his or her original place of abode in order to resettle him in a new place is to disturb his spiritual world, which he regards as the source of blessings in his or her life. It is to break the mystical link between the person, the pool, the ancestral spirits, and other beneficial local

spirits with whom he or she has established strong friendly ties. Such a disturbance, he or she believes, may turn his or her whole life upside down thereby suffocating his or her well-being. In other words, a Mosotho believes that the loss of his or her link with these forces will result in exposure to all sorts of problems in life. This is an issue that cannot be ignored, since his or her cooperation with these forces is of vital significance for survival.

Unfortunately, this is what many projects of the nature of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project or bad African governments seem to fail to take into consideration when they forcefully remove people from their original land. When he expresses an African need to cooperate with these forces of nature, Kaunda states:

I believe that the universe is basically good and that throughout it great forces are at work striving to bring about a greater unity of all living things. It is through cooperation with these forces that man will achieve all of which he is capable. Those people who are dependent upon and live in the closest relationship with nature are most conscious of the operation of these forces: The pulse of their lives beats in harmony with the pulse of the universe. (Kaunda 1966: 22-23)

The presence of these spirits or forces in an inhabited area gives it a spiritual dimension. Thus, the land in an African context is understood and seen not only as a material commodity, but also as a spiritual one. Therefore, Africans regard losing it as both material and spiritual loss. They believe it is to the land that they owe their being for it is through the land that they commune with their ancestral spirits and come to terms with cosmic forces. Thabo Mbeki once expressed this understanding in what was described as the best speech of his political career by many African politicians when, in his address to the South African Parliament, he said:

I am an African.
I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land. (*City Press* 12 May 1996: 17)

Spiritual Pitfalls in the LHDA Compensation Plan

Having said all this, what then can be seen as lacking in the Compensation Plan of the LHDA and perhaps in other bodies of similar nature in other African countries, which have experienced similar problems regarding the question of resettling the people? One thing that the LHDA seems to have inadequately

understood in its Compensation Plan is the fact that the Basotho (as Africans) are known for their holistic approach to life. An African proverb states: “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” Another proverb provides the following notions: “One knee does not bring up a child,” and “one hand does not nurse a child”. These proverbs point to the fact that Africans are traditionally communitarian people. They believe that each person ought to live in such a manner that his whole life is geared to the common good of the whole community. This is best expressed in the dictum: “I am because we are; we are because I am.” Whatever happens to the individual affects not only the individual concerned but the entire community to which the individual belongs; and whatever happens to the community affects not only the community as a whole but individual members of the community as individuals (Healey and Sybertz 1996: 107).

In this kind of life, Africans commune not only with the visible, but also with the invisible world. While the former provides their material needs, the latter is believed to be the source of everything that the former provides. From this perspective, Africans seem to inhabit a larger world than other people in other parts of the world do. Expressing this unique African character, Kaunda says:

They may be simple and unlettered people and their physical horizons may be strictly limited, yet I believe that they inhabit a larger world than the sophisticated, Westerner who has magnified his physical senses through invented gadgets at the price, all too often, of cutting out the dimension of the spiritual. (Kaunda 1966:22-23)

It is precisely this dimension of the spiritual (the invisible world) that the LHDA seems to have failed to address adequately in its Compensation Plan. The plan speaks of the material things (the visible world) that people will be compensated for if they are affected by the project, but it remains silent regarding the spiritual ties which are disturbed as the people are forced to leave behind their pools and the graves of their ancestors. For instance, in one of its documents on the issue of compensation, LHDA declares that “all the losses addressed would be tangible and material and would be of individually owned property” (LHDA 1990:2 9).

The specific categorization of all losses as “tangible” and “material” was intentionally to render any claim for spiritual loss impossible. For a Mosotho person, spiritual ties are regarded as the source of all good things. To disturb them without ensuring their restoration is to jeopardize one’s future. In fact, some of the studies done on the Project reveal that the standard of living of most of the resettled has declined. A number of people have lost their livelihood strategies (some of which included traditional healing systems) and have not replaced them with new ones in their resettled places (Lenka 2009: 31).

This is something that a Mosotho person cannot stand, hence the reason why he will object to the resettlement. In other words, while the LHDA sees only the material value of the land, the Basotho see both material and spiritual value of it. Therefore, for them, the LHDA compensation remains incomplete and indeed unsatisfactory as long as it overlooks or ignores the spiritual value of the land they have lost. Perhaps Granberg-Michaelson is correct in arguing that,

Most of the poverty we see in the world today is the result of the destruction of traditional cultures, of the rape of their resources in the name of 'progress', of the uprooting of people who then are left with no choice but to vegetate in the festering slums or rape the last remaining wilderness. (Granberg-Michaelson 1992: 14)

Conclusion

Having presented the above discussion, it is my contention that unless African worldviews are duly explained and articulated to the outside world, with whom Africans enter into business partnerships, numerous projects of a similar nature as the project discussed above, will continue to be a victim to unnecessary delays. At times these delays take the form of finances and consumerism, implying that the delays are therefore a financial burden to poverty-stricken countries such as Lesotho.

The Lesotho Highlands Development Authority is surely headed by the Basotho who are supposed to know their culture well. They should therefore have foreseen these possible resistance from the villagers right from the outset and therefore have started to prepare them psychologically (using senior traditionalists who are knowledgeable in things of this nature as counsellors). When the Basotho refer to a family, they signify the complex reality consisting not only of the living members of the family, but also of the departed ones who are the roots on whom the living stand and who, having entered the glory of ancestorhood, are supposed to look after the wellbeing of the living by way of interceding with God on their behalf. The departed are thus included in all major decisions made by the living in order to ensure their continuous care for the living.

Their inclusion in such decisions is quite elaborate. It requires a ritual performance which often includes the shedding of blood. LHDA speaks of providing animals to the villagers for other purposes, but does not include anything pertaining to animals that will be required for the kind of shedding of blood referred to above. One thing that has to be noted is that once a special relationship has been established with spiritual forces, they demand their inclusion in various milestones of a Mosotho life, such as when a child is born and when such a child undergoes various rites of passage, as well as when the

family migrates. Hence one cannot just leave the place abruptly without seeking the cooperation of these forces first. Any failure to do so is believed to result in undesirable consequences. Resettlement too is one of those things which the Basotho believe cannot be decided upon without the involvement of the said spiritual powers which are believed to be the rightful owners of the land upon which the living are mere custodians.

Africanness or being a Mosotho is a gift from God about which one needs not feel ashamed of or apologize for. Venerating ancestors and seeking cooperation with cosmic forces is part of the Basotho culture. Dismissing this as 'barbaric', 'savage', 'naïve', 'primitive', or 'backward' (as some people often do) is only to make these poor villagers, to use Archbishop Tutu's words (as quoted by Cumpsty), "feel uneasy and guilty about what they cannot alter even if they try until Doomsday—their Africanness" (Cumpsty 1991: 141).

Notes

¹ http://www.mountainvoices.org/1_th_spiritual_beliefs, Transformation Resource Centre. 2004.

² <http://www.mountainvoices.org/lesotho>

³ http://www.mountainvoices.org/1_th_spiritual_beliefs

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