

The Impact of African Holistic Cosmology On Land Issues: A Southern African Case

Frances C. L. Rakotsoane
University of Lesotho

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 - a 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 underlies such opposition. It 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 and, so argues, that the Basotho's veneration of their ancestors graveyards, the dependence of the living upon their ancestors for their material welfare, and the Basotho's cultic functionaries' mystical identification with some aspects of nature, all of which give spiritual value to the land, are the source of the problem.

Introduction

For Africans, land is not a mere lifeless, material commodity. As Talboid has pointed out:

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 de-

crease the life span of man. These forces are organised 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. (Talboid 1979: 27-8)

Many land-related problems experienced in Africa have more to do with this way of conceiving reality. Their "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 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). This was clearly expressed by President Kenyatta reflecting on the significance of land:

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. (cited in Ray 1976: 166)

In South Africa, those who were forcefully removed from their homes by the apartheid regime are now reclaiming their land. An important thing to note is their insistence on being given back their land even when they are promised resettlement in places that are better in terms of infrastructure. Such insistence can only be understood as having its basis in the significance that these people attach to the land in which lay the remains of their ancestors. Even the whole process of exhumation as carried out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (T.R.C.) has 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 whose bodies that are to be exhumed as part of the TRC were not given proper burials. Consequently, according to the African worldview, they have remained useless spirits that haunt their living family members as they have not been able to enter the glory of ancestor-hood. It is the belief of the families concerned that it is only through a burial that includes a complete observance of all African burial rites that will enable the deceased to enter the glory of ancestor-hood and so be of some spiritual value to their relatives who live on the land in which they have been reburied. In Swaziland, Swazi cultural beliefs in the spiritual dimension of land "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 so 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. (1999: 109)

When the land failed to produce as expected, they blamed it upon their ancestors' disapproval of the foreign agricultural technology and the people's failure to perform the pre-season ceremonies in a correct way. This paper looks at some of the land-related problems that the Lesotho Highlands Water Project has encountered ever since its inception, and explains the cause behind them in light of what has just been said above.

The Lesotho Highlands Water Scheme and People's Objection to Resettlement

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project is one of the most ambitious and comprehensive schemes that is presently 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 in 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. 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, as well as the development of tourism, fisheries and other projects for economic and social development (LHDA 1990).

An autonomous, statutory body which is responsible for the implementation, operation and maintenance of the part of the project that is 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 the Compensation Plan. The Plan includes, among other things, a compensation policy and regulations for various losses incurred by those whose properties are affected by the Project. Under such losses are houses and trees, whose 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 two 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 fall into the last 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.

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. What is important to note here, is that these villagers said this even though they were quite aware of the LHDA policy on exhumations and reburials. The policy made it very clear that the LHDA would provide such things as a coffin, a grave stone, an animal, and the provision of supplies for a ceremony to mark the occasion (LHDA 1990). Now the question is: Were these villagers really speaking of the loss of the physical graves, or something else? Such an excuse has been described as naïve and senseless by those who apparently have no understanding of African world-views. As a matter of fact, there is more to such an excuse than what appears on the surface and this is what this paper attempts to unfold in the following pages. As our starting point, let us look at what Africans make of the world out there.

African Holistic Cosmology in Basotho Culture

No matter how educated (in terms of western schooling), or how culturally displaced Africans may be, Africans always have their unique way of explaining reality. They often understand and explain things and events in a way that appears strange, if not totally incomprehensible to non-Africans. It was precisely

due to their unique explanation of reality, which some westerners describe as being "irrational," that their rationality as human beings was doubted by people from other parts of the world. In his acknowledgement of the existence of such uniqueness in Africans, Kaunda says:

Possibly "psychology" is not the appropriate word, but I do believe that there is a distinctive African way of looking at things, of problem-solving and indeed of thinking - we have our own logic-system which makes sense to us however confusing it might be to the Westerners. (1966: 28-29)

As people living on a continent with its own unique life situation and geography, Africans see things in a way that is different from the way people in other parts of the world with different life situations and geographies do. If Europeans are unable to be entirely emancipated from the attitudes of their society, it is because their reactions are flowing from a complete philosophical system which is unique to their society. One of the world-renowned exponents of African philosophy, Tempels, argues for what might be the cause for the persistence of certain attitudes which seem not to be affected by space and time in a given society by saying that:

Behaviour can be neither universal nor permanent unless it is based upon a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man and of the things which surround him, of existence, life, death and of the life beyond. We must postulate, seek and discover a logical system of human thought as the ultimate foundation of any logical and universal system of human behaviour. (1969: 190)

Africans maintain a monistic world-view. 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 man) hang harmoniously together like threads of a spider's web. In other words, Africans do not see, or regard themselves, as masters over the universe but rather as part of it. In fact, as Tempels puts it:

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. (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 thus acquiring religious significance (Cumpsty 1991: 276). Being Africans, Basotho, are no exceptions to this way of conceiving the universe. There are some aspects of the universe which they regard as religiously vital. These are what Eliade (1997) regards as hierophanies of the holy: the things in, or through, which the holy or the sacred is manifested. Or, in the words of Mbiti: "They are not for common or careless use, because they are considered to be sacred or holy" (Mbiti 1975: 144). It is precisely these kinds of things that Africans believe they cannot afford to lose. These are special things or places with which they have a mystical identification and they are therefore 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 ancestor-hood and so continue to take part and maintain a lively interest in the affairs of their families. As they are believed to reside with God, they act as mediators between him and the living. They pray for the needs of the living and pass their prayers to God. This is the reason why almost all Basotho traditional prayers begin with the formula: "New God 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 is 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. It is because of such existing relationships between the living and the departed relatives, that when one is plagued by misfortune in life, you will hear people say: his or her ancestors have deserted him/her (*o furalletsoe ke Balimo*), or that his or her ancestors are with him/her (*Balimo ba hae ba na le eena*) in such cases as when one has mysteriously survived a serious danger. It is the role of ancestors to enforce morality also. They do this by punishing all social deviants (i.e. those who act contrary to the socially approved way of life). The usual means of punishment is a series of misfortunes that will befall the culprit. Sometimes the punishment may be so severe as to include even death.

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. In the life of the Basotho, this is supposed to be the most sacred place. It is the meeting place between the living and the dead. Nothing profane should be done at this place. If a person happens to either sit or stand on the grave unconsciously, he or she has to have his/her feet lightly passed over a fire of grass to scorch off the misfortune which may befall the transgressors as an expression of the ancestors'

displeasure. It is not only the graveyard which is a matter of great concern to the Basotho ancestors. The land of the family too is their concern as it regarded as the property belonging to the ancestors. Their living relatives are but mere custodians of it. The ancestors must therefore be consulted when such a land is let out to people by the living members. It is not uncommon in Lesotho to hear of someone who has settled in a new place but then had to return to his/her original home because of their experience of being haunted by ancestral spirits (*ho tsamaeloa ke Balimo*) who disapproved of his/her new residence. To desert one's original land or to sell it without consulting one's ancestors is believed to be sacrilegious to ancestors who may, in their discontentment, bring about misfortune for the living. In cases where resettlement or selling of the land is unavoidable, special rituals which may include the shedding of sacrificial blood for the ancestors, have to be performed by the living family.

Second, there are the natural pools (*likoetsa*). Some of the Basotho cultic functionaries use pools for religious purposes. *Mathuela* or *Sangomas* are a good example in this regard. As sacred specialists, they are believed to be possessed by spirits which enable them to heal and communicate with ancestral spirits and water snakes. They are also able to divine, or even foretell things, and well as diagnose illness. Intense religious experience which may involve a period in which one undergoes a form of temporary madness, nearness to death, the performance of austerities, isolation and apparent spiritual transformation, are all starting points of the process of becoming a *sangoma*. Such a religious experience is of a possessional nature. An individual feels as if they are being invaded or seized by a spirit. This is often accompanied by mental phenomena such as visions, ecstasy, the channeling of spirits as well as the display of erratic, compulsive actions. Such actions may be involuntary: jumping, running, weeping, shouting and vigorous dancing in which the dancer makes quick, jerky steps that include the trembling of the whole body whose tempo gradually gets quicker and quicker. In Sesotho, when a person is in such a state, he or she is said to be possessed by spirit (*o na le moea*). In the visions, such a person is at times shown, among other things, a traditional healer (*sangoma*) who will initiate him/her into the process, and a natural pool where he/she will meet the ancestral spirits for guidance and whatever he/she will need as a healer. Once he has completed his training, a *sangoma* becomes mystically connected with this pool from which he draws his spiritual insights. Such a pool becomes a hierophany. To dispossess him of such a pool is to destroy his spiritual guidance and, ultimately, his very profession through which he earns his living. The initiate is therefore likely to remain opposed to anything which may lead to this situation, especially when the LHDA seems to be silent on how such places are to be compensated for.

It is not only the *sangomas* who revere natural pools in Lesotho. Some ordinary people revere them too because traditionally, it is believed that it is the dwelling place of the source of water, namely, the water snake. It is therefore

believed that tampering with these pools annoys their inhabitants who, in their anger, may cause the drying up of their natural wells or stop giving rain. For this reason, the area around the natural wells and pools is kept as intact as possible in many places in Lesotho, especially in those places where people are still leading a traditional life. It has been a common saying among some Lesotho Highlands dwellers that the severe drought that has recently stricken the country and the drying up of some of their natural wells are due to the disturbance done to the water snake by the Lesotho Highlands Water Project.

Removing a Mosotho man from his original place in order to resettle him in a new place is to disturb his spiritual world: a world which he regards as the source of blessings in his life. It is to break the mystical link between him, his sacred pool, the ancestral spirits, and other beneficial local spirits with whom he has established strong ties. Such a disturbance, he believes, may turn his whole life upside down and thus suffocate his well-being. In other words, a Mosotho believes that the loss of his link with these forces will expose him to all sorts of problems in life. This is something that he cannot ignore. His cooperation with these forces is of vital significance. Unfortunately, this is what the LHDA seems to have ignored. Expressing a need for such cooperation Kaunda says:

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. (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 land as both a material and spiritual loss. They believe it is to the land that they owe their being for it is in the land that they commune with their ancestral spirits and come to terms with cosmic forces. Thabo Mbeki once expressed this truth in what was described as the best speech of his political career by many African politicians, in his address to the South African Parliament:

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 can then be seen as lacking in the Compensation Plan of the LHDA and, perhaps, in other bodies of a similar nature in other African countries that have experienced similar problems regarding the question of resettling people? One thing that the LHDA seems to have obviously overlooked, if not simply ignored, in its Compensation Plan is the fact that Africans are known for their holistic approach to life. An African proverb says: "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Another proverb says: "One knee does not bring up a child," or "one hand does not nurse a child". All these 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 happens to the whole community, and whatever happens to the whole community, happens to the individual (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. Expressing a similar sentiment, 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. (1996: 22-23)

It is precisely this dimension of the spiritual (i.e. invisible world) that the LHDA failed to take into consideration in its Compensation Plan. The plan speaks of the material things (i.e. 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, the LHDA says that, "all the losses addressed would be tangible and material and would be of individually owned property" (LHDA 1990: 29). For a Mosotho, such spiritual ties are regarded as the source of all good things. To disturb them without ensuring their restoration is to jeopardize his future. This is something that he cannot stand, hence the reason why he objects to the resettlement. In other words, while the LHDA sees only the material value of the land, the Basotho see both the 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.

Conclusion

It is my contention that unless African worldviews are duly explained and articulated to the 'outside' world with which Africans enter into business partnerships, many projects of the nature of the one discussed above, will continue falling victim to unnecessary delays. These delays often have negative financial implications and therefore place more of a burden on poverty-stricken countries like 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 causes of delays right from the outset and so start making arrangements with those who would be affected by such a development. In other words, those whose ancestors are buried on the land or individuals that may have spiritual ties with the place. When the Basotho talk of a family, they talk of a complex reality consisting of not only 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 ancestor-hood, 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. In fact, they demand their inclusion in the 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. Resettlement too is one of those things which the Basotho believe cannot be decided upon without the involvement of their ancestors who are the rightful owners of the land upon which the living are but mere custodians. Bizarre as these beliefs and practices may seem to a culturally displaced African who regrets his or her own Africanness, but upholds everything foreign to African life, these are beliefs which go back to a venerable antiquity and, as such, deserve respectful consideration when dealing with Africans. It is about time that an African should be allowed to be himself and stop emulating cultures other than his own:

He speaks everyone else's language, he wears everyone else's clothes; he has assumed everyone else's culture; he bears everyone else's name; he aspires to everyone else's way of living; he eats everyone's else's food and... he buys everyone else's products. (Nangoli, 1987: 167)

Africanness, or being a Mosotho, is a gift from God about which one needs not

feel ashamed of, or apologetic for. Venerating ancestors is part of Basotho culture. Dismissing this as 'barbaric', 'savage', 'naïve', 'primitive', or 'backward' is only to make Basotho, to use Tutu's words, "feel uneasy and guilty about what they cannot alter even if they try until doomsday - their Africanness" (Cumpsty 1991:141).

Works Cited

- Bujo, B. 1990. *Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation*. Nairobi: St. Paul Publications.
- Eliade, M. 1997. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Healey, J. and Syberts, D. 1996. *Towards an African Narrative Theology*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications. Africa.
- Iliffe, J. 1967. "The Organization of the Maji Maji Rebellion". *Journal of African History*, 8, 3, pp. 495-512.
- Itote, W. 1967. *"Mau Mau" General*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.
- Idowu, E. B. 1974. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: SCM Press Ltd.
- Kaunda, K. 1986. *A Humanist in Africa*. London: Longmans.
- Lesotho Highlands Development Authority. 1990. *Environmental Action Plan: Synopsis of Studies and Proposed Programs*. Maseru: LHDA.
- Machobane, L.B.J. 1995. "Basotho Religion and Western Thought". Occasional Paper, 55, Edinburg University: African Studies Centre.
- Matšela, Z. 1990. *Bochaba ba Basotho*. Maseru: Mazenod Publishers.
- Mbiti, J. 1983. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- Moeti, L. 1999. "Paradox of Water Resource Development: Lesotho Highlands Water Project". *South-South Journal of Culture and Development*, 1, 2, pp.1-20.
- Mudimbe, V. 1994. *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Nangoli, M. 1986. *No more Lies About Africa*. New Jersey: African Heritage Publishers.
- Rakotsoane, F.C.L. 1999. "Land Spiritual Value: The Underlying Cause for Basotho's Objection to Resettlement". *Review of Southern African Studies*, 3, 1, pp.164-176.
- Ray, B. 1974. *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community*. Eaglewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Ruch, E.A. and Anyanwu, K.C. 1981. *African Philosophy*. Rome: Catholic Book Agency.
- Shutte, A. 1994. *Philosophy for Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Sikhondze, B.A.B. 1999. "Technology and Swazi Concept of Land Tenure: Their Cultural and Financial Implications for Advancement in Swazi Agriculture, 1894-1932." In *Review of Southern African Studies*, 3, 1, pp. 101-131.
- Talboid, A. (ed). 1979. *No One Taught like this Man*. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.
- Tempels P. 1969. *Bantu Philosophy*. Parish: Presence Africaine.