

Filling a glaring historiographical gap in Mozambique's history

Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement and the Delusion of Development, Cahora Bassa and its Legacies in Mozambique, 1965–2007*

University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2013

308 pp

ISBN 978-1-86914-291-9

R295.00

Comprising seven chapters, this work focuses on the period from the 1960s, when the Portuguese began to plan construction of the Cahora Bassa dam, to 2007, when Mozambique's post-colonial government finally gained majority ownership of the dam. In the opening chapter, the reader is introduced to the broader scholarship on the subject of dam projects, particularly in the developing world. The authors argue that by focusing on the developmental implications, the scholarship has neglected the environmental and social effects on surrounding and displaced communities. It further argues that by relying on official documents, scholars have tended to ignore the voices of local communities, whose livelihoods have oftentimes been adversely affected by these projects.

In chapter two, the authors document Portuguese efforts, dating back to the sixteenth century, to conquer and domesticate the Zambezi River and its hinterland for human benefit. Chapter three discusses the process of constructing the Cahora Bassa dam, including technical challenges, labour recruitment and control. Salient features of the chapter include the highly racialised and regimented organisation of work and the contrasting experiences of the European and African employees. Chapter four explores how more than 30 000 peasants were displaced from their ancestral lands to pave the way for the massive dam. The social and ecological impact of this project on communities in the lower Zambezi Valley are examined in chapter five. Among issues explored are changes in the river flow and how the unpredictable discharge from the dam affected thousands of peasants whose livelihoods were dependent on the river before the construction of the dam. Chapter six documents Cahora Bassa's unique role as the largest dam in the world constructed primarily to produce energy for export, a role it continued to play even after the end of Portuguese colonial rule. The final chapter reviews the impact of the dam on riverine communities and the biosphere, focusing on the period after the end of the civil war. This chapter also questions the likely impact of a second dam, Mphanda Nkuwa, planned for construction some sixty kilometres from the Cahora Bassa dam.

Isaacman and Isaacman's work coherently shows the interplay between science, economics, politics and security considerations. When Portugal decided to construct the dam in 1965, officials envisioned that numerous benefits would accrue from the US\$515 million project. These included stimulating agriculture, mining and industrial production; increasing European settlement; reducing flooding, as well as

Book Reviews

improved communication and transportation throughout the Zambezi Valley. There were also plans to generate income by exporting electricity to South Africa. For the engineers and hydrologists, the dam signified technical complexity which reinforced the view that nature could be conquered for the benefit of humankind (p 3). On another hand, built at a time when the rest of Africa was decolonising, construction of the dam was a signal that Portugal was not ready to grant independence to Mozambique. And with mounting military confrontation from Frelimo, the Portuguese believed that the 500 kilometre long dam would pose a formidable barrier for Frelimo forces intending to enter Mozambique from their military bases in Tanzania and Zambia.

This book captures African memories of hardships and catastrophes which were experienced by former workers and peasants who were displaced to pave way for the dam. As the authors note, "Absent from public discourse were the experiences, conversations and ideas of peasants who lived with the consequences of its existence" (p 16). With African voices taking precedence in the text, the contrasts between colonial and postcolonial discourses surrounding the dam are illuminated; the latter maintained silence on Cahora Bassa, authorising only official voices in public discussions about the dam. Those who are now given a platform to speak reveal that coercion and exploitation of Africans were central to the process of establishing this mega dam. Despite the abolition of *chibalo* decades earlier, Africans were conscripted for gruelling work on the dam site. One of the author's informants summarised life during the dam's construction as follows: "You work, eat and sleep. It's a never ending cycle with little variation" (p 77). Yet, in a racialised work regime, Africans were among the most poorly remunerated, receiving the lowest wages with the poorest housing and substandard rations.

Furthermore, people were forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands to make room for the dam. This began with the displacement of communities from the Songo highlands to make way for the establishment of a segregated town for white workers, many of whom were recruited from abroad. The authors go on to chronicle the various tactics of the forced removals and the hardships encountered by more than 30 000 Africans who were forcefully evicted and forced into *aldeamentos*, protected villages. These *aldeamentos* were modelled on counter-insurgency initiatives developed in Malaysia and Vietnam and were designed to block peasants from having contact with Frelimo guerrillas. The book further demonstrates how those who were relocated were traumatised by the nature of the resettlements, because communities lost control of their physical space and their access to economic and cultural resources.

Critically, the authors also differentiate the African victims because the degree of victimhood varied. Some Africans employed during the dam's construction, such as foremen, master technicians and long distance truck drivers, were better salaried, housed and received superior rations. Yet the rest were not passive victims because some protested by resorting to desertions, work slowdowns, striking and looting of food, forcing the employer to increase rations and to offer "a modest pay rise" (pp

Book Reviews

88-89). Equally remarkable, some *aldeamentos* had better social and recreation facilities than others while at the same time societal and marital status, gender and age also determined one's access to better land and other resources in the new settlements. Interestingly, militarising the *aldeamentos* at the peak of war had the opposite effect as some disgruntled young men actually escaped the villages to join Frelimo.

The book also provides a lucid chronicle of the social, economic and ecological impact of the dam on peasant communities inhabiting the lower Zambezi valley. Instead of the seasonal water flow to which the communities were adapted, the water flow became irregular because South Africa's electricity needs "dictated the magnitude, timing, duration, and frequency of water released from the dam, regardless of the possible effects on agriculture, fisheries, and wildlife downstream" (p 123). Among the several negative effects of interfering with the natural river flow was that it disturbed the natural ecosystem. The irregular floods caused erosion, washed away crops, drowned livestock, interfered with fish breeding patterns, and affected birds that fed on fish from the Zambezi River. In other words, the Cahora Bassa dam also fundamentally transformed the livelihood patterns of the people inhabiting the lower Zambezi valley.

Remarkably, the book is also about the limits of the post-colonial state, evidenced by the fact that fifty years after independence, the citizens of Mozambique did not derive any significant benefits from the dam. Until 2007 Portugal continued to own the dam, selling a large percentage of electricity to South Africa below the market price. Consequently, Cahora Bassa remained a living symbol of a violent and oppressive past and a constant reminder that the nation was still not free from the yoke of colonialism. Ironically, when South Africa attained majority rule in 1994, the ANC government continued to uphold the colonial electricity supply contract. Indeed there was more continuity than change because "South Africa received the energy, Portugal received the income and Zambezi valley residents paid the price" (p 150). Plainly, the dam remained a commentary on the challenges and failures of a post-colonial state.

The greatest strength of this book is that it brings to the surface what the master narrative of Mozambique's colonial and post-colonial actors have suppressed (p 7). By interviewing more than 300 Africans - former workers and peasants who were affected by the dam - it clearly captures the voices of the marginalised, which are silent in the official records. Crucially, therefore, it fills a glaring historiographical gap of colonial and post-colonial Mozambican history. The book also brings to the fore the nexus between societies, the environment and science, making it unquestionably useful to historians, environmental activists and policy makers.

Noel Ndumeya
University of the Free State