



COLIN HOAG, 2022, *The Fluvial Imagination: On Lesotho's Water-Export Economy*, Oakland: University of California Press, 224 pp., ISBN 978-0-52038-634-1.

In *The Fluvial Imagination*, Colin Hoag, a former U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Lesotho, examines rangeland and water conservation efforts associated with the Lesotho Highland Water Project, a crucial infrastructure initiative designed to cater to the ever-increasing water demands of the South African cities of Johannesburg and Gauteng. Historically, Lesotho was known for producing grains for South Africa's Orange Free State. It later became a labor reserve during the apartheid era in South Africa and eventually established itself as a supplier of wool and mohair. Today, Lesotho is the primary provider of fresh water to South Africa. However, sediment buildup in the Lesotho Highlands Water Project dams poses a significant threat to the country's freshwater supply. It is this issue that forms the basis of Hoag's quest to find solutions to ecological problems in using the insights of anthropology.

Many readers may already be familiar with Hoag's more concise analyses of water management and livestock production in his previous works (see especially "Water is a Gift that Destroys," *Economic Anthropology* March 2019, and "The Ovicaprine Mystique," *American Anthropologist* September 2018). Those works, like *The Fluvial Imagination*, drew on insights from Hoag's numerous interviews with engineers, herders, livestock owners, and conservationists as well as analysis of records housed in colonial and contemporary archives. However, while previous publications provide part of the picture, *The Fluvial Imagination* contributes much more significantly to anthropological critiques of flawed development projects and interventions by drawing attention to the humanist-ecological dimensions at the core of conservation and resource management. As such, the work encourages a deeper understanding of the complex interrelations of history, community practices, and environmental governance.

Of greatest significance for anthropologists, *The Fluvial Imagination* offers an expanded interpretation of James Ferguson's analysis of the failed efforts by the World Bank in the late twentieth century to commercialize cattle livestock in Lesotho. While Ferguson argued that the World Bank's development initiatives overlooked the social value of cattle (Ferguson called the development-defying powers of cattle "the bovine mystique"), Hoag suggests that a different livestock "mystique" is now at play. Contemporary highland herders in Lesotho are more inclined to sell their livestock, particularly small livestock like goats and sheep. This shift indicates a desire to raise many of these animals quickly in the highlands, where grazing practices contribute to soil erosion. This erosion subsequently clogs the dams that supply water to South Africa. Hoag refers to herders' enthrallment with the potential of goats and sheep to make them wealthy despite herders serving as the brunt of administrators' blame for erosion, as the "ovicaprine mystique." Although Hoag's argument about the

ovicaprine mystique might have appeared earlier in the book in order to drive the anthropological argument about social ecology more forcefully (it is only fully discussed in chapter 4), addressing herders' efforts to sustain their livelihoods enhances Hoag's insightful critique of bureaucracy and resource extraction.

One of the book's most compelling insights is that a defining feature of conservationists' resource management efforts is the intentional engineering of both social and environmental resources to advance the singular goal of rapid resource extraction for economic development. To capture this eco-social aspect of resource management, Hoag develops the concept of fluvial imagination to describe water conservationists' implicit sociological perspectives about how water flows across the land. The idea not only recalls C. Wright Mills' notion of "the sociological imagination," inveighing sociologists to observe what is present but unsaid. It also undergirds the book's central argument that a landscape is socially engineered and capable of acting independently; it resists human management due to the natural forces of geology and gravity.

While Hoag observes that prevailing narratives among engineers and administrators often blame herders for dams' sediment buildup, Hoag's own approach is more nuanced, including his assessment that conservation administrators themselves understand that resource management requires social engineering. Hoag uses the term "conservation bureaucrats" to refer to the engineers and professionals who implement rangeland ecology principles to maximize water exports and who are constrained by projects and policies that failed before them. The term is useful yet underestimates these professionals' own complex observations and interventions. In the Lesotho highlands, conservationists' efforts translate into programs such as *fato-fato*, which involves building rock-line sedimentation traps. Surprisingly, conservationists support building these traps not primarily to retain water and prevent soil erosion, but to generate income opportunities, thus providing meaningful work for people living in Lesotho's highland herding communities. The book concludes with a discussion on landscape degradation and encourages conservation biologists to consider historical, racialized, and economic contexts alongside traditional ecological factors.

Although it is consensus anthropology, Hoag's book emphasizes the failures of governance systems to protect long-term ecological stability, as well as the pro-growth resource management strategies and social control methods aimed at promoting economic growth. As a study of environmental issues and an analysis of political-economic systems of governance, Hoag's call for a more critical ecological science that incorporates considerations of political economy and history will appeal to students and scholars for its interdisciplinary insights. Anthropologists interested in environmental issues, economic systems, and governance should value it as a compelling critique of so-called development projects. Overall, Hoag's work encourages readers to carefully reflect on the consequences of water commodification for both communities and ecosystems. Offering a critical lens for examining the interplay among livestock practices, ecological governance, and ecosystems, *The Fluvial Imagination* highlights the socio-economic dynamics that shape the lives of herders. By introducing concepts like the "ovicaprine mystique" and the "fluvial imagination," Hoag encourages readers to rethink the implications of resource extraction and management strategies.

KEY WORDS: Lesotho, herders, water, environment, conservation

Reviewed by Amy E. Stambach, author of *The Corporate Alibi: Capitalism and the Cultural Politics of US Investments in Africa*, University of California, 2025. ORCID: 0000-0002-0693-3966



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