

# ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

## TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard  
Joseph Battat  
Mary Lynne Bird  
Steven Butler  
William F. Foote  
Kitty Hempstone  
Pramila Jayapal  
Peter Bird Martin  
Ann Mische  
Dasa Obereigner  
Paul A. Rahe  
Chandler Rosenberger  
Katherine Sreedhar  
Edmund Sutton  
Dirk J. Vandewalle

## HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot  
David Hapgood  
Pat M. Holt  
Edwin S. Munger  
Richard H. Nolte  
Albert Ravenholt  
Phillips Talbot

**Institute of Current World Affairs**  
The Crane-Rogers Foundation  
Four West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

JGW-10  
SOUTHERN AFRICA

*James Workman is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying the use, misuse, accretion and depletion of fresh-water supplies in southern Africa.*

## *The Highlanders* **Manmade Quakes and Giant Snakes; Africa's Beautiful and the Damned**

James G. Workman

DECEMBER, 2002

MOHALE CITY, Lesotho—I awoke at 7:30 a.m. to the window-rattling concussion of explosives and sat up, hung over, in a strange bed, hoping with rising anxiety to orient myself. Happily, I was the bed's sole occupant. Not so the adjacent blue bathroom, where I was joined in my ablutions by dozens of plastic smiling angels. On the landing atop the staircase I felt a second blast. Moments later, a third.

Racing downstairs I encountered a huge 119-channel satellite television quietly broadcasting a German soccer match. Through the open sliding door a gust of cold and thin air — infused with construction-site smells of mud, cement, tar and diesel — breathed life into the house. Outside on the patio a bath-robed young woman gazed across a deep gorge at a fresh mushroom cloud of dust billowing up frost-covered escarpments into a leaden sky. In the background droned a noise like that saliva-sucking tool that dentists hook between your gum and lips.

\* \* \*

It came back in a rush. I was standing on the verge of Mohale Dam, the last phase of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), an \$8 billion mega-



*Plowing Lesotho's thin, terraced soil: Boys in Christopher Robin gumboots can ride donkeys at age four, calves at five, and horses at six.*

dam undertaking and the largest in the southern hemisphere. The dam project will back up tributaries of the region's most important river, the Orange/Senqu. It will reverse the rivers' flows backwards down tunnels drilled through the region's most rugged mountains, the Maluti-Drakensberg. And it will provide water to be consumed by the continent's most powerful and vital city, Johannesburg.

Most know China and its massive Three Gorges Dam Project, but few have heard of Lesotho and the equally controversial LHWP. Lesotho is the visually breathtaking kingdom (with Swaziland, one of Africa's two remaining monarchies) that is among the world's poorest and hungriest, and is the only real country completely surrounded by another, South Africa. Still, the operative word here is 'high.' In addition to the LHWP centerpiece, Katse, which is Africa's highest dam, Lesotho also boasts the world's highest national low-point (Lesotho's 'lowlands' are a mere 3-5,000 feet high), highest pub, highest single-drop waterfall in Africa, highest peak on the continent south of Kilimanjaro, and so forth. Up here at this altitude, Basotho people are known as 'Highlanders.'

For centuries, Highlanders have lived isolated, semi-feudal lives, traveling on foot and horseback without roads, communicating face-to-face without phones or writing, cooking over fires burning dried sheep or cattle dung without gas or electric stoves, carrying water from springs or creeks without pipes or plumbing. That began to change a decade ago, when the LHWP urged thousands of Highlanders to sacrifice and move "so that water can save many peoples lives" and benefit lowland millions, lifting Lesotho out of its medieval era into modernity. Lacking phones or e-mail, most heard this government advice through the voice of an explosion.

\* \* \*

I was the overnight guest of J., a German accountant and W., his South African girlfriend, inside their prefabricated house, which was part of a sprawling, three-year-old, soon-to-be-empty boomtown, Mohale City. The boomtown was connected to the world by spectacularly engineered asphalt roads that wound through three high mountain passes (yes, one boasting 'the highest pass in Africa'), yet remained cut off on those roads by three checkpoints and two armed security gates.

That 'company-town' isolation cut both ways. It sheltered white-collar workers from poverty-driven crime, but suffocated them too. W. and J. were going stir crazy, paid comfortable salaries with no time or place to spend them. When not office-bound, they sat glued to the satellite TV, eating escargots and overcooked meat at the Company Restaurant, and drinking (and pouring their guest far too) many fine wines and liquors crated back from the distant city. W. also wrote poetry. Throughout our 17 hours together, they were exceedingly generous hosts to me, a stranger introduced through a third contact. But theirs seemed a desperate hospitality, starved of fresh

voices for too long, and, while grateful, I began making excuses why I must depart.

W. spoke often of their crushing boredom and loneliness. Her poetry revolved on themes of death. Recalling her angels in the bathroom, I tried to cheer her with descriptions of my previous weeks of backpacking and pony-trekking along tiny, scattered mountain villages connected only by bridle trails. I described the taste of fresh-caught trout, the sound of wind and cowbells, the whiff of blossoming peach trees, the rhythm of children singing (after insistently demanding in vain 'gimme some sweets!') and the sight of boys in Christopher-Robin gumboots who can ride donkeys at age four, calves at five, and horses at six. Though Mohale City lies at the epicenter of all this, to her it seemed more alien than the movie and soundtrack of *Shrek*. Her strongest link to Highlanders was through Mohale City's menial labor. "Don't use the swimming pool at the recreation center," she advised. "The staff uses it to do laundry."

The enforced separation of *gastarbeiters* and locals troubled me. One of the enduring attractions of Lesotho was that — in contrast to South Africa or America — its people utterly lacked racial hang-ups. They really did. Lesotho had been surrounded for decades by apartheid, but never sank to practice the political divisions of classes and races, like setting European tribes apart from Basotho.





In turn, the absence of pro-white racial discrimination left no room or need for any post-colonial affirmative action or reverse, pro-black racial discrimination. People I met, black, white, Indian, young, old, rural, urban seemed genuinely to look me (and each other) in the eye as equals. It's not something one can prove, but I inhaled it like oxygen. True, there were never as many whites in Lesotho. And it was a British protectorate for many decades. And finally, in such an impoverished country there was never a concentrated economic engine — like South African mines or American plantations — that might act as an incentive for racial or class discrimination. With LHWP, now there was.

\* \* \*

I greeted W. on her chilly patio and said that, of all the things that had stirred me from heavy sleep — roosters, dump trucks, lions, gunshots, earthquakes — this was the first time explosions had done the trick.

"It's for the access roads down to the dam," she answered calmly. Blasting was nothing new here to anyone; it had become part of the background noise, like suburban commuter trains, interstate highway drone, urban honking. Perhaps it had grown soothing. "You can see the dust from the dynamite, but they're only now getting the trucks going. It's not going well. They're way behind schedule."

They certainly were. And not just on the access roads. Mohale Dam itself was supposed to have started filling a week earlier, in early October. Back in June I had been invited by confident, welcoming officials to attend a proud ceremony of 'closing the gates,' which is the hydro-engineering term for plugging the dam's giant bathtub drain. Now that I had arrived, the ceremony was mysteriously postponed. Something was wrong. I heard nervous rumors that the gates would not be closed for weeks, of indefinite delay, and then nothing. Officials would no longer return my calls. They instructed their secretaries to bar me (and presumably others) from interviewing engineers. The men I'd spoken with were already gone, or busy seeking employment elsewhere, their work done, if not exactly completed. Even J., the accounting insider, could not explain what was behind the delay. "Something to do with the World Bank not feeling we've tied up all loose ends," he'd heard. "I'm sure it will be quickly resolved."

It wasn't. And a window of opportunity was closing. As spring rolled on and snowmelt (snow closes roads in Highlander winters) combined with rainfall, the rivers began to rise. If the rivers rose past a certain point, I'd been informed, the engineers wouldn't be able to 'close the gates' due to too much upstream hydrostatic pressure. They'd have to wait another expensive year until



*'A feudal kingdom: Yet the operative operative word here is 'high.'*

the flows subsided. Thus shut off from the official story, yet weighed down with reams of their glossy booster propaganda, I spent most of my time walking, talking, living with Highlanders and interviewing the dam's growing opposition. For if hydrostatic momentum was gathering upstream, what I'll call 'anthro-static' pressure was mounting downstream. A year before, in a rare display of organization and solidarity, 2,300 Highlanders demonstrated against LHWP authorities. I later learned this was the source of reasons behind the delay. But at the time I just wanted to learn what drove them, what they hoped to gain, and what might be lost in the exchange.

\* \* \*

Given my history of skepticism toward the promised wonders of dams (and thrill in the removal of obsolete dams) some have accused me of being 'anti-growth' or 'anti-development.' My position was never that simplistic. After I had spent a few weeks sleeping in villages without running water or electricity, where Chihuahua-sized rats scurried over my sleeping bag at night to raid my backpack and freezing winds sneaked through mortarless cracks in stone huts to snuff out candles and leave ice crystals in water bottles... it is safe to say few wanted development for Lesotho more than I. One way or another— rapidly through Mohale Dam or slowly through

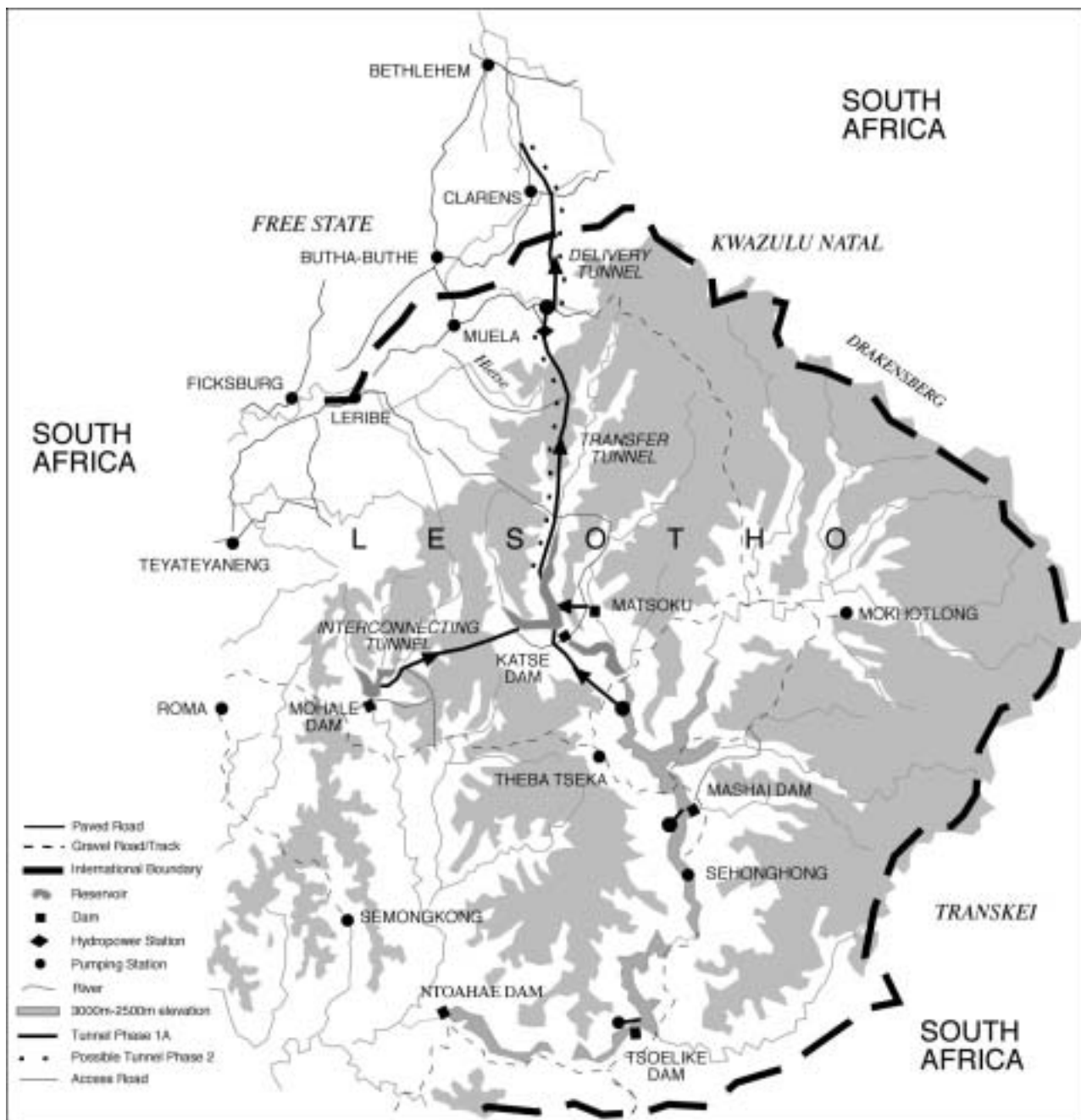
mining or eco-tourism (there were no other real options) — development would and *should* come to Lesotho. But dams, mines, and eco-lodges are but tools, means to an end, not the end itself. The issue for me, and for Highlanders was: Who benefits, and who pays?

Sooner or later the Mohale Dam (LHWP Phase 1b) would start to fill, just as Katse had filled four years earlier. Based on lessons from that previous experience and uncontested documents, when Mohale did rise: An endemic Maloti Minnow would likely go extinct; blackfly habitat would spread disease; erosion would increase; clusters of earthquakes would rock the mountains; waters rising upstream would uproot some 2,000 people; shrinking waters and new roads would impact 20,000 downstream; and the tariffs on Johannesburg water would rise threefold, spurring more protests against steep consumer-price hikes. Dam critics have seized

on these social and environmental costs to fuel opposition; Mohale's displaced people and dying species were becoming poster children in the global anti-dam crusade.

I sympathized but was not too surprised; these impacts followed the pattern of large dams worldwide. To me a more dynamic aspect was the economic and political waves that occur while transforming water into wealth at every level. Basotho Highlanders affectionately refer to water as “white gold — *khauta e ts'oeu.*” It remains the one natural resource that Lesotho possesses and well-endowed South Africa covets. The other resource, migratory male muscle, has plunged in value some 75 percent in income and jobs due to mine-industry contraction and a labor glut.

‘White gold’ binds the Highlander family to its







*Shovels and saddles: A visually stunning but illiterate rural isolation without luxuries, where villages are connected only by bridle trail*

people, the people to their livestock and crops, and food to the nation's thin, terraced soils — only 9 percent of which are arable. Development officials point out that undammed white gold is fleeting, seasonal and unpredictable; it fluctuates like the value of weak currency stashed in a mattress. In contrast, a federal dam acts like a federal reserve bank; stored water had risen behind Katse like gold in a safe.

The problem with that analogy lies in control. The moment it is dammed, white gold is no longer the Highlander's to spend or invest. It belongs across the border and the Maluti Mountains, at the other end of the LHWP pipes, canals, tunnels and rivers, in Johannesburg, whose residents affectionately refer to their metropolis as 'Igoli,' the city of gold. Real gold. Gold that would act as a magnet for the For-ex market, the bond market, export credit and commercial loans, real banks and development banks — even, sneaking past apartheid restrictions, the World Bank. Concentrated money tends to seduce, and not just multinational construction companies.

I won't pretend I'm thrilled about LHWP's priorities — delivering clear water to industry 200 miles away while failing to provide drinking water to families living 200 yards from the Dam. Yet I also won't pretend that, if I were Lesotho's king or Prime Minister, and had been offered \$44 million a year in royalties, plus \$20 million in electricity sales, plus majority ownership in the multi-

billion dollar investment, plus a network of asphalt roads, plus 7,000 temporary jobs (and scattered clinics, sports fields and schools thrown in for good measure), while all I had to do was sit back and let my neighbor dam my rivers that would eventually flow to them anyway, Hell, I'd find it extremely difficult to refuse. Especially since my neighbor had the military might and inclination to do so regardless.

So were these mega-dams the result of savvy, hard-nosed partnerships, or a Faustian bargain on Lesotho's part? The growing numbers of dam opponents outside the country said that as the dams filled, Lesotho was draining its soul and giving its blood away for free. Perhaps. But that's not always how local Highlanders saw it. They weren't ideologically against the LHWP dams on principle. They just wanted more money in compensation for the loss of their streams, homes, livelihoods, pastures, farms and woodlands. They wanted more *Igoli* in exchange for *khauta e ts'oeu*. One of Mohale's last families to be displaced, for example, was holding out for a few hundred dollars in moving expenses.

Given the relatively small number of people impacted (by comparison, China's Three Gorges Dam is displacing the equivalent of several million, or two entire Lesothos), and the relative pittance they were seeking, why didn't the LHWP simply 'buy off' its domestic opposition? A Hobbesian answer: because they didn't have

to. The Highlander opposition was too poor, dispersed, divided and politically weak to collectively demand what they felt they deserved.

A more generous answer: even if LHWP wanted to (and like all development officials and businessmen, they believed they *did* want to), there are some things accountants and engineers just can't calculate. I spent some time with Jacob Lenka and Mothusi Seqhee, two articulate leaders of Lesotho's Transformation Resource Center (TRC), an NGO that educates Highlanders about their rights, and seeks to build unity among impacted people and environments. They walked me through the deliberate and careless inequities that arise between big dams and weak peoples: the 'lost' compensation payments, the lack of clean water, the damaged buildings, the unfulfilled promises of job training, the crowded pastures and resentful hostility from lowland host communities to which the displaced were relocated.

Many of these social-impact patterns were echoes of other large dams I had read and written about elsewhere. Some were new. None make it onto the pages of Lesotho's official tourist brochures. For example, the most important cash crop in the Highlands around Mphahlele was not beans, wheat, or alfalfa. It was *dagga*, or marijuana, a crop that, reportedly, makes up in cost-effective value what it lacks in quality and was grown by 70 percent of dam-affected households. LHWP compensates for lost farmland. But since *dagga* is illegal, it is not included in the compensation policy, thus reducing household incomes by 90 percent.

I asked TRC why inequities kept happening, despite lessons from only a few years earlier at Katse. I expected some political, invective-filled rant, but their calm answer made infinite sense. "Look, the LHWP people are trained as expert technicians," said Jacob. "They are hydrologists, mathematicians, problem solvers. But working with a Highland social community is not like engineering. It's messy. Confusing. They just don't know what to do, so they turn away and don't do anything."

In other words, the LHWP planners spent so much time and energy reaching consensus and setting up infrastructure for how and where to deliver the precious 'white gold' to *Igoli*, that they didn't ever really understand the far more complex social infrastructure for how and where to deliver *real* gold back to High-



*Coronation ceremony for a chief: The natural horsemanship of Highlanders leaves one deeply impressed, even with those distinct woven Basotho hats.*

landers. The results would be predictable.

\* \* \*

The first Highlander I met after crossing the border was a policeman hoping to wangle a bribe. Nothing personal — he was stopping all vehicles on the road to Malealea. Nor was he threatening, exclaiming cheerfully his excitement about California and how he'd like to visit. And he wasn't the first or last to wheedle me in Africa (alas). But after several minutes of such banter it grew clear that he was angling for something I wasn't about to volunteer. Finally, still smiling, he blurted out: "Yes, so, why you don't bring us gifts when you come here to visit?"

"Ah, yes, but we *do*. I bring gifts of money to people who in exchange give me food, or drinks, or performances, or places to stay, or arts and crafts they make."

"Hmm. So no gift for me?"

"Our gifts are to support the local economy, *your taxpayer's* local economy."

He nodded, reluctantly taking in this reasoning.



Then, brightening, he announced a novel idea: “But...I could be an economy!”

Indeed he could be. For Lesotho — perhaps like many young African nations in transition — had little history, structure and stability upon which to develop resource-based democratic capitalism... little except water and tribal loyalty. To be sure, tribal allegiance and respect still existed; I saw this manifest in a splendid, all-day-long coronation ceremony for a new young chief. King Letsie spoke. The prince spoke. The elders spoke. Then, nervous at such pressure suddenly placed on his shoulders, the new chief tried to speak, choked his lines and practically broke down in tears.

Yet tribal allegiance seemed based on a social system where everyone was equally poor, and so could trade only on a currency of respect. The moment the LHWP began transforming that ‘white gold’ into real gold, opportunities for gifts, bribery and corruption multiplied all along the dams’ routes to development.

At first, roads seemed the exception. Even the most intransigent mega-dam haters privately conceded to me that while they would do away with vertical concrete, they rather liked the horizontal asphalt. Across the spectrum, from activists to LHWP officials, Lesotho seemed more proud of her dam-linking roads than of her dams themselves. Yet road-impacts on the Highlander communities, while less visible, gradually sank in, until they seemed to some even more insidious than the dams. Roads opened commerce, trade, tourism and competitive access to a broader range of consumer markets. Of course, like Wal-Marts, roads also put many local businesses and packhorse traders out of business. Indeed, anthropologist James Ferguson argued that road construction impoverished Highlanders further, as markets undermined local food production and officials milked more taxes and fees from newly accessible peasants. This analysis seemed a bit of a stretch until I recalled that smil-



*Flower v. Power: The spiral aloe, Lesotho’s national plant and symbol of the Highlands, is endangered by LHWP dams and roads, but is being cultivated as part of highland environmental mitigation.*

ing corrupt cop, hoping I’d help him ‘be an economy.’ His boss made him relent — “They’re American. Let them pass.” What happened to Highlanders who had nowhere else to go.

One highlander was Benedict Leuta, displaced by Katse Dam. “The roads they have built are the only good thing I can think of,” he said of the project. But then he recalled how road culverts caused erosion in his fields and a LHWP road covered village wells, without compensating anyone. How did they drink? “We had to pay the government to come help us bring water down from high in the mountains.”

I confess a romantic Westerner’s weakness for the picturesque traditions and trappings of Africa’s tribal past — dances, foods, religions, masks, costumes, drink, contests, ceremony, song and laughter. But on closer reflection I found that tribal/feudal life can be as isolated and suffocating as J. & W.’s expat boredom (minus the luxuries of *foie gras*, Merlot, Shakespeare, Mozart, flush toilets and DSTV). The aim of the LHWP was to ‘liberate’ Highlanders from their old dead-end ruts, hire locally when possible, and specifically “leave impacted communities better off than before.” Great. The tool for this was the job-retraining center at the new crossroads town of Thaba Tseka. Even better. I saw the glossy photos of smiling, dam-displaced women and men learning new trades and skills and crafts as part of their compensation package. It was a welcome improvement over past simplistic ‘one-time-cash-for-land’ handouts to household fathers, who relished his instantly fat pocket but who had no means or place or community in which to secure a long-term livelihood. But when I looked for it on the road between Molele and Katse, the center had become “a joke,” corrupted to the core. Rather than make affected people economically independent, it had bypassed Highlander communities to favor lowlanders with connections and help increase profit margins on poultry and pig farming. Said Benedict Leuta: “The chiefs gained because they were sub-contracted to the (LHWP) and also received bribes from many people.”

Bribery? Corruption? In *Africa*? Okay, so this should come as no surprise to anyone. Greased palms — even ‘soft-money political-action campaign’ contributions in the U.S. — are the way of the political world. But there is the matter of scale. Where \$100,000 might help elect a local politician who might change his vote in America, that same amount in Lesotho will change a whole society, if not a country.

In the copious propaganda listing the superlatives of its dams, the LHWP makes no boast of what should rightly be seen as its most exciting accomplishment to date: its role in implicating 12 of the ‘largest’ multinational corporations in international bribery; for demanding the ‘highest’ amounts to get contracts; and by triggering the ‘world’s biggest’ anti-corruption drive, uniting the World Bank and other lending development institu-

tions. A Lesotho executive middleman named Mr. Sole was imprisoned for his role in 48 corrupt and fraudulent transactions, including 46 bribes. One Canadian company, Acres International, which hired him as its representative 'agent', was guilty of paying him \$674,000. That much is legal. But like the other multinational construction firms from Germany, France, Britain, Italy and Switzerland (happily, not the squeaky clean U.S.) Acres claimed it was 'a shock' (shocked!) to learn that two thirds of its payment was then passed on under the table in LHWP contract-related 'gifts.' Acres has now been fined an unprecedented \$2.2 million.

Mr. Sole was apparently not a modest or unrepentant man, even standing in the dock. These payments, or gifts, are merely a cost of doing business, he said. Everybody does it: "The scale of the bribery is related to the scale of the project." Looking at the international transactions, I can't but wonder whether the reverse may be equally true.

Whether money is distributed transparently or 'informally' as gifts leads to another question: When currents become currency, who gets to distribute the funds? Lesotho before the LHWP was a sleepy, rural, decentralized realm, with 19 regional chiefs who in turn answered to the king. Thieves stole cattle and tribes feuded over arable land. The small, weak military served mostly a ceremonial role. But given the poverty, there wasn't much in any place worth really fighting over. After the LHWP contract was signed with South Africa, there was. Suddenly all learned that there would be a vast concentration of water and electrical power and money. Naturally, those chiefs' allegiance shifted from royalty to *royalties*.

With this huge new pie, everyone wanted a piece. Coup followed coup, and factions arose almost at the pace and proportion of the water rising in the brand-new Katse Dam. After the first elections in 1998 returned a party that the existing regime didn't like, riots broke out in the capital of Maseru. To quell the riots, Lesotho declared a state of emergency and invited armed intervention from Botswana and South Africa. Rather than stopping at the riots in lowland Maseru, however, the South African special-forces 44 Parachute Brigade flew on directly to the Maluti Mountain highlands at Katse Dam, guarded by 16 to 27 (reports vary only in numbers) sleeping Lesotho Defense Force soldiers, and opened fire, killing them all. The intervention still angers Lesotho people I visited. To the injury of the deaths and looting (with an estimated 20,000 lost jobs and investor confidence shattered) came the insult that South Africa's mili-

tary priority was to secure its own precious water first, and protect Lesotho's people and economy only second.

\* \* \*

Some observers excitedly assert that that invasion was the world's first 'water war.' While intriguing, the claim falls short on several counts. The two nations weren't competing over the water, just protecting their investment during a political upheaval. The dam was an expression of solidarity, not hostility. Finally, despite real or imagined threats, the dam itself could not be blown up by any amount of explosives. Why not? Because it was built to withstand massive manmade earthquakes.

'Manmade earthquakes' are a fascinating, if little known side effect of large dams, and one that LHWP deserves credit for taking seriously. Reservoir-induced-seismicity (RIS), as it is called, occurs through the unpredictable combination of water's sheer mass, its lubrication qualities as it percolates down through rock, and the stress patterns that result when a dam is filled or lowered. In crude terms, it's akin to adding a leaky swimming pool to the new, cantilevered second-story wing of a house. Since most dams are logically built in mountainous (i.e. already tectonically unstable) regions, one finds cause for concern.



*Maletsunyane Falls: Africa's beautiful and highest single drop falls, but watch out for the giant water snakes lurking in the pool below.*



Engineers have recorded RIS elsewhere, from the Zambezi's Kariba Dam (6.2 on the Richter scale, as the dam filled) to California's Oroville Dam (5.7, seven years after filling). And in the Highlands? Since Katse began to fill, there have been more than 100 RIS 'events' around the reservoir. The largest so far (3.5 on the Richter scale) ripped a 1.7-kilometer-long crack in the mountain just north of the dam wall, and through Ha Mapeleng village. This exposes an interesting facet to what happens when, in the name of development, one of the world's poorest, most illiterate feudal societies must absorb overnight the world's most complex and high-tech economic invasions.

When fears are not explained or allayed, they tend to fuse. A paradox of Basotho Highlanders is that the source of their wealth is the very source of their fear. They love, need and use shallow 'white gold' but are terrified of deep water. On a day-long trek to Maletsunyane Falls, one of the most picturesque places I have ever seen, I expressed my desire to hike down to the pools at the base of the falls. Vincent, our Basotho guide, pointed out the narrow descending trail but refused to come along.

"Why not?"

"There is a too large snake that lives down there. Too huge. I am too afraid."

Lest anyone think this was a cover for other reasons, I should say that all week Vincent proved extraordinarily patient, courteous, energetic and brave. He rode down rocky steep slopes fully loaded where I would inch down, crawling on hands and knees, and herded us like cats

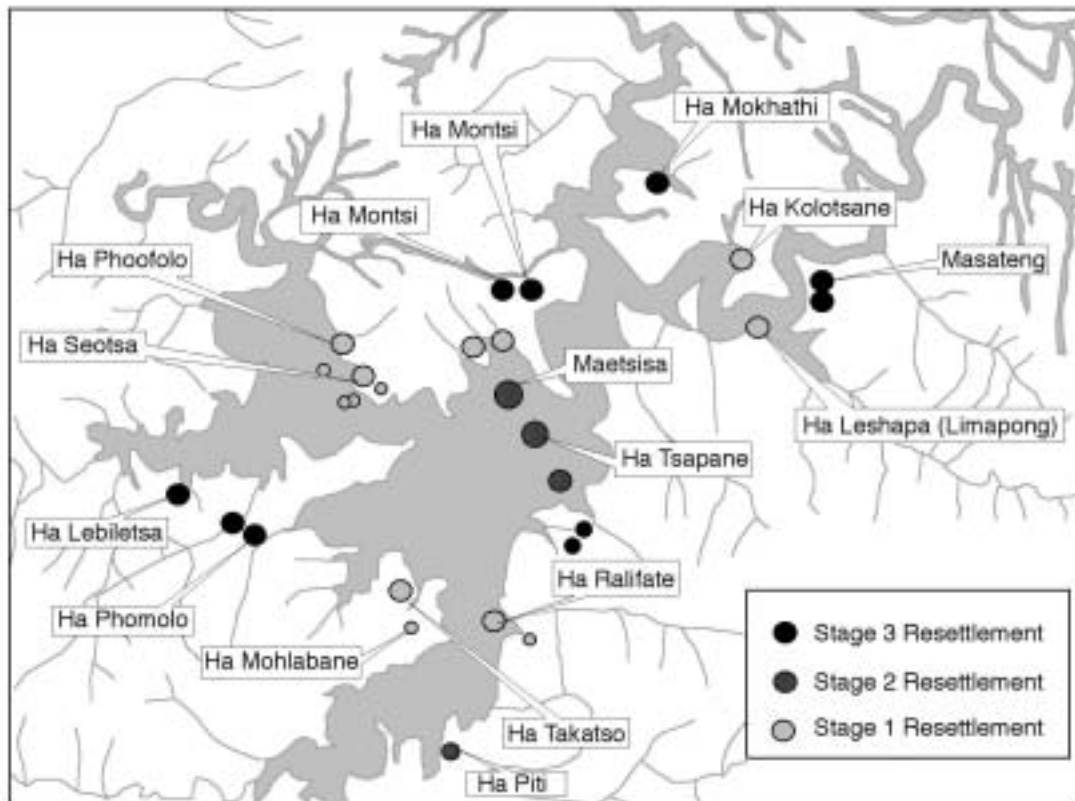
when we veered down the wrong divergent trails.

"A giant snake? Where?"

"Down there! By that pool. The snake is too big. Too huge."

He was smiling nervously, but not at all joking. His fear was genuine, and I respected it without being deterred by it (the icy water was uninviting, but I got roped into playing chicken with a fellow trekker). Vincent's fear began at an early age when, like all Highlander children I asked, he was warned of 'khanyapa' and 'fito,' river snakes are said to dwell in deep pools. Since Highlanders often can't swim, this warning may be pragmatic folk wisdom, keeping kids from slipping in and drowning. But the image has interesting permutations, not to mention parallels with the Loch Ness monster of another rural Highlander people. Some Highlanders believe river snakes dislike low rivers because they prefer to remain hidden; and indeed LHWP dams may reduce flows 45-85 percent. They also dislike warm water, and find it difficult to breathe during low flows, which will be exposed as dams fill. When these serpents are angry, some people believe they drown human passersby and suck their blood. The dams are unfenced, and I found bloated carcasses of drowned sheep, and read accounts of villagers who had fallen in.

When that earthquake ripped through villages around the rapidly filling Katse Dam, damaging mud-and-stone-houses, the Highlanders were understandably terrified. LHWP propaganda portrays their reaction in



*Proposed Mohale Dam of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, and the villages that will be inundated by its 23-square-kilometer reservoir (indicated by black dots). Project authorities estimate that 300-400 households (up to 2,500 people) will be forced to leave their land and homes. The reservoir will flood some of the area's best farm land. In addition to flooded villages, others will be affected by road construction and other project activities.*



*The almost-completed Mohale Dam: Sooner or later, it will be filled, cutting downstream flows 45-70 percent, and perhaps awakening 'khanyapa' and 'fito'.*

terms of a quaint, folksy anecdote, but can't deny that given competing explanations — an irate snake, or a phenomenon called 'reservoir-induced seismicity' — the former makes as much sense as the latter, and becomes a formidable obstacle. To LHWP's credit, half the frightened villagers accepted an offer to be relocated a kilometer higher in new quake-resistant houses, while those remaining received the same, but kept a watchful eye out for the snake.

\* \* \*

At Mohale, I later learned that the delay in approval to close the gates was due to a complex combination of political and financial pressures on the World Bank to adhere to its own guidelines. It has been showcasing LHWP as a dam project that had learned the lessons of the past and had made much-needed improvements for all stakeholders involved. The international spotlight was on the dam, not just for the high-profile bribery case being prosecuted in court, but for how it held up in the court of global and public opinion. I was told by various sources that with its reputation at stake, the bank wanted to take no chances, even if that meant expensively delaying filling the dam for a year.

But I found that out only through asking dozens of officials. There was no official story, leaving some Highlanders to assume the delay might be due to the snakes. One environmental-impact statement advised that river snakes should be taken seriously even if they exist only in human imagination "because the belief in their existence gives meaning and also guides action" of Highlanders. That report considered the snakes a "social fence" against exploitation of resources in ecologically delicate areas of the river believed to be the snake's homes.

In that respect the giant snakes may be the last crucial vestige of the strong link between Highlanders and their 'white gold.' They embody the mystery and power and unpredictable forces within rivers that can't be mea-

sured, tapped, drunk, harnessed or diverted.

\* \* \*

Four hours after waking to dynamite, I'd packed to leave. J. was at work, but I asked W. for their phone, address and e-mail contacts in case I came through again in the next few weeks. She paused. "Well, sure, here's both our addresses," she said. "But I won't be here." She explained that after two years together, joined by the dam, they were parting, going separate ways. She had been sleeping on the couch or the spare room I'd occupied last night. It seemed the two-year process to fill Mohale dam had drained their love affair.

I mumbled an awkward apology and said that I was sorry. "Don't be," she said. "I'm just sorry things seemed tense since you arrived. It's this place. What it does to you." Trapped within Mohale City, against the excitement and awe of a massive project, she explained that many such relationships had frayed and faltered, some bitterly and violently.

LHWP dams may divide people by class, nationality and race, but the river's water snakes don't seem to discriminate. Perhaps sustainable water development may come only when expats inside a protective fence see their fates linked with locals outside, or when lowlanders paying much to acquire white gold see their binding connection to Highlanders who sacrificed even more to supply it.

"Well," I said, shouldering my duffel and hugging W. good-bye "It was generous of you to take me in after a week on the trail without hot showers, good food, wine, electricity or TV. I confess I missed them. Thanks for your hospitality and for welcoming me out of the wilds back into reality."

She looked at me, then jerked her arm in a sweeping arc that took in Mohale City, security gates, massive dam, delays, divorces, dynamited access roads, bribes, corruption, manmade earthquakes, invisible giant snakes, and sputtered: "You call this *reality*?" □



## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

### Fellows and their Activities

---

#### **Alexander Brenner**

(June 2002 - 2004) • **EAST ASIA**

A linguist who has worked as a French-language instructor with the Rassias Foundation at Dartmouth College and also has proficient Mandarin and Spanish, upper-intermediate Italian, conversational German and Portuguese, and beginning Cantonese, Alex received a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and has just completed a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He is preparing for his two-year ICWA fellowship in China with four months of intensive Mandarin-language study in Beijing. His fellowship will focus on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

#### **Martha Farnelo**

(April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

#### **Andrew Rice**

(May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will

be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

#### **Matthew Z. Wheeler**

(October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

#### **James G. Workman**

(January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of freshwater supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-429X**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock St., Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548  
E-Mail: [ICWA@valley.net](mailto:ICWA@valley.net)  
Fax: (603) 643-9599  
Web Site: [www.icwa.org](http://www.icwa.org)

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin  
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson  
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

©2002 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation. The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.

Author: Workman, James G  
Title: ICWA Letters - Sub-Saharan Africa  
ISSN: 1083-429X  
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH  
Material Type: Serial  
Language: English  
Frequency: Monthly  
Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia; Mideast/North Africa; Europe/Russia; The Americas

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.