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ABSTRACT

While the benefits of mega-dams are irrefutable, the destruction they entail necessitates critical attention. This paper engages with alternative histories on Kariba Dam to index the precarization of indigenous people and the degradation of the environment. I make the claim that the rhetoric and architecture of hydro-modernity drowns the brutal violence that subtends it. The paper pursues a close hydro-critical reading of three selected texts on Kariba Dam: Frank Clements' *Kariba: The Struggle with the River God* (1959), David Howarth's *The Shadow of the Dam* (1961) and Bob Nyanja's film *Nyaminyami: The River God* (2018). Although the selected works are largely binary and are informed by colonial schemas, my watery analysis aims to lay bare these structures and highlight the points at which these binaries become unsustainable. I draw on Isabel Hofmeyr, Sarah Nuttall and Charne Lavery's lens of the hydro-infrastructural (2022), Hofmeyr's concept of hydrocolonialism (2022) and Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence (2011) as a combination of theories that offer ways to think about water infrastructures and hydrological themes from an ecological and postcolonial perspective.

KEYWORDS

hydrocolonialism; slow violence; Kariba Dam; Nyaminyami; Tonga people; hydro-modernization; Zambezi River

In discourses of development, mega-dams signal human triumph over nature and the pinnacle of hydro-modernity. Here, emphasis is placed on clean electricity, water retention and waste management, but these come with devastating social and ecological consequences. It is in this light that I engage with alternative histories on Kariba Dam to surface the precarization of indigenous people and the environment. To explore this dynamic, I read Frank Clements' *Kariba: The Struggle with the River God* (1959), David Howarth's *The Shadow of the Dam* (1961) and Bob Nyanja's documentary *Nyaminyami: The River God* (2018). These creative works embody alternative rationalities to reflect and refract hydro-modernity. But beyond politics of victimhood, the paper recognizes the agency, resilience and resistance of local communities and nature. My reading draws on Isabel Hofmeyr's concept of hydrocolonialism (2022), Hofmeyr, Sarah Nuttall and Charne Lavery's lens of the hydro-infrastructural (2022) and Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence (2011).

A hydrocolonial framework nuances decolonial thought by focalizing slippages and seepages that attend human and nonhuman entanglements. In the context of this

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paper, centring the colonial encounter between the British and the Tonga draws attention to the alternate histories of the mega-dam and other ways of relating with water beyond secularizing it. As Isabel Hofmeyr, Sarah Nuttall and Charne Lavery explain,

> hydrocolonialism seeks to critique colonial constructions and representations of water and to undo these. One method for relativising such constructions is to examine older indigenous epistemologies around water and the oceans while paying attention to the ways in which these precolonial and colonial hydro-epistemologies interact and creolize. (313)

Engaging with indigenous hydro-imaginaries surfaces the agency of water, drawing attention to nature's push-back strategies against sustained anthropocentric wounding. For the purposes of this paper, I read nature's agency and potency as embodied in the water deity Nyaminyami.

Hydro-infrastructural analysis considers 'the politics and poetics of infrastructures with and in relation to water, including in its materiality' (Hofmeyr, Nuttall and Lavery 311). It recognizes that water infrastructures embody and exude power beyond their utilitarian value. This lens 'implies subjecting the dominant analytical modes of the infrastructural to water, liquidity, wetness' (311). Such a watery turn seeks to nuance and relativize the rigid binaries that come with land-based epistemes. This method of reading for water engages with the 'spiritual and mythic alongside immersive and material' (313) techniques to deconstruct the myths of (de)colonization. Although land was and continues to be a site of intense contestation, Hofmeyr, Nuttall and Lavery remind us that 'water too has long been a vector of dispossession and inequality. Bringing water into the frame deepens, rather than detracts from, understandings of the afterlives of colonial violence' (305). Taking its cue from them, my watery reading 'follows the sensory, political and agentive power of water' (303) in the selected texts. If dry epistemes of postcolonialism champion decolonization and inspire dry narratives, what potentialities and complexities arise when water is added to the equation? I argue that the paradoxes, continuities and discontinuities of (de)colonization become more noticeable.

Nixon's notion of slow violence offers further insights into how the deluge of colonial modernization erodes indigenous communities, 'people who live in the path of progress,' as anthropologist Shannon Morreira aptly describes them (283). Nixon brings attention to how hyper-capitalism instigates deferred damage to the environment and local people. Being inconspicuous and unspectacular, slow violence escapes the radar of mainstream discourse that is preoccupied with melodrama. As Nixon explains, 'it is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence. Their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives' (4). To undo this invisibilization and erasure, Nixon invites creative artists who can 'devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to capture the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects' (3). This paper interrogates cultural works that dramatize the Kariba Dam saga. Besides offering insights into how mega-dams ruin riverine communities, Nixon, Hofmeyr, Nuttall and Lavery also disrupt the flattening discourses of modernization by foregrounding resistance and resilience. I argue that the damming of the waters of Zambezi River metaphorizes the damming, if not damning, of Tonga people and the non-human.

Howarth's *The Shadow of the Dam* (1961) dramatizes the saga surrounding the construction of Kariba Dam (1956–1959), a reservoir designed to power the rapid

industrialization of the short-lived Central African Federation (CAF) at the expense of Tonga people. The federation was designed to consolidate British colonization in Southern Africa amidst growing calls for decolonization on the continent. Following this logic, *The Shadow of the Dam* exhibits the hubris and insouciance of colonialism. Its linear plot presents the construction of Kariba Dam as inevitable and beneficial to all. Such a universalizing logic of modernization misapprehends a process that I argue was evitable, callous and ruinous. I read *The Shadow of the Dam* against the grain to surface the underbelly of mega-dams and the illusory promises of modernization.

Frank Clements' *Kariba: The Struggle with the River God* (1959) and Nyanja's documentary *Nyaminyami: The River God* (1981) gesture toward resistance to hydro-modernization. Clements' adventure novel deploys the spirituality, materiality and agency of water to demonstrate how the building of Kariba Dam encountered formidable resistance. To the Tonga, Zambezi River was (and is) animated with the spirit of Nyaminyami the water deity, instantiating what Hofmeyr terms inspirited waters (2022).[1] Clements and Nyanja personify the river and deploy its materiality for narrativization purposes. Nyanja represents the multiple sides of Nyaminyami through cinematic shots of violent waterfalls (His menacing side), tranquil flowing waters (His nurturing side) and whirlpool (His divinity). Clements militarizes Zambezi River through graphic descriptions of floods and mudslides. The river assumes agency as it confronts anthropogenic practices. In reading Nyaminyami's militance, the paper turns to Nyanja's text that showcases interviews conducted with Tonga people. What emerges from these is a complex picture of a river deity who is no different from other prominent deities. The three texts largely rehash colonial and anticolonial binaries in a troubling manner. I problematize this binarization by surfacing those moments at which they become untenable.

Prior Evacuation

In a ploy to rationalize and sanitize the brutal violence of colonization, colonial literature frames indigenous people as sub-human. Joshua Matanzima explains that 'African subjectivity and Africanity emerge in the post-Enlightenment Eurocentric discourse of identity as disabled, deficient, and lacking essence or ontology: lacking souls, religion, history, civilization, development, democracy, human rights, and ethics' (76). Following this line of thought, *The Shadow of the Dam* portrays Tonga people as 'the simplest and most primitive of all people in that part of Africa' (18). In this way, British colonization is framed as 'the white man's burden' (to borrow Rudyard Kipling's formulation) of rescuing Tonga people from stagnation and primitivism. The Tonga are also depicted as 'irrational' and 'superstitious' as opposed to 'logical' and 'scientific' Europeans. For instance, Howarth contrasts 'the trained legal mind' of a white Rhodesian district officer (Alex) to 'the illiterate native intelligence' (82) of Chief Chipepo (a Tonga member of the Gwembe Valley Native Authority). Disparaging the mental faculties of Tonga people is designed to rob them of their voices, dignity and humanity. This ideological evacuation sets them up for physical colonization and sanitizes the violence that subtends it.

The above indexes what Nixon describes as 'developer-dispossessors who descend from other time zones to impose on habitable environments unsustainable calculations about what constitutes the duration of human gain' (17). Imposing capitalist temporalities on the Tonga constituted a traumatic severance from their measures of time, production

and life. Because of strategic primitivization and invisibilization, *The Shadow of the Dam* reveals that their interests 'carried little weight compared with the industrial interests of the country. If Kariba was built, the Tonga would have to be moved' (38).[2] It is on this basis that the Rhodesian government decided that Tonga people 'should suffer for the sake of the progress of the country as a whole' (40). Unseen and unheard, the Tonga were sacrificed at the altar of hydro-modernization as they were evacuated to pave the way for a colonial economy from which they were excluded.

Rhodesian government officials and the British Queen become implausible mouthpieces for the dehumanized Tonga people. The District Commissioner becomes 'their magistrate, the highest of all human authorities they knew; and he was also their advisor and advocate, the man they turned to in any serious trouble which beset them, so that they referred to him in their language as their father' (25). Here we witness the erasure of local leadership that had served Tonga people for centuries. The metaphor of a father captures the skewed paternalist relationship of the colonizer and colonized. This deification of colonial administrators and infantilization of indigenous people legitimizes the authority, decisions and actions of the colonial regime.

Later in the text, the Rhodesian Governor meets Tonga people who are resisting relocation. We read:

> Another of the Congress men joined in and said: 'But the Native Authority agreed that the dam should be built, and did they inform people about Kariba? Did the people agree that the dam was to be built?'
>
> 'The Native Authority were not consulted before the decision to build Kariba was taken,' the Governor said.
>
> 'Then we will stay on our God-given land, water or not,' the man replied. 'How can this be decided without our agreeing?'
>
> '*In big matters like this, little people are not consulted,' the Governor said. 'This is a very big matter. In big matters the Queen does not consult small men.*' (164; my emphasis)

Similarly, when a local activist Khumbula sends a petition to Queen Elizabeth imploring her 'to appoint a commission, mostly of Africans from West Africa, to enquire whether it was really in the interests of the country to obtain the benefits of Kariba at the expense of suffering for the Tonga, and whether atomic energy could not be used instead' (91), a terse response was sent to Khumbula. It informed him that 'the Queen was advised that the petitioner was not representative of the people concerned and did not express any genuine grievances, and that the petition for a commission was not granted' (91). Two questions arise from the Queen's response: what can be a more genuine grievance than the loss of land, and who is best positioned to speak for Tonga people if not Khumbula, a seasoned local politician? The condescending dismissal of the legitimate concerns of Tonga people indexes the invisibilization of colonized subjects. Strategically and problematically, as guardian of the British Empire, the Queen appoints herself the spokesperson for Tonga people. This is a question of power under the broader mission of colonization. As invisibles, Khumbula and Tonga people do not exist.

When some Tonga people invoke the language of war to register their presence, the Rhodesian government silences them. Howarth explains that many white Rhodesians

> argued that the Tonga, and similar simple people, had never been governed in their history by anything but compulsion; and so, when they met a civilized problem which

> they could not possibly understand, it was kinder to tell them exactly what to do and to see that they did it, whether they seemed at the time to like it or not. (106)

Reducing such complexities to primitive versus civilized approaches disguises and justifies the barbaric displacement of indigenous people. Elsewhere, Arundhati Roy describes this reductionism as 'a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of "Development" versus a sort of neo-Luddite impulse – an irrational, emotional "Anti-Development" resistance, fuelled by an arcadian, pre-industrial dream' (2). Such a framing along flattening lines of prejudice serves to legitimize and sanitize colonial violence. Later when another rebellion occurs, we read in *The Shadow of the Dam* how the District Officer 'immediately recognized men whom he knew quite well and was horrified at this final change in their demeanour, this relapse into savagery' (141). By drawing on the stereotype of the savage other, Howarth casts colonial violence as a necessary antidote to barbarism. To borrow from Roy's wording, he 'confers on it a false legitimacy' (2). It is telling that Howarth ascribes barbarism to Tonga resistance but not to colonization. As Tonga headman Namakungulu confides, 'when the Queen decided to close the Zambezi River, she decided to kill everybody. If the Queen wishes to kill us, we cannot run away' (169). It is critical to mention that Howarth's incorporation of Tonga voices serves to caricature and marginalize rather than recuperate and humanize their besmirched image in colonial discourse. In mobilizing and emphasizing death-speak, he expresses the sentiment of many Tonga people who knew that damming the waters of the Zambezi was damning them to a literal and metaphoric death.

Tonga lives become what Judith Butler (2009) in the context of the so-called USA global war on terror terms ungrievable lives. Butler reflects on the question

> whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable. We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all. We can see the division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities, and to defend them against the lives of others – even if it means taking those latter lives. (38)

I would contend that the hydrocolonization of the Zambezi Valley rendered Tonga lives unliveable, disposable and ungrievable.

Costs and Losses

It is impossible to measure the trauma and losses that indigenous people experience when vital links to the environment that have been cultivated over centuries are abruptly ruptured. These relationships are as much instrumental and material as they are spiritual and abstract. Such concerns that escape the techno-speak of modernization and the prejudices of colonial discourse constitute what I am terming alternative histories of mega-dams. Tonga people lost that which had hitherto made their lives liveable and worthwhile.

The shores of Zambezi River nourished these riverine people in irreplaceable ways. Considering the erratic rains and arid soils of the Gwembe Valley, the alluvial soils and perennial waters of Zambezi River were indispensable to their riparian agronomic system. Isaacson explains that 'patterns of food production, including selection of the most

appropriate crops and amounts planted, with reference to the season and different micro-ecological zones, were finely tuned to changes in the river's discharge rates as well as variations in soils and sunlight' (107).[3] This fertility meant that Tonga people could plant crops throughout the year. Allen Isaacson further notes that their protein needs were inextricably tied to Zambezi River through the provision of fish and attracting game to its shores. In the same vein, the banks of the river provided pasture for livestock. Unsurprisingly, Tonga people cherished and revered Zambezi River. Uprooting them from vitalizing shores and dumping them in hostile upland areas constituted a death sentence. As Terrence Mashingaidze explains, 'their villages were located between or adjacent to the recently established state-owned wild animal sanctuaries that made them vulnerable to incessant low crop yields, crop marauding animals and the tsetse-induced livestock disease, trypanosomiasis or nagana' (22).

It is indicative of the futility of political decolonization that six decades later Tonga resettlement areas still lack basic amenities such as water and electricity despite their proximity to Lake Kariba. The lake sustains lucrative economies, industries and luxurious lifestyles and yet the locals who were sacrificed to facilitate its construction experience underdevelopment and immiseration.[4] This exemplifies Nixon's resource law of inverse proximity where closeness to a natural resource fails to bring tangible benefits to local populations. Isaacson identifies the same dynamic in Mozambique where the construction of Cahora Bassa (again along Zambezi River) has failed to benefit the locals. He deplores the fact that 'despite official plans calling for the electrification of the countryside, almost a half-century after independence, the power grid from Cahora Bassa reaches only 30 percent of the population, primarily in urban areas and provincial and district capitals' (118). For these orphans of hydro-modernity, mega-dams are symbols of violence, loss, trauma and betrayal. Their architectural splendour reminds them of the hydrocolonial encounter that plunged them into a seemingly endless crisis. Mega-dam projects drown the interests of indigenous communities and exposes them to unforeseen long-term harm, what Nixon aptly terms slow violence.[5]

The displacement of Tonga people from the shores of Zambezi River also marked spiritual violence as their religious beliefs were desecrated. This despoliation followed a sustained dismissal of Nyaminyami beliefs as superstitious, in colonial discourse. However, I argue that the attributes of Nyaminyami are not different from other divinities such as Jehovah of the Judaic tradition. For instance, Nyanja's documentary indicates that no one has seen Nyaminyami. Ninety-one-year-old Jabula Kangwenda, the one person who claims to have seen the river god's shoulders, turns blind. These attributes resonate with Exodus 33:20 in the Bible (the King James Version), which warns 'Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.' The above suggests that it is prejudice rather than substance that underlies the disavowal of Nyaminyami in colonial discourse.

Like other deities, the physical characteristics of Nyaminyami are mysterious. In the documentary, ambassador Hapunda avers that Nyaminyami 'was neither a human being nor an ordinary creature. It was a combination of a fish, some kind of snake and also with human features.' The voiceover narrator adds that 'Nyaminyami, the river god, is a snake-like dragon, but with a fish's head.' It is instructive that the water deity belongs simultaneously to the aquatic, reptilian and mammalian families, explaining His supernatural powers. Nyaminyami draws attention to a deep interspecies connection within Tonga cosmological beliefs that fosters symbiotic relationships.

Nyaminyami also registers His presence through mysterious acts.[6] In the documentary, Kangwenda discloses that 'every time it came out, the water would go in reverse. Therefore, water would mysteriously flow unnaturally.' In another scene, the presence of this river deity is visualized as a whirlwind sweeping across the water. In an extreme close shot, the camera zooms in on the eye of spinning waves of water whose rapid circular movements disorient and threaten to pull down the viewer. But, as the voiceover narrator reminds us, 'This mysterious deity has an equal share of love and hate for the people.' This ambivalence is visualized through the materiality of water – turbulent waves in some instances and serene waters in others. For instance, in one scene cascading sheets of Victoria Falls blurred with rising white mist flood the screen. This is accompanied by roaring diegetic sounds of the falling waters. Put together, the hazy mist and deafening sounds capture the mysterious nature of Nyaminyami. The turbulent waves of the waterfall point to his might, also indexed in the documentary through wide shots of reddish grey clouds and reverberating diegetic sounds of thunder.

The benign side of this river god is embodied in His very name, which translates as 'pieces of meat'. In the documentary, Lexon Mizinga reveals that, during periods of drought, Nyaminyami exposed his back on the banks of Zambezi River so that Tonga people could chop off pieces of meat. He would only submerge once satisfied that people had taken enough.[7] Tonga people would also consult Nyaminyami before the start of the rainy season or propitiate Him during drought. It was this relational, interspecies connection that was disrupted by the establishment of the hydro-infrastructure. Deplorably, 'nobody was appeasing Nyaminyami in Lake Kariba. People had limited access to and had no control of the lake, which they believed sheltered Nyaminyami' (Matanzima 93).

Lake Kariba was constructed on Kariba Gorge, a sacred site along the Zambezi River 'regarded as the headquarters of the great river god Nyaminyami, who caused any canoe or human being who ventured near to be sucked down forever into the depths of the river' (Clements 18). It is from this rationale that I read the floods that troubled the building of Kariba Dam as a manifestation of the wrath of Nyaminyami. Matanzima writes that 'both the engineers and BaTonga exploited and appropriated the idea of Nyaminyami. The BaTonga personified the river and sought Nyaminyami's protection, whereas the engineers saw themselves as battling a "primitive" river god at Kariba' (83).

Nyaminyami was (and is) a prominent deity who existed before the advent of European colonizers. JoAnn McGregor argues that the trope of Nyaminyami 'was part of a derogatory and cruel caricature of the Tonga developed during the move that made them a "laughingstock"' (121). I therefore critique Clements' novel against the grain of the colonial gaze to resist the erasure of Nyaminyami and endorse nature's pushback strategies against forces of hydro-modernity. As Nuttall argues, 'violent histories of labour exploitation, displacement and death, as well [sic] the Dam's ultimate uncontainability, subject as it is to a river known for its extensive flooding, undercut watertight narratives of human progress and enlightened modernity' (328). In the following section, I argue that Nyaminyami's influence precedes and supersedes the construction of Kariba Dam.

Some Kinds of Resistance

In *Kariba: The Struggle with the River God*, we read, '[N]ever has a river fought so savagely and persistently as the Zambezi was to do' (105). This can be seen as a fulfilment of the

Tonga belief and warning that Nyaminyami 'will never allow the white men to control him. With one flick of his tail he will destroy all the work in the gorge' (88). The resistance was so spirited and seemingly premeditated that Clements conceptualizes it through war lexicon. The author adds that even 'many of the engineers themselves became obsessed with the feeling that they were fighting a strange battle in addition to performing what they had begun by considering as a routine job of work' (13). Clements writes that 'Zambezi River's behaviour decided the schedule of the project' (57). Following Hofmeyr's hydrocolonial lens, we witness the role of Zambezi River both to the colonization project of Rhodesia and to the text itself as protagonist and aesthetic enabler.

The initial work of constructing a pontoon bridge across the Zambezi River sought to dodge the flood season. However, Nyaminyami had other plans, for,

> on Christmas Eve, 1955, the river struck, and the flood which came down swept away the pontoon bridge and swamped the only partially completed foundations of the coffer dam. Nyaminyami, it began to be whispered, had shown that he would accept the challenge. Throughout the rest of that rainy season, he was to harass the skirmishers with a series of counterattacks, some of them utterly unexpected. Never before in the recorded history of the Zambezi's flood had there been two peaks to the flood, so that it receded and then came back with new strength. But that was to happen later in that first season after the decision had been made to halt the river. It was, no doubt, a coincidence, but there were many such coincidences still to come. (59)

Nyaminyami is imbued with human-like abilities as He accepts the challenge of the European marauders and regularly commandeers His forces (floods) to strike at their critical infrastructure. The strike on the pontoon bridge marks a strategic attack on communication lines. Moreover, demolishing the foundation of the coffer dam scuttles plans to establish the main Kariba Dam wall. Those who perceived the floods as chance encounters were puzzled as 'there were many such coincidences still to come' (59). Here we notice the limitations of rationalism in comprehending supernatural manifestations. Those who witnessed the above floods (both Europeans and Africans) were convinced that Nyaminyami was the instigator.

From 'that first skirmish with the river, man suffered a minor tactical defeat … [but] so much work remained to be done in the hills and above the furthest reach of the river's fury that no time was spared for regrets' (60). However, that work was postponed until after the middle of that year because 'a cyclone, known in the meteorological records as "Edith", had struck the headquarters of the Zambezi, causing a second flood of unprecedented lateness and further curtailing the short time when work in the riverbeds was possible' (68). Through these 'unprecedented' attacks, Nyaminyami spoke in a language no human being could ignore.

The resistance of Nyaminyami resonates with Mother Gunga in Kipling's short story 'The Bridge-Builders' (1893). Resisting the encroachment of hydro-modernity in colonial India, the water deity unleashes a deluge that scuttles the progress of the hydro-infrastructure:

> A shrill wail ran along the line, growing to a yell, half fear and half wonder: the face of the river whitened from bank to bank between the stone facings, and the far-away spurs went out in spouts of foam. Mother Gunga had come bank-high in haste, and a wall of chocolate-coloured water was her messenger. There was a shriek above the roar of the water, the complaint of the spans coming down on their blocks as the cribs were whirled out from under

> their bellies. The stone-boats groaned and ground each other in the eddy that swung round the abutments, and their clumsy masts rose higher and higher against the dim sky-line. (18)

Just like Nyaminyami, Mother Gunga indexes nature's way of fighting sustained human encroachment through inexplicable floods.

In *Kariba: The Struggle with the River God*, rumours of the water deity find corroboration as Italian contractors conclude that Nyaminyami 'was just about as terrifying as venerable old Father Tiber and even less dangerous than Lombardy's own river Po' (106). Here Clements juxtaposes European and African myths to surface those beliefs that cut across cultures and oceans. Similarly, with Nyaminyami, we read that 'over eight hundred miles away the Zambezi was also mobilizing its forces. Upstream from Kariba the river is served by a catchment area of two hundred thousand square miles of country' (109). The author ascribes military characteristics to Gwai, Sengwe, Bumi and other tributaries that converge at the entrance of Kariba Gorge to defend the fortress of their commander, Nyaminyami. In 1957, Zambezi River struck the first blow that was 'so far beyond its normal range that in one night several villages were swept away' (109). The author further describes how:

> [a]s the river gained strength, the outposts of man's fortifications in its bed began to look pitifully small. The piers of the road bridge trembled from the shock of the current, which reached twenty-five miles an hour. The men working inside the haven of the coffer heard the roaring and grinding of the great boulders as they were swept around the river's bed like pebbles. Those watching from the banks saw the debris which lurked on the surface of the water: smashed canoes, huge trees, entanglements of thorn and bush, and once a vivid reminder of the disasters upstream, the almost undamaged roof of a hut, which spun in lazy gyrations as it hurtled by. (110)

Like a calvary charge, the swiftness of the attack and motion of the water currents are overwhelming. The strength of the river compels humans to recalibrate their place in the universe. Film critic Deirdre O'Toole comments that '[c]ontrasting images of characters to vast landscapes creates a … narrative of smallness and isolation' (365). The ramshackle piers of the footbridge draw attention to the fragility of hydro-infrastructures in the face of nature. Clements deploys evocative aural metaphors, tactile images and apt diction to register the overwhelming force of Zambezi River. This force is felt by those helpless and clueless people 'watching from the banks'. From this assault, one grasps what Deirdre characterizes as 'the feeling of being overwhelmed, particularly in the face of nature and the grandness or power of the environment' (359).

The resistance of Zambezi River compelled Baldassarini (Impresit's chief at Kariba) to observe that '[w]e are going to have to watch out with this river. It looks as if it knows exactly what we are up to' (110). Human beings were forced to reconsider their real place in the geosphere. It was to their dismay that the following year 'the road bridge, which had been so narrowly saved a year before, was struck a mortal blow. One of its supporting piers collapsed and was washed away within seconds' (112). The speed and viciousness of the attack suggests well-trained and marshalled forces. The waters continued to rise and 'flooded the air strip and all air traffic was cancelled. Except for a dangerous storm-swept route along the access roads, which could no longer take heavy traffic, Kariba was isolated' (112). With the strategic isolation almost complete, later that night 'a violent thunderstorm burst over Kariba. In the torrential rain, landslides started on the

slopes of the hills, and came skidding across the access roads to pour into the river. Swathes were cut out of the banks as fifteen-foot waves swirled and scurried against them' (132). The entire arsenal of Nyaminyami assembled at the Kariba Gorge: the ground forces in the form of the turbulent waters of the irate rivers; the air force in the shape of violent thunderstorms; and the auxiliary forces in the shape of roaring landslides. It came as no surprise that '[in] less than four hours the area inside the dam was flooded. The river had re-conquered its bed' (133). To those who witnessed these events:

> it indeed seemed that there was some sort of intelligence guiding the river, seeking out the weak points in man's defence, following a planned campaign. First the road bridge, the main line of supply, had been crippled, and now the main assault on the already breached coffer dam was launched. (134)

To complete the rout, '[i]n what was a mopping-up operation, the Zambezi again diverted its attention to the crippled road bridge … . Then with a sharp sound which was later compared to the bark of a field gun, the bridge was gone' (135). The aurality of the field gun reminds the reader that Kariba gorge became a battlefield where humans and nature fought. Those sustained and ostensibly intelligent attacks from the Zambezi convinced Baldassarini that his team was 'confronted with a force far stronger than ourselves. All that was left for us to do was to salvage what we could and wait for the floods to go down. The river was master' (136).

A supernatural power that operates outside chronological time and human comprehension was in charge. Simumba in Nyanja's documentary suggests that the strange behaviour of Zambezi River led Impresit representatives to consult Tonga elders on how to placate Nyaminyami. He explains how rituals were subsequently conducted, paving a way for the completion of the dam. Clements observed that Tonga people were convinced that, had Nyaminyami 'wished, he could have broken more than the bridges. But he has agreed to your plan. For through your machines he will go all over the world. It is he who will run along your wires but only because he wished to' (210). Whilst this might be interpreted as capitulation on the part of the river deity, another way of reading this suggests otherwise. It was through the establishment of Kariba Dam that Nyaminyami became popular throughout the world. Moreover, in tune with the shape-shifting nature of river gods, Nyaminyami metamorphizes to cohere with the new demands of hydro-modernity. In any case, it is His water that is generating electricity and sustaining modernity. Put another way, as people revel in the affordances of hydro-electricity, they are celebrating and embracing the powers of Nyaminyami.

There is a local belief that the Zambezi River God will not rest until the dam wall crumbles so that He reunites with His wife Chitapo. His wrath is registered in tremors that are frequently felt around Kariba Dam. Because most Tonga people were excluded from the benefits of the dam, they also consider the looming destruction of the walls as some form of divine justice. Namwali Serpell (author of Zambian epic *The Old Drift*, a novel which tells of several stories across several generations, all of which cohere around Kariba Dam) states in a 2020 article in *The New York Times* that

> scientists and reporters have issued warnings about the dam's potential to cause ecological disasters – of opposite kinds. On one hand, low rainfall has yielded water levels that barely reach the minimum necessary to generate electricity. On the other hand, heavy rainfall has threatened to flood the surrounding areas.

The paradoxical nature of the threat questions the viability of mega-dams and affirms nature's pushback strategies. In his study of mega-dams worldwide, anthropologist Thayer Scudder had this to say: 'I eventually concluded that over the long term (50 years and more) large dams are not cost effective for economic, socio-cultural and environmental reasons' (4). Arundhati Roy (1999) anticipates these sentiments in her assessment of India's mega-dam mania. Considering the above, the current escalation in mega-dam construction appears misguided and misplaced.

Conclusion

The construction of Kariba Dam (1956–1959) and the experiences of Tonga people suggest a harrowing narrative of violence, erasure, peripheralization and neglect from the colonial days of Rhodesia to the present post-colonial moment. While the dam continues to contribute to the economic development of Zambia and Zimbabwe, it has equally ruined the lives of Tonga people. For them, the sight of Kariba Dam induces traumatic memories of violent evictions, apprehensions of the present and grim prospects for the future. As I have argued in the paper, displacing indigenous people from their ancestral land and waters only to deny them the benefits of the resources being exploited ushers in underdevelopment rather than progress. Tonga people instantiate casualties of monolithic and callous practices of hydro-capitalist development.

That Kariba Dam has a secure place in post-colonial Zimbabwe and Zambia signals the indelible dent of British colonization on the natural and mental landscapes of Southern Africa. It is a scar that captures the ambivalence of colonization. In relation to the discourse of decolonization, it might be argued that Kariba Dam points to the elusiveness of that dream. Not only have 'independent' Zimbabwean and Zambian governments embraced it and exploited it, but they have also internalized what the dam represents in terms of a capitalist economic thrust of development. In fact, the construction of mega-dams has intensified in both countries and across the global south, rehashing the logics and spirit of colonization. This realization leads us to reconceptualize decolonization beyond simplistic optics of race. Such a pursuit might shed light on the retrogression of most postcolonial states in Africa.

Considering the anthropogenic ecocide that is occasioning extreme weather events across the world, it is time to revisit our relationship with the non-human. Hofmeyr usefully calls for the need to look at indigenous ways of relating with water that transcend optics of control, exploitation and excessive othering. It is here that lessons can perhaps be learnt from how Tonga people venerate Zambezi River. What happens when we perceive water as the abode of diverse spirits that protect us and need our protection? When we do this, the great divide between nature and humans narrows to the benefit of both. Reciprocal relations are created upon the realization that nature will reward us if we treat it well and reject us if we do otherwise.

Notes

1. Although water deities are largely feminized in most imaginaries, Nyaminyami is ascribed male attributes, epitomized in His marriage to Chitapo.
2. In the context of the Mozambican Cahora Bassa Dam project (1969–1974), Allen Isaacman refers to such practices as a 'top-down approach to governance' where the authorities

'effectively asserted a monopoly on wisdom and power,' characteristic of 'megadevelopment projects, particularly those involving dams' (117).
3. See also Christopher Magadza (2006).
4. For more on this, see Joshua Matanzima (2013).
5. I explore this dynamic at great length in a different project I am working on where I engage with the protracted violence of mega-dams through analyzing Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019).
6. Water deities have been described as 'shadowy … whirlwind-like' (Siegal 16) and 'a storm or whirlwind' (Lange 3).
7. Also see Matanzima (2022) for an in-depth account of Nyaminyami.

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