

Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development: Cahora Bassa and its Legacies in Mozambique, 1965-2007* (Athens (OH): Ohio University Press, Coll. 'New African Histories', 2013), 324 pp. Pbk \$32.95, ISBN: 9780821420331.

Dams represent a major investment, both economically and ideologically. They demand large financial resources to be built, and sustained campaigns to convince affected people that dams will serve their interest and they should therefore voluntarily leave areas to be flooded. Since the 1980s, postmodern and postcolonial authors have submitted 'development' and 'high modernism' to a thorough critique. Yet belief in development continues to dominate political elites, and more and ever bigger dams are consequently built all over the world. In Africa, the NGO *International Rivers* counted no fewer than 67 large dams being 'proposed, under construction, rehabilitation, or expansion' in 2010.

In *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development* (DDDD), Allen and Barbara Isaacman investigate the history and legacies of one of Africa's largest dams, Cahora Bassa, which was built in Mozambique by the Portuguese in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The dam was constructed under conditions of war and it was inaugurated after independence by a government led by the Liberation Front of Mozambique (Frelimo). The dam has since operated continuously, though much of its electricity has not been exported or used for many years because armed rebels had destroyed many high voltage power line pillars. Since the end of the armed conflict in 1992, power lines have been rebuilt and Cahora Bassa has provided electricity again, primarily to South Africa, though increasingly to the national Mozambican grid as well.

The authors of DDDD set their aim as doing an 'alternative history' of the Cahora Bassa dam, 'one that seeks to recover, or bring to the surface, what the master narrative of Mozambique colonial and postcolonial state actors have suppressed' (7). This means moving away from a history looking at high diplomacy and engineering and engaging instead in a social history of the dam, its construction, and its impact on people and ecology. The key questions are: who was the dam built for and who benefits today from its electricity; conversely, who has been and remains affected negatively by the dam, and how? To discover this, the Isaacmans rely on the advances of the latest historiography, sensitive to ecology, gender and memory, and they adopt a *longue durée* approach to highlight local structural dynamics. As to sources, they have invested massively in oral history to compensate the limits of the colonial and technocratic paper trail (which they have of course investigated thoroughly all the same).

DDDD is organised in seven chapters. The first two problematize the topic and situate the dam in the long historical trajectory of the Zambezi region. Chapter three analyses the construction of the dam, focusing on the work and social life of the employees, both white and Africans. Chapter four studies the removal of the people who lived in the area flooded by the dam, their internment in militarised villages (the war of liberation had reached the area by then) and the daily suffering which resulted from it. Chapter five examines the downriver ecological consequences of the dam on nature, farming, hunting and fishing. Chapter six scrutinises the issue of the energy

produced by the dam after independence, looking at Frelimo's policy in relation to Portugal and South Africa, the question of the electrification of Mozambique's countryside and the plans for a new dam at Mphanda Nkuwa (south of Cahora Bassa). The last chapter concludes the book by summarising the argument and by rethinking Mphanda Nkuwa through the lens of the experience of Cahora Bassa.

Allen and Barbara Isaacman's volume is most impressive. It builds on the authors' very long-term research in the area (over 40 years now) and more than 300 oral interviews (collected by several teams of researchers). The approach is original, joining social history with ecological studies, and it contrasts with the high-politics history of Cahora Bassa authored by Keith Middlemas in 1975. The writing is clear and the descriptions are vivid with extensive discussions of animals, plants, fishing and hunting activities, life in militarised villages, religious rituals, and even witchcraft. Thus the authors succeed in making the reader empathise with the African workers, peasants, hunters and fishermen whose lives were connected and affected by the construction of the dam. The authors also manage to effectively restore the voice to the local African communities and individuals who have not only been ignored by historians and engineers, but have also been displaced and silenced by the state and its agents, often through violence. More generally, the Isaacmans are successful in making the reader think differently about dams – away from a global and statist perspective where development is like making omelettes, 'impossible without breaking some eggs', and authoritarian to those who disagree.

In this reviewer's opinion the book has two main defects. First, chapter five would have needed a heavier editorial hand. There is too much description and repetition, several mistakes in references, and various quotes already used. More substantially, the introduction makes a strong statement about studies having only rarely analysed downstream societies and ecology, yet the conclusion to the chapter does not highlight what new knowledge their approach contributes. Instead it brings the story to the 2000s and states that it is difficult to figure out which environmental and social disruptions were caused by Cahora Bassa rather than by Renamo – a conclusion which partly undermines the argument laid out in the introduction. The river Shire is also not mentioned once in the chapter despite it being the second biggest tributary to the Zambezi, joining it below the dam and contributing a quarter of all the Zambezi waters at that point. Was it not worth a mention? It surely could have at least been used as a counterfactual to render the argument more subtle and complex.

The second problem of the book has to do with its overarching argument. There is an ambiguity in the message and the solutions proposed by the authors. On the one hand, the Isaacmans reject in their introduction large state-driven development projects 'as long as they lead to growing disparities in wealth and concomitant increases in hunger and poverty, which are the natural consequences of their market-driven calculus' (7). On the other hand, the authors envision in their conclusion the following solutions to resolve the legacies of the Cahora Bassa dam: (a) to use more of its electricity for local communities to promote development around the dam, and (b) to regulate the dam's discharges differently (reduce the water releases by three to ten percent) to minimize the dam's impact on the ecosystem. Now the difference between these two propositions is so small (a bit of water and a bit of electricity) that one cannot but wonder about the proportion of responsibility the dam has had in causing the problems identified by the authors (as opposed to colonialism, foreign

aggression, and civil war) and whether the solutions proposed by the authors are not too minor and optimistic to really end 'growing disparities in wealth and concomitant increases in hunger and poverty'.

These minor concerns aside, the Isaacmans have produced a highly original and readable volume. *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development* stands as a contribution to studies of (high-) modernism, development, ecology, social history, and African history. It will be of interest to all those interested in Southern African geo-politics, history, ecology, the Portuguese empire, decolonization, Mozambican history and oral history. I cannot recommend it enough to academics and students as an example of what new historical approaches can bring to scholarship and of how fruitfully such approaches can revisit old topics.

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