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Ebbs and Flows of Authority: Decentralization, Development and the Hydrosocial Cycle in Lesotho

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Abstract: Dominant development discourse holds that water scarcity reflects geophysical limitations, lack of infrastructure or lack of government provision. However, this paper outlines the ways in which scarcity can only be fully explained in the context of development, specifically, neoliberal economic policies and related notions of good governance. Water is Lesotho's primary natural resource, yet many of its inhabitants remain severely water insecure. Presently, decentralization and Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) are embraced in Lesotho as a philosophy and method to engage varied stakeholders and to empower community members. Using a water committee in Qalo, Lesotho as a case study, this paper explores the micro-politics of water governance. As individuals contest who is responsible for managing water resources for the village—by aligning themselves with traditional chiefs, elected officials, or neither—they transform or reinforce specific hydro-social configurations. While decentralized resource management aims to increase equity and local ownership over resources, as well as moderate the authority of traditional chiefs, water access is instead impacted by conflicts over management responsibility for water resources. Drawing on theories of political ecology and governmentality to extend recent scholarship on IWRM, this paper re-centers the political in water governance by situating local tensions within national policies and development agendas and demonstrating how scarcity is hydro-social.

Keywords: international development; decentralization; political ecology; integrated water resource management (IWRM); Lesotho; Africa

1. Introduction

A recent report by the Lesotho Global Water Partnership affirmed the country's commitment to the United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goal to provide clean, accessible water [1]. To achieve this, Lesotho will recommit to the existing hydro-policy and more fully embrace Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM, or Integrated Catchment Management (ICM)), an approach and philosophy of water resource management that engages myriad stakeholders in the provision of water.

Lesotho is one of the few countries to export water. Through the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), Lesotho provides water to Gauteng Province, South Africa. Indeed, water is one of Lesotho's primary natural resources, with the water sector contributing 10% to the gross domestic product (GDP) [2]. Relatedly, water has been a major focus of Lesotho's development agenda and over three-quarters of Basotho, or the people of Lesotho, have access to a safely managed water source [3]. The availability of groundwater resources and safely managed sources is uneven, and Basotho, particularly in the lowlands, experience routine water insecurity [4]. According to dominant development discourse, water scarcity reflects geophysical limitations, lack of infrastructure or lack of government provision [5]. While such reasoning situates scarcity within its social context, i.e. through the failure of the government to provide water, scarcity is only fully explained through an examination

of the micro-politics of water resource management in the context of larger development agendas, such as decentralization policy.

Lesotho remains a major recipient of donor funding, with such funding accounting for 14% of Lesotho's budget [6]. Along with financing, Lesotho has embraced the neoliberal development ideology touted by donor organizations, including pressures to politically decentralize natural resource management. Decentralization is a departure from the earlier economic liberalization found in structural adjustment programs (SAPs); instead, it frames development in the discourse of "good governance" and "empowerment" [7]. Decentralization is meant to promote equitable development in ways not realized by SAPs yet, we shall see that, at its core, decentralization policy reflects neoliberal economic development aims. According to development policies, water is a natural resource prime for exploitation. In villages throughout Lesotho, people do not have enough water and yet are expected to mitigate this scarcity through economic empowerment and self-sufficiency.

Using a case study of a water committee in the town of Qalo, Lesotho, I examine the hydro-social realities shaped through contestations over water management. While decentralized resource management aims to increase equity and local ownership over resources, as well as moderate the authority of traditional chiefs, it instead exacerbates scarcity as water governance breaks down due to political fractioning over responsibility for maintaining water resources. Given the political economic history of the country, alignment with either the chief or the local elected officials can reinforce or transform long-standing social relations.

The aim of this paper is to situate the forthcoming expansion of IWRM in Lesotho in larger decentralization and development policy. While IWRM aims to engender participation of varied stakeholders, its implementation occurs in the context of hydro-social relations shaped by these ongoing policies and the country's political economic history. Drawing on theories of political ecology and governmentality, I engage recent critiques of IWRM to outline how Lesotho's water governance not only transforms social relations, but manufactures scarcity as well. Using this case study, this research extends our understanding of water insecurity in Lesotho by bridging micro- and macro-politics to understand the multi-scalar construction of authority and the continued role of the state in the era of neoliberal decentralization policy. As the state rolls back provisions of resources such as water, tensions arise over management of water tanks and scarcity is exacerbated as tanks fall into disrepair.

1.1. The Political Geography of Lesotho

The Kingdom of Lesotho, an independent constitutional monarchy located within the country of South Africa, is the home to approximately two million people [4]. Lesotho is an ethnically homogenous country, with 99% of the population identifying as Sotho (individually Mosotho, plural Basotho).

Formerly known as Basutoland, Lesotho achieved independence from English rule in 1966. Historically, Lesotho was economically dependent on South Africa for employment. Lesotho's development policy focuses on poverty reduction through economic diversification of a market that, unfortunately, remains dependent on single industries—once employment in the South African mines supported the populace, while now the textile industry has emerged as the primary source of employment. However, with the tightening of the South African border, and the inability of the textile industry to elevate the country economically, Lesotho has had to look within its borders for opportunities for economic advancement. Whereas Lesotho once served as a labor reserve for the South African mines, the exploitation of human resources has been replaced by the extraction of natural resources such as water.

Lesotho remains one of the least developed countries globally, with 57% of the population living in poverty [4]. Intricately tied to Lesotho's socio-economic position is the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Lesotho has the second-highest prevalence of HIV in the world. This epidemic has had far-reaching effects on the economy of the country as 24% of the population lives with HIV [8].

1.2. The Political Hydrography of Lesotho

Through the LHWP, water from large dams in Lesotho is conveyed to Gauteng Province, South Africa, where it is used to bolster South Africa's globally competitive economy. Ironically, while water fuels South African industry, people in rural Lesotho often see little benefit of this exchange. From the agreement with South Africa, Lesotho receives electricity, however; the capital Maseru primarily receives this benefit.

While one of the greatest natural resources in Lesotho is water [2], people experience occasional water supply and quality problems, with some adverse effects during severe droughts [9]. By 2025, Lesotho will be "water stressed"; that is, the Basotho will face frequent seasonal water supply quality problems, accentuated by occasional droughts [10]. In light of the importance of water as a natural resource, the World Bank examined Lesotho's vulnerability to climate change and notes that both domestic water needs and water transfers are vulnerable to climatic shifts in the coming decades [2].

Presently, Lesotho's Ministry of Water which is tasked with developing and monitoring water and sanitation policy and strategies as well as managing all water sector activities. The provision of rural water falls under the auspices of the Department of Rural Water Supply (DRWS) (however, at the time of this research, water sector activities did not have a stand-alone ministry). This provision includes mapping and construction of community water tanks and taps, although infrastructure construction and rehabilitation is often done by donor-funded projects, for example the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact. The management of the tanks and the provision of water, however, has been decentralized to local government authorities. Today, DRWS' mandate is "to build capacity and empower communities in the operation and maintenance of water supply systems" [11] and the exact configurations of authority are community-specific and may include community members, traditional authorities such as chiefs, locally-elected or appointed councilors or private sector providers. The exact roles of central and local authorities in the management of water resources was and remains disputed, and this will be discussed at length below.

2. Method

This paper is based on data collected in Lesotho between February and November 2011, during a mixed-method study examining the lived experience of water insecurity in three rural communities in the Maseru district of Lesotho. While these data were collected several years ago, by establishing the cultural politics of decentralization, they have immediate relevance to the planned expansion of IWRM. The case study presented in this paper is drawn from observations and interviews with twenty-six individuals, including the chief, and a group interview with members of a water committee from a community, Qalo, in the Maseru District of Lesotho. This research was conducted by a team comprised of the author and two Basotho research assistants. The larger study concerned the lived experience of water insecurity and a quantitative assessment of water insecurity, food insecurity, household illness and related psycho-emotional stress (the full methodology can be found in [9]).

Qalo offers a prime location in which to examine resource management, as Qalo was unique among the communities studied given that community members were reliant on sizeable water tanks for their water (see [12], for additional information on water sources in Qalo). Community members discussed the recent tensions in the local water committee in Qalo, and this committee is the focus of this discussion. These data were analyzed inductively with specific attention given to discussion over resource management and local authority.

2.1. Political Ecology and Governmentality: The Hydrosocial Construction of Lesotho's Water Resources

Water policy in Lesotho, and in Africa more broadly, has shifted from solely technical approaches to water management to ones that incorporate social relations, that is, the focus shifts from water management to water governance [13]. Understanding processual move to local water governance in Lesotho's development policy requires engaging the theoretical framework of political ecology.

Political ecology, specifically the theorization of the hydro-social cycle, shifts the emphasis from the linkage between water and society, as iterated in IWRM policy, to the co-production of water and society [13]. The hydro-social cycle, in contrast to the hydrologic cycle in which water is entirely material, outlines “dialectical and relational processes” between the material and the social (p. 170). This framework allows us to understand how water is created and culturally understood and how this in turn influences social relations. Political ecology brings the understanding that individual subjectivity is co-creative with the environment and situates power at the intersection of multiple registers of space and place [14]. When applied to Lesotho, specifically, we see the rendering of water as an economic resource and how it, in turn, actualizes certain forms of authority and economic relations.

Implicit and explicit in much of the scholarly literature concerning both water governance and development policy is Foucault’s theorizations of governmentality, or the “art of governing” [15]. As power is relational, the power of the government is not centralized, but dispersed and contingent so that “a whole variety of authorities govern in different sites” (p. 85). Beginning with the understanding that the state can only exist in relation to the people governed, we now examine how this relationship changes in the face of international calls for smaller, less intrusive governments in resource management. In this regard, the state is criticized for interfering in people’s lives and thus it is in the best interest of the people to become entrepreneurs without interference from the government. One such example of this is the prescription for ethical self-determination found in the “enterprise model” of development. As opposed to an interventionist state, the state was seen as a barrier to social and economic development [16]. This approach is evidenced in Lesotho, as development projects tasked with the construction of water infrastructure are ultimately aimed towards poverty alleviation, particularly for women [17]. Thus, the result is a “Brave Neo World”, a world where neoliberalism is more than an economic policy; it is an art of governing and defines the relationships between people, the state, and development [18].

In his seminal research on Lesotho, Ferguson [19] brings development into a discussion of state power. Ferguson argues that by rendering development “neutral” or “anti-political,” the expansion of bureaucratic power was hidden. This is not to say that the magnitude of the capabilities of the “state” was expanded, but rather that what was extended was the “extent and reach of a particular kind of exercise of power” (p. 274). Making explicit governmentality and anti-politics in this analysis is useful as it complicates the role of the state—or the role of many states, for example donor countries—in development policy and the process through which development is decidedly political yet hidden. Moreover, the participation of non-state actors, for example in water management, has “important implications for the nature of state power in relation to processes of water governance” [20] (p. 122).

Swyngedouw [21] discusses “governance-beyond-the-state” which has been promoted by state and international bodies to give private individuals and civil society a greater role in “governance” and to make development processes more inclusive (p. 1192). These new modes of government between the state and various non-state actors are new forms of governmentality, or conduct of conduct (ibid). This re-articulation takes place within the context of rising “neoliberal governmental rationality” and results in “Janus-faced” arrangements (p. 1193). These two-faced arrangements create new technologies of government, including new state and civil society relationships and understandings of authority, while simultaneously reinforcing the status quo. While Swyngedouw’s work concerns Europe, his theorizations about how state power is simultaneously modified and reinforced has direct relevance to Lesotho given the new technologies of government outlined in decentralization and IWRM policy. Specifically, we see in Lesotho that state power is not always hidden through “anti-political” development, but rather the new technologies, or modalities, of governance bring the state in and out of focus as individuals recognize, or reject, the role of the state in decentralized service provision and water maintenance.

Together, political ecology and governmentality provide the necessary frameworks through which to view contestations of authority. Such contestations, while occurring at the local level, reflect long standing historical processes. Historically, Lesotho served as a “labor reserve” for the South African

mines [22]. With miners increasingly retrenched from the mines, Lesotho has had to look within its own borders for exploitable resources. This process of *financialization* of nature evidenced in development policy, notably the water policy including IWRM [23]. According to recent documents linking water, energy, and food, the philosophical underpinning of approaches such as IWRM is that water is prime for exploitation and sustainability requires global economic realignment. This process reflects larger trends in neoliberal development policy, but exactly how this is realized in Lesotho must be situated within Lesotho's larger development agenda and political economic history. In Lesotho, as elsewhere, there are competing governmentalities, related to tradition and authority, to local and global economic ties. Moreover, these new technologies of government (re)define both authority and hydrography.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to synthesize Lesotho's political ecological history with the political economy of health, it must be noted that the hydro-social relations in Lesotho cannot be divorced from the biosocial realities of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Indeed, the topography of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is intimately tied to Lesotho's historical position as a labor reserve. While men often contracted HIV at the mines, women who remained in Lesotho, many without a means of survival, would often have multiple male partners (*bonyatsi*) to provide for their families while their husbands were away [24]. The demographic shifts due to the HIV/AIDS was predicted to directly contribute to water scarcity [10] and that water treaties, such as those between Lesotho and South Africa, must retain flexibility to account for both demographic and climatic shifts [25].

2.2. Integrated Water Resource Management in Lesotho

Most development policies favor IWRM, predicated on the assumption that "efficient, equitable and sustainable development and the management of the world's limited resources" requires local approaches "tailored to the individual circumstance of the country and local region" [26] (p. 4). IWRM links stakeholders and technical experts across sectors at the basin or catchment and national levels [27]. In Southern Africa, IWRM has been widely promoted by supranational governing bodies as well as multi- and bilateral donor organizations. However, the exact role of these organizations in IWRM implementation varies by country with donors exerting more influence in Zimbabwe than South Africa, for example [28].

While IWRM has been limited in implementation in Lesotho, it is slated for broad adoption in future hydro-policy. As discussed at length below, the implementation of IWRM must be situated within the larger context of decentralization as earlier decentralization policy has resulted in macro-and micro-political contestations within Lesotho. Decentralization will continue in tandem with IWRM, indeed, IWRM policy itself promotes decentralization. There is also overlap in the two approaches, notably the focus on neoliberal economic development. As IWRM is slated for expansion in Lesotho, scholarly critiques of IWRM are relevant here.

Critiques of IWRM highlight the inherent politics of implementation despite the fact that IWRM is framed as apolitical and technical [29]. Such policy can recreate "historically moulded axes of inequality" [22] (p. 397). Indeed, "the progressive policies and plans have failed to recognise the complex historical context, and the underlying inequalities in access to knowledge, power and resources" (p. 403). Mehta et al [29] hold that while IWRM stresses decentralization, these policies often result in the centralization of power. Moreover, these scholars stress that IWRM policies all too often neglect local social, gender and power relations. In Lesotho, the tensions over water are indeed tied to intersectional power relations and were neglected by earlier decentralization policy. While IWRM policy explicitly links players at multiple scales, the linkages between the state, local government and civil society under decentralization remain contested. The result, as we shall see, is not solely a centralization of power but new technologies of government that may or may not cement state authority over water resources.

2.3. “Water is the Source of Life”: Economic Development and Water Resource Management

Lesotho’s long- and short-term development goals were drafted in their Vision 2020 [30] policy document, with the strategic plan outlined in their National Strategic Development Plan 2012/13-2016/17. Major goals include a stable democracy, well-managed environment and strong economy. The Growth and Development Strategic Framework of the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2012/13 aims “Towards an accelerated and sustainable economic and social transformation” of Lesotho [31]. To accomplish this, Lesotho is tasked with “radically transform[ing] its economy” in order to “define a future that is characterized by the capacity to produce goods and services for the regional, African and global markets” [31].

Water is governed as a natural resource prime for economic development. The importance of water for the country’s survival is underscored in a statement by Lesotho’s Minister of Finance and Development Planning, “Water is the source of life. Lesotho has always regarded it as its ‘white gold’ to support its people” [32]. Indeed, research in the Mopotlong District of the Highlands of Lesotho demonstrates how water has been mobilized for export through discourse that renders water inherently Sesotho [33]. The Government of Lesotho explicitly calls upon Sesotho, Sesotho refers to the language spoken in Lesotho and is used as an adjective to describe being of Lesotho, cultural identity in order to make water meaningful as an exploitable resource. Aside from notable exceptions—the MCC Compact that brought improved water to the rural areas for private sector development—in line with decentralization, much of the onus of development, including private sector development, falls on communities themselves.

2.3.1. Implementing Decentralization in Lesotho

At the urging of the British, decentralization was first attempted in the 1950s as a mechanism for British control and an attempt to limit the power of the Paramount Chief [34]. However, despite lasting only a decade, decentralization is written into the Constitution in the 1990s [35] and was again legislated in the Local Government Act in 1997 (although the Local Government Act was passed in 1997, elections were not held until 2005). The concept of decentralization can be found throughout all development policies such as Vision 2020 and the NSDP. Written into policy in 2014 in the National Decentralization Policy, the process of decentralization falls under the auspices of what is now the Ministry of Local Government, Chieftainship and Parliamentary Affairs (MoLGCOPA).

The 2014 policy document identifies decentralization as a long-term strategy for empowering citizens, promoting equitable development, and protecting territorial integrity and security “since pre-colonial times” [36] (p. viii). However, despite historical attempts at decentralization and development, this new envisioning is held to be qualitatively superior than any previous attempts, even while it may reflect earlier thinking on participation. Indeed, a 2007 World Bank report predicts that community-driven development will succeed where decades of participatory approaches have failed [37].

Within decentralization is an explicit linkage of water resource management and economics. Vision 2020 strategizes targeting seven “pillars” of development: democracy, unity, peace, education and training, economic growth, management of the environment, and advancement in technology [30]. We see the influence of donors in shaping traditional authority through decentralization. As described by Mothetjoa Metsing, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Local Government, Chieftainship and Parliamentary Affairs, “The (decentralization) policy statements and strategic actions contained in this Policy therefore reflect the views and aspirations of the GoL’s (Government of Lesotho’s) priorities for decentralisation and *inputs from Lesotho’s development partners*” (emphasis mine) [36] (p. viii). These development partners include donors such as the United States. This policy relies heavily on the discourse of participation and grassroots development yet is explicitly linked to neoliberal economic development as the policy is designed to provide guidance for “deepening and widening the economic and social benefits of democracy to all citizens” [36] (p. x).

There is similarly an explicit focus on cost-effectiveness, “(d)ecentralisation has potential to address issues of local development concern (such as energy, rural roads, public health, water, etc.) in a cost-effective way, primarily because of its focus on local development” [36] (p. 7). Local officials are being asked to leverage their own revenues, not just for maintenance but to fund new projects as well. Presumably, the money will come from the community members who will then receive the benefit of the project. This devolution of responsibility, or *responsibilization* [38], is couched in the pervasive discourse of “ownership”, such as “its potential to increase ownership of development projects, in areas like food security, micro enterprises, water supply, public health and community security” [31] (p. 28). Indeed, development workers interviewed during this research described how community members would contribute labor for development projects. For example, they would collect stones for the provisioning of water catchments or would participate in the construction of latrines.

Decentralization of water resources was planned for 2008, with the maintenance of the water supply in villages to be managed by the Community Councils and the safety of the water supply to be managed by local health officers [37]. Despite being touted as the panacea for the ills of participatory development, decentralization has been historically fraught. Indeed, as noted succinctly in the World Bank report regarding decentralization, “The relationship between councilors and chiefs is the most complex issue encountered” [37] (p. 16). Indeed, when this research was conducted in 2011, the local government and the chiefs were still negotiating their roles. Thus, water resource management must be understood in light of the changing role of the chief and the maneuvering for the legitimacy of authority at the local level. It is within this context that IWRM, with its doctrine of decentralization, is being rolled out.

2.3.2. Decentralization and IWRM

The “Roadmap” to IWRM was completed by the Ministry of Natural Resources, Water Commission in 2006 (since then, a document drafting the development of integrated catchment management plans was completed in 2013 and for the Orange-Senqu River Basin in 2014) [39]. This Roadmap includes baselines of “the natural, socio-economic and institutional sub-systems” and how they interrelate with and impact resource management. It also includes objective assessments of water availability in Lesotho as well as how this policy will intersect with their Vision 2020, outlined previously. Finally, the IWRM policy explicitly states that a goal is to “minimize necessary investment in measures by GoL” and embrace decentralization [27]. Indeed, as the IWRM policy was being finalized, decentralization of water resources was well underway. How exactly the Basotho are to marshal scarce resources such as water is contested as newly elected village councils and local chiefs vie for limited power as the state rolls back its provisions of services. To secure control over water resources, individuals in this schema must align themselves with more powerful individuals, or as the case may be, reject association with them in defiance of what is perceived as encroachment into village life.

2.3.3. *Morena Ke Morena Ke Sechaba* (The Chief is a Chief because of His Nation): The Role of the Chief in Decentralization

Since the recognition of Lesotho as a country by the Cape Colony in 1834, colonial powers have attempted to transform the role of the chief to best serve their needs. For the first 50 years, Lesotho was under varying degrees of control by the Cape Colony whereby both chiefs and British colonial authorities presumably ruled Basutoland in tandem. In 1884, Lesotho returned to direct Imperial British rule; however, the British relied increasingly on Basotho chiefs to maintain colonial authority [34]. The British set a chiefly council called *Borena* (kings) or *Bakoena* (crocodile, the totemic symbol of the ruling clan) that was later formalized into the Basutoland National Council in 1903. However, in 1935, a reported stated that the British were not active enough in countering indigenous authority. As a result, two government proclamations were issued effectively reducing the power of the chiefs in

Lesotho and Basutoland was governed under indirect British rule until independence on 4 October 1966 [34].

Since independence, the role of the chief in Basotho society has been continuously contested. The platforms of the political parties established at independence focused heavily on the role of the chief in contemporary society. The Basutoland Congress Party (BCP)—the rival political party with the most power leading up to the time of independence—split because some members thought chiefs to be archaic and antithetical to independence. The Local Government Act of 1997 sought to balance the power of the chiefs by establishing local councils in which all positions are elected and the number of chiefs in each council is limited to two. Not surprisingly, tension remains between chiefs and non-chiefs serving on the councils. As in many former colonies, a strict class hierarchy, in this case a chiefly aristocracy, was created and encouraged and its effects can still be seen today. As Laurence Juma [40] (p. 96) holds, “In the context of power relations, much of what the colonial systems had started was not dismantled by the arrival of independence and, whereas the players may have shifted, the power relations remained the same.” Following research in the Lesotho highlands, David Turkon [41] noted, “one of the most salient features of social life that I have encountered is antagonistic feelings that pervade neighborly relations” and explains these findings by situating these antagonistic social relations in larger political and economic process (p. 82). He argues that the varying political factions that have attempted to gain foothold in the Bakoena-dominant political arena has resulted in contested national politics that have ‘percolated’ down into remote village life. In short, class divisions that were fostered by colonial powers have been exacerbated by Lesotho’s position in the local and global economy and by political entities grappling for purchase in the government by promulgating a very specific form of economic development.

In addition to foregrounding economic development in the policy, there is explicit engagement with notions of modernity—in contrast to traditional rule, such as by chiefs—by asserting that the District Councils will eventually have “the full range of powers commonly associated with modern local authorities” [37] (p. 11). Development, according to this discourse, includes the spread of modern democratic processes. However, in its official policy document outlining decentralization, the Government of Lesotho maintains that the chieftaincy “... remains the fulcrum of Basotho nationalism and governance despite shifts in power balance” [36] (p. 6). It is not as simple as the chief representing tradition or the people. As we saw previously, the chiefs were at one point an extension of the state, and represented a certain class faction of Basotho. Indeed, this purportedly wholly Basotho tradition had ties to not only Cape Colony, but to larger colonializing powers in Europe. That said, the chief has come to represent to the people an incorruptible national image, epitomized in the reverence of the first king of Lesotho, Moshoeshoe I, and the Basotho who resisted colonialization. Despite the ties of chiefs to governmental politics throughout Basotho history, according to policy discourse, chiefs are now non-governmental or “anti-political” in their traditionalism. The local councils and elected officials, while purportedly now closer to the people in a decentralized state, are still seen as clearly governmental given that the creation of local governments was done at the behest of the centralized government and development donors.

The chief is imagined in contrast to the modern state, in which politicians are viewed as working in their own self-interest. Chiefs are considered the fathers of the village and the villagers are his children. Explicit in this metaphor is that the chief, as father, is responsible for his children’s welfare and health. Chiefly authority is derived from those ruled and are there to represent the people. As noted by political scientist J. Michael Williams [42] in his study of the role of the chief in post-apartheid South Africa, “For example, one obvious difference is that while post-apartheid institutions are premised on the twin principles of majority rule and free and fair elections, the chieftaincy is based on decision making through consensus and on the hereditary right to rule” (p. 3). He furthers, “For many living in the rural areas, it is the idea of the chieftaincy itself, even more so than its individual leaders, that provides a sense of unity and harmony” (p. 219). Indeed, this notion is not without historical precedence. Historically, *pitsos* were protected space, where people could even dissent against the

government or a chief [34]. However, while reverence for the historical role of the chief is evident in the discourse, the role of the chief in modern-day society is complex. We shall see these tensions between the chief, the community and the locally elected councilors over the maintenance of water resources.

2.4. Management of Water Tanks in Qalo: The Co-Creation of Authority and Scarcity

One could imagine that the availability of community tanks in Qalo would reduce the water insecurity compared to communities that were reliant on taps from smaller tanks, or those reliant on natural springs. While it was certainly the case that fewer respondents reported ever being without water—comparatively, only a quarter of Qalo residents compared to almost half in a different community reported ever having no water—participants routinely talked about the scarcity of their water, mentioning that the tanks were regularly empty or they would have to wait in long queues for the little water that was there. In short, residents reported less severe water insecurity than villagers elsewhere in Lesotho, but that they still experienced water scarcity was surprising given the availability of such large communal water tanks. What is most salient regarding the availability of water in Qalo is that three respondents stood out from the rest when they stated that they found no issues concerning water availability or access. They attributed the lack of problems to the fact that it was a rainy year and that a water committee fixed the tanks when they are broken. This contradicted other participants who did not mention a water committee in relation to community water management. Indeed, the research team routinely heard about tanks not being maintained.

In light of pervasive water scarcity, several questions emerged: Who comprises this water committee? Why is it their responsibility to fix the tanks in the first place? If they don't fix the tanks, who does? Why would community members seemingly exacerbate water insecurity by allowing the tanks to fall into disrepair?

2.5. Case Study: Authority and Community Water Governance in Qalo

To better understand the water committee, and the reticence of some community members to discuss it, the chief of Qalo was approached and asked if there was indeed a committee and if she could elaborate on its role and functions. The chief confirmed that there was a committee and stated that the members were supposed to take care of the water tanks when there was a problem, but that they did not. She added that the committee members were “worthless.” She reported that when she talks to the committee, they are not willing to help: “They expect something in return; they want to get paid even though they volunteered.” Because of this, the chief chooses to bypass the committee and ask for help from people with whom she is comfortable working. She, and others in the community, described the tanks having been fixed or cleaned by good Samaritans. However, not one of our respondents reported having ever cleaned the tanks.

Respondents gave varied reasons for this lack of maintenance—it was the responsibility of the committee, the tanks never required it, it was never the respondent's turn. To underscore the effect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, one participant explained how the person responsible for training others to maintain the tanks had suddenly died without passing on their knowledge.

“They Took Away Our Responsibility”: Conflict in Water Resource Management

Three research participants informed the researchers that maintenance of water tanks was the responsibility of the village water committee. When the research team spoke to people in the community, however, no one could even agree if there was a water committee, let alone of whom it was comprised. However, one particularly knowledgeable village member said that the water committee has existed since the 1980s and that it was very functional. As he described in an interview, community members contributed money to a bank account, and the committee went to the Water and Sanitation Authority (then WASA, now WASCO—Water and Sewerage Company) to ask about a standpipe. The money was given to the chief and when WASA showed up the money was gone, it had been “squandered” he said. This report of money theft and mismanagement of funds was common, and

while I cannot speak to the veracity of these claims, this case will demonstrate that the situation is more complicated than money squandering alone.

Eventually, names of the members of the water committee were given to the research team and a time was set to meet with them. However, at the meeting, there were several more people present, including a group of four women. Despite the difficulty in identifying the committee members initially, this was not a clandestine meeting. One man recounted how the community tanks had been built, and the history of who was responsible for their maintenance. He recalled that the tanks had been built in 1991 or 1992, but there had been a committee before this who were instrumental in their construction. According to the man telling the story, DRWS was to train people in the village in maintenance and three men were selected from outside the committee, as the committee was comprised primarily of women, except for this man. If there was a breakage, the person would report the breakage to him and he would alert the chief. Since then, he continued, DRWS had not come back and the people who were trained had not passed on their knowledge to others, and now no one knew how to fix the tanks. The problem, however, was not that the knowledge had been lost, but that the chiefs at the time were neglecting their duty. He emphasized, "Above all, the responsibility of maintenance falls on the chief as the leader of the people" he said. That chief disagreed, however, asserting that "Every committee member had the responsibility, too." Here we see the first disagreement over who is responsible once DRWS did not return. The committee member felt that it was the chief's responsibility, but the chief felt everyone on the committee should be responsible for continued maintenance of the water tanks.

According to the committee, the entire village was responsible for routine cleaning. They would hold a *pitso* and then people would volunteer to clean the inside of the tanks which might have accumulated sediment or algae. This respondent further claimed that the tanks were being cleaned at the time this research was conducted, but this was done by a volunteer from the village. The water committee respondent said the committee used to meet often when the committee was properly functioning but recently they have not been meeting at all. "How long has it not been properly functioning?" I asked. "Six years back" he said, "the committee stopped functioning with the introduction of local government." At this point the four women who had been sitting behind me erupted in complaints against the local counselor. "They took away our responsibility!" they said, continuing, "They aren't willing to work with us!" According to this man and these women, the local counselors had usurped their power and took the treasury for the water committee with them.

In the event of a problem, people in Qalo were less likely to feel comfortable approaching elected officials than a chief or a local committee member. I asked one respondent who was complaining about the water insecurity in his community why he did not contact DRWS himself and he responded incredulously, "Who am I to approach DRWS?" He obviously felt he lacked the status needed to approach a government office. Furthermore, a few people who were comfortable discussing politics with me during interviews explained their lack of faith in politics. "Politicians are troublesome," said one young man. As we saw, the committee stopped working in reaction to the appointment of a locally elected official tasked with taking over the roles of the committee. Whereas once the committee had functioned under the authority of the chief—but with relative autonomy—they now ceased to recognize the authority of the new locally elected official. When people reject such responsibility, their small gesture reflects a larger reaction to changing government roles as Lesotho attempts to embrace fully "modern" governance.

We see here that the chief believed the committee was responsible for the maintenance of the tanks and should not be paid for this maintenance. This stands in contrast to the committee's beliefs as well as the dominant policy discourse that water is an economic good and should be managed thusly. The committee held that the community was responsible for the maintenance and that if it was solely the responsibility of the committee that they should be recompensed for their time. The committee similarly argued that they should be financially responsible for the tanks and not the local councilors, whom they felt took their treasury money unjustly. Not to overstate one individual's response, but it is nonetheless telling that one respondent felt that DRWS is responsible for the tanks and that they

are decidedly political. When DRWS decentralized authority, the responsibility was to fall primarily with the councilor with input from the chief. However, individuals with whom we spoke felt that ultimately the responsibility for the tanks falls to the chief, although this was occasionally gendered and the fact that the chief was a woman was given as a reason for the mismanagement of the tanks.

3. Discussion

In thinking of how water flows from Lesotho into South Africa and how water flows within communities, we begin with the understanding that such flows are both physical and cultural, both literal and figurative. With water flows ideas and discourse about who is entitled to access, and, relatedly, specific assemblages of power over who makes those decisions. Moreover, when water is unavailable, we similarly see political processes at play. Specifically, we see how national policies about the decentralization of the government and the role of the chief in modern Lesotho are being realized in the communities. Where tasks such as the maintenance of community water tanks were once the responsibility of the chief and the committees he or she would form, they are now purportedly the responsibility of the local councils. Not all community members felt this to be just—particularly the former water committee members—and there was disagreement over who was, in fact, now responsible. Some village members claimed the old system was still working while some said there was no maintenance being done at all. To better understand this confusion over responsibility, I begin with the premise that the ongoing negotiation over resources is multi-scale process and that by relying on discourses about tradition and modernity, individuals align themselves with either elected officials or chiefs to achieve their aims. These political alignments, in turn, create a scarcity that is, at least partially, manufactured. Additionally, scarcity is mediated by the demographic shifts caused by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We shall now further explore the processes through which power and scarcity are realized.

To return to Lesotho policy, the three pillars of development are democracy, economic growth and management of the environment. As we have already seen, environmental management has been suggested as prime for exploitation at the local level. That a community committee—and then a local council—was charged with the maintenance of its water supply reflects a very specific belief in the role of the state in providing for the needs of its people. Indeed, while touted as a way for civil society to self-realize its potential through participation, this responsabilization works in the interest of the state.

According to Williams [42], the symbolic and moral force of the chieftaincy is not just that it is posited vis-à-vis an inefficient state, rather, there are multiple sources of legitimacy occurring at the national and local levels. He found that, “... even though both the democratic state institutions and the chieftaincy want to exercise exclusive social control in the rural areas, the reality is that neither is able to do so completely” (p. 19). Indeed, this is the case in rural Lesotho. From the conversation with the former water committee, it emerged that community members were resentful of the chief for not having maintained control of the water committee—and its scant capital—in the face of decentralization. Furthermore, our interviews revealed that certain people in the village aligned themselves with the chief while others rejected her authority. Ethnographic evidence from elsewhere in Lesotho showed that chiefs can be viewed as self-serving and prone to bribe-taking [43] and that the ability of the chiefs to control the spread of information meant that not all village members had the same access to participation and chiefs could and would exclude individuals [44]. Indeed, the chief told us that she worked only with those village members she selected.

As Ferguson [19] argued, development works within the aims of the state and knotted bureaucratic power together. That decentralization has ameliorated bureaucracy is debatable, and with the inception of local committees and the positioning of new local officials, chiefs vie for legitimacy and power. Through these contestations the local water committee rejects the authority of the local council yet assumes their discourse about the economic importance of water. With the committee no longer under her authority, she must seek out individuals in the community to assist with cleaning and fixing the tanks. According to the participants in this research, the local councils, and the resultant

committees formed, are decidedly governmental. Who chooses to and is able to align themselves with the government or with the chief is based on their positionality within the community and within Lesotho.

As individuals may have no mechanism to address perceived social inequality with the state—as was evidenced by the respondent who reported they could not approach DRWS on their own—his only recourse is to embrace individualism counter to the cultural ideal. Non-participation in collectives such as water committees may reflect a rejection of state- and development-imposed ideas about modernity and the responsibilities of civil society. It also reflects one's class position in the community. Given that chiefs come from the select historical lineage of the Bakoena, one's alignment with a chief cements their authority and marks that person as a higher class or evidences a patronage relationship.

Here we see the art of state governance, the conduct of conduct: by rejecting the authority of elected local councils and either rejecting or recognizing the authority of the chief over natural resources, community members engage the state in novel ways. Individuals may reject responsabilization of resource management and yet embrace some aspects of neoliberal development ideology. Decentralization policy states that communities should work together collectively to raise their own funds for the tanks through democratic processes resulting in empowered individuals. First, the committee, that is ostensibly the target of the economic and democratic policy agendas, seem to reject the state and its ideology of decentralized local authority yet they embrace select neoliberal ideas, such as water is an economic resource, and demand payment for their participation in tank maintenance.

Second, while select individuals may have volunteered to clean and maintain the tanks, on the whole, a new committee did not spontaneously form; there was no obvious collective action over water. For those who align with the chief we see an apparent embrace of traditional authority—that the chief should manage the water when the government stops. Ironically, however, the few “good Samaritans” who did step up to clean the tanks enacted the development ideals of self-empowerment. Chiefs are not divorced from state authority even though they're described as “traditional” in policy. In Lesotho, the chiefs have always served as an extension of the state, with an ambivalent relationship that ebbs and flows over time. Their authority comes from the people, as the adage goes, yet many chiefs represent a chiefly aristocracy. Community members are, thus, not rejecting the state or the state's development policies regarding decentralization: they are just engaging the state differently through different channels. Whether the chief or the local councils ultimately manage the water resources, ostensibly with community participation, the state is present; there are just different modalities of state power. However, it is not simply a centralization of power. Rather than a knot of power, a new tapestry has been woven, from which people pull various strings, connected to the state in myriad ways.

It is important to note that women are primary users of water and several showed up to the meeting with the researchers to voice their opinions about the perceived usurping of responsibility. This case study also took place in a village with a woman chief and a man as the district counselor. Alignment with either the chief or the new system of water management may be in response to this and may reflect the social positionality of the committee or community members, including their gender. Presently, too, more women are becoming chiefs. While the numbers have changed, not all attitudes towards women in leadership have accordingly changed. Older villagers, particularly some older men, had a problem with the chief being a woman. They felt that if she were a man she would be a stronger leader and would accomplish more. Thus, chiefly power that was perhaps weakened by the presence of locally elected councils may be blamed on her inability to lead as a woman as we saw one respondent argue.

Finally, it must be noted that the reported lack of tank maintenance in Qalo is also the result of the structural reality of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The committee did not stop outright with the inception of the locally elected councils. I asked about the remaining committee members and the water committee respondent mentioned that he was one of the three last remaining members of the committee. “What happened to the remaining members?” I asked. “They passed away” he replied. The HIV/AIDS epidemic dramatically changed the demographic profile of Lesotho; the population

curve was hollowed as the epidemic killed mainly adults – those would have managed water tanks. Thus, one cannot discount the impact the HIV/AIDS epidemic in shaping participation and the realization of democratic processes. This, too, is immediately tied to class and gender and the fact that the epidemic renders certain individuals at greater risk than others.

Indeed, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is discussed in IWRM policy documents noting the drastic demographic changes as well as changing environmental usage, “the poorer the people get, the more they rely on the environment to sustain their livelihoods. Degradation of the environment again causes impact on the water resource, for example through pollution, erosion etc.” [21] (p. 51). The policy document goes on to discuss the impact of the epidemic on service delivery. We see this with the water committee: as individuals died their roles were often not refilled or they died before passing on their knowledge. Thus, we see here that the scarcity of water in Qalo is complicated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Local water scarcity is created—at least in part—through the collapse of water management committees and the tensions between various authorities and community members. As tanks are not repaired or maintained community members are unable to use them. In direct contrast to the development ideology that water is a resource that should be used to develop business, for example the use of surplus water to grow vegetables, few if any respondents reported marshalling water as an economic resource. Even as several tanks were not able to be used, the community nonetheless had others which could be drawn from. Elsewhere I have discussed that women were disinclined to use water sources for business. They preferred to use the water to fulfil household responsibilities [13]. In this instance, water is a material through which to realize authority and assert political allegiance rather than to support neoliberal notions of entrepreneurship. The fact remains, though, that clear collective management of water sources was not happening in Qalo. As such, water availability and authority are co-created through participation in the water committee.

IWRM is meant to situate water governance within existing social relations. However, scholars have well demonstrated that within hydro-social relations we see power through water not just power over water (c.f., [45]); water governance is not situated within social relations, they are co-creative. This research engages this theory by linking scalar dynamics and by emphasizing the importance in understanding community-level micro-politics. On the one hand, micro-politics in Lesotho link to larger political processes, for example the fact that chiefs are part of a chiefly class created, in large part, by colonial authorities. Critics have argued that IWRM can reinforce specific power relations but by engaging political ecology, we see that through the contestations over IWRM and decentralization, new social relations, for example between the chief and committees she was once had authority over, are created. Moreover, even micro-politics are importantly political since they engender scarcity when community organizations cannot maintain the water sources. However, the micro-politics also occur in the context of shifting gender roles and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Thus, this research extends political ecology by showing that the political economic forces shaping the HIV epidemic are similarly shaping hydro-social relations and that such relations are ultimately hydro-biosocial. The foregrounding of the body in hydro-social relations is an important avenue for future research in the political ecology of health.

In sum, we see at the community-level that certain hydro-social configurations result from the circulations and flows of neoliberal development ideology through the handing over of control of water resources to local councils and their committees. However, many still afford the local chief much authority and prefer that the maintenance of tanks fall under her control. Who aligns with either the local council, the chief, or neither depends on their relative power and aims – the embrace of tradition or modernity is complicated by one’s social position. Thus, the role of the chief in Lesotho or the successful acceptance of decentralization writ large is contingent on local micro-politics. The effect of decentralization can both weaken and strengthen the authority of the chief depending on local factions and political configurations.

Several limitations should be considered in the interpretation of these findings. These findings are drawn from limited interviews with community members willing to discuss the politics associated with the water committee. They may not be generalizable to all communities or all committees in Lesotho. In addition, an important contrast would be communities in which committees are sustainable, thus speaking more broadly to literature on common pool resources [46–48] and to resistance and place-making [49].

4. Conclusions

In Lesotho, the management of water resources was decentralized from Maseru to local communities. The 2007 World Bank report asserts that the idea of decentralization was “received by even the remotest populations with great enthusiasm” [32] (p. 7). The enthusiasm likely stemmed from the same distrust of government officials that was encountered in this research. Democratic processes, such as *pitsos*, are familiar to *Basotho*. Participation is not a novel concept, and is at the core of the continued reverence of the idea of the chieftaincy—the chief is the chief because of his people.

From the outside one could posit that the water committee is not functioning because of misappropriation of funds or interpersonal conflict. While those may be compelling reasons for certain individuals, we also see a complicated mix of national and local politics circulating through Qalo all within the structural reality of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Water as an ecological resource is created through long standing and recent political relations. One example of the specific social relations creating a waterscape is the Qalo water committee presented here. Choosing not to participate in supporting the community’s water committee may be the result of disinterest or individualism in the face of poverty, but it can also be a stand against the encroaching power of the local councils or a reaction against a woman chief. People living in rural Lesotho are aware of the continued hand of the state in decentralization and are bristling at what they see as less power and not more power. Furthermore, some people align themselves with the chief, while others prefer to dissent by supporting neither the chief nor the local councils and would rather let the tanks fall into disrepair. People can subtly employ or hide the power they do have. We also cannot ignore the reality that this committee is not functioning, at least in part, because of the mortality due to a disease that is exacerbated by poverty and social inequality.

Historically, the chieftaincy and the state were linked through indirect rule and the establishment of the Bakoena. While chiefs represent resistance to the state they are often an extension of it. Similarly, as Ferguson [15] notes, decentralization can often have centralizing effects. Where once some of the chiefs remained more or less autonomous, with the inception of locally elected councils, the government becomes more effectively entrenched in the rural areas. Whereas decentralization was once explicitly political—it was an attempt to minimize the power of certain Paramount Chiefs—now it is seemingly “anti-political” [15] and touted as modern and community-driven. Decentralization is meant to put the government in the hands of the people, and it does but not in the way it is written. As neither chiefs nor locally elected officials are anti-political, decentralization brings with it a vying for legitimacy and power that brings the state in and out of focus. The state ebbs and flows in communities far removed from Maseru, the capital. While the metaphorical bureaucratic knot may be tighter, strands reach the rural areas in new ways.

While the Vision 2020 and IWRM policies posit that water is a natural resource primed for exploitation, we see here that water—and scarcity—are inherently political. Policies that link water to social relations miss the role that water is playing in creating local power structures but also how authority is defined. In Qalo, notions of authority are being transformed via participation in—or rejection of—the water committee. Moreover, such rejection may represent contestation the self-empowerment ideology promulgated by neoliberal development policy, and, thus, a rejection of the state’s devolution of responsibility to communities.

Finally, we can expand our view to the global scale. The seeming collapse of the water committee in Qalo illustrates the implementation of international and national policies about resource

management in a neoliberal economic environment and how the application of these policies disseminates broader democratic ideals about good governance. The success or failure of local committees to marshal their resources will necessarily inform future development policies, which then circulate regionally and globally. This highlights the importance of re-centering politics in our understanding water management. Decentralization is slated to continue apace and with the embrace of IWRM, we must fully understand the co-creative effects of water scarcity and authority.

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