

Book Reviews

Progress, Development and Knowledge in Lesotho's Environmental History

Christopher Conz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho: The Poverty of Progress*

Boydell and Brewer, Suffolk, 2024

266pp

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In light of academic debates about decoloniality which have contributed to reconsiderations of the history of colonialism, Lesotho remains an area rich in potential for research. Christopher Conz's *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho: The Poverty of Progress* broaches the interconnectedness between knowledge, environment, and injustice, drawing on historical and recent relations between the Global North and the Global South.

The book contributes to broader debates on ecological justice, postcolonial development, and the decolonisation of knowledge. Conz pays particular attention to how the Basotho drew on local and global sources of knowledge to form vernacular ideas of 'progress' known as *tsoelopele*. Conz argues that profound injustice, embedded in colonial relations and postcolonial development, has shaped environmental governance in Lesotho. Using various colonial institutions established to create a colonial capitalist system in Lesotho, dating from the mid-1980s to the early 1970s, the book shows that *tsoelopele* has been an integral part of Basotho environmental management, politics, and culture for decades (p. 162).

Offering a *long-durée* account of the ecological history of the Basotho from precolonial times to the post-independence era, Conz aims to understand the complex social webs that comprise systems of progress. Capturing the diverse experiences of various Basotho who drew on local and global sources of knowledge despite being landlocked by South Africa, the book succinctly demonstrates how the Basotho people and their land were integrated into the global capitalist agricultural and industrial economies since the mid-to-late 1800s.

The book outlines the contours of Lesotho's precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial experiences of *tsoelopele*. Although women played a central role in the agrarian and conservation sectors of Lesotho, the chapters' engagement with women's experience is somewhat truncated, stressing male-dominated spheres to

foreground the meanings and experiences of *tsoelopele*. Despite that, the chapters generally reveal both the macro and intricate entanglements of environmental knowledge, colonial power, and injustice in Lesotho.

The first chapter presents the biosocial context and significance of the mountains. Here, Conz emphasises how the engagement of people with new knowledge, technologies, and biological resources shaped and reshaped Basotho in Qacha's Nek from the 1870s, following the colonial administration's involvement in the mountainous region of the territory. The chapter provides a detailed yet concise account of how institutions, individuals, and ideas contributed to significant changes in people's beliefs and actions, as well as their environment. While he acknowledges the cultural aspects surrounding Basotho adaptation to foreign forms of production and ecological management from the 1870s to the early 1890s, Conz tends to overemphasise the political factors affecting production and the circulation of knowledge about the environment.

Chapter 2, 'Animal, Pests and Politics of Veterinary Knowledge', reveals how political institutions engage with knowledge and policy. The chapter suggests that Lesotho played a pivotal role in global and regional historical events. It stresses the significance of the years between 1896 (rinderpest outbreak) and 1933 (Dust Bowl) in forming ideas about *tsoelopele*. These years are not only crucial for Lesotho's history, but bovine disease (rinderpest) in the late 1800s affected most countries in southern and East Africa. Additionally, the 1930s marked the establishment of a global soil conservation discourse. This chapter is one of the few single-authored texts that compares these two events, providing an in-depth illustration of how colonial capitalism, changes in ecology, and bovine diseases shaped politics in Lesotho. These events shifted the social order and reinforced Lesotho's peripheral economic position in the region and beyond (pp. 57-93). The chapter also discusses commercial injustice in the wool industry, highlighting that it created broad inequality rather than prosperity (pp. 82-89).

The following three chapters continue to stress the complex changes to the Basotho and their landscape that came with research, policing, production, circulation, and application of knowledge. Chapter 3 outlines how older methods of stewardship coincided, collided, and overlapped with new state-led forestry, conservation, agriculture, and water programmes. Chapter 4, 'Soil, Progress and Preserving the Status Quo', provides condensed accounts that explain the evolution in the production, application, and circulation of environmental knowledge during colonial rule for students and policymakers. This chapter gives agency to Basotho farmers and sheds light on the social complexities of conservation in the late 1930s, extending up to the time of independence. As people gained knowledge, they raised more questions about the social, technical, practical, and ecological aspects of soil conservation (p. 141).

The chapter thus aligns with other scholarly perspectives on conservation in Basutoland regarding the imposition of scientific conservation programmes on the Basotho but adds that ordinary Basotho and their chiefs played a significant role in the production, dissemination, and application of science. The author presents the international context of the development of conservation discourse, revealing how it relates to the Basotho understanding of local land tenure systems, their relationship with conservation, commercial agriculture, and prosperity (p. 145). However, Conz does not fully engage environmental science itself when he questions the narratives of soil erosion as a crisis. An in-depth, interdisciplinary ecological perspective incorporating soil science and land-use data would have strengthened his critique.

Chapter 5 discusses agriculture, knowledge, and paths of progress, providing a concise account of how various social groups in Lesotho responded to new agricultural knowledge from the early 1900s to the late 1960s. The author's treatment of this period is insightful and refreshing, providing evidence of the effects of colonial state initiatives on the landscape and the people. The author emphasises that outcomes varied among social groups; some groups viewed the state-led programmes as instruments for extending colonial power. In contrast, others viewed them as opportunities for acquiring practical knowledge and skills, as well as inputs that could help them achieve community, personal, and community objectives (pp. 163 – 192). This analysis was not publicly available before the publication of this book.

However, urban-rural dynamics during this period remain in the background of the chapter, although they were deeply connected to how agriculture and conservation practices unfolded, especially in relation to Lesotho's neighbour, South Africa. A more explicit examination of urban growth, regional integration, and their impact on environmental governance could have helped situate rural Lesotho within a broader Southern African historiography.

The sixth chapter examines the environmental and social history of nutrition during the latter years of colonialism in Lesotho, depicting the diverse and progressive views of the Basotho during apartheid in South Africa – a period when African countries faced the central issues of nationalism and international science. The chapter argues that the Basotho addressed nutrition problems through new and old ideas and technologies, revealing the varied forms and notions of *tsoelopele*. Although the chapter provides considerable detail on all social groups, it emphasises women and political groups.

Overall, the book covers the critical contours of Lesotho's history, demonstrating how environment, knowledge, and injustice are inextricably linked (p. 224). Although the author effectively employs primary sources from over ten archival repositories and several interviews to illustrate and support his arguments, he appears to overlook the methodological pitfalls and challenges associated with

researching local knowledge and environmental injustice. It would have been more fruitful to indicate how the methodologies used helped the author to gain a deeper understanding of local approaches.

Nonetheless, Conz's bilingual research in Sesotho and English enriches the text and his approach offers a fresh perspective on the environmental history of Lesotho, challenging the literature which credits foreign agencies in the country's agrarian and conservation development issues.

Although it allows for nuance, the book's use of a single case study has its shortcomings, such as overgeneralising and bias, considering that Qacha's Nek is primarily used to represent the entire ecological zone or the country at large. Nevertheless, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho* is a welcome addition to the growing body of knowledge on African environmental history, and particularly, Lesotho. Students from various disciplines can benefit from this monograph, as it moves beyond simplistic narratives of degradation and backwardness, offering new dynamics to environmental knowledge, political ecology, and development studies. It also provides policymakers and NGOs interested in the Global South with a case study that illustrates deeper histories of inequality and injustice that hinder development.

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Understanding the Place of Death, Manhood and Martyrdom in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

Jacob Dlamini, *Dying for Freedom: Political Martyrdom in South Africa*

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152 pp

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In October 2022, Jacob Dlamini, a professor of history at Princeton University, delivered the Smuts memorial lectures at Cambridge University's Magdalene College. The three lectures, titled 'Dying for Freedom', 'Defying Death' and 'A Dignified Corpse', form the basis of Dlamini's book, *Dying for Freedom: Political Martyrdom in South Africa*. Staying true to his oeuvre, Dlamini's penetrating and insightful work asks difficult yet necessary questions about South Africa's struggle for freedom.

The book's central question is posed at its conclusion: 'did the tree of freedom have to be nourished by human blood?' (p. 117). In other words, 'did people have to die so South Africa may be free?'. Analysing the figures of Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Phila Portia Ndwandwe, Justice Mafa Ngidi and the author's namesake, Jacob

Dlamini, the book re-examines the conventional narratives around these individuals, their roles in South Africa's struggle for liberation, and their positions as martyrs (or in some cases, their refusal to be martyrs).

Three concepts permeate the book: martyrdom, the veneration of death in the struggle against apartheid, and a masculinist kind of politics, as espoused most prominently by Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko. The book 'explores the implications of this political investment in death, for how we think about betrayal, contingency, dignity, honour and sacrifice in the struggle for freedom' (p. 3).

The book argues that there were different categories of deaths: those that could be mourned and those that were outside the sphere of sympathy and mourning. The former encompassed people who were deemed heroes of the struggle for laying down their lives for freedom, a notion raised in several of Mandela and Biko's speeches. The latter consisted of those whose deaths could not be mourned, including people such as Jacob Dlamini (not the author), who was deemed a collaborator by his community for staffing apartheid's bureaucracy and died a brutal death.

Dying for Freedom contends that even the lives of those who were deemed 'stooges' of the apartheid regime also deserve to be mourned – simply by virtue of their humanity. To complicate the matter, the book details the capture and death of Phila Portia Ndwandwe, a celebrated activist who was killed by security police for refusing to share information and turn collaborator. However, to save her life, Ndwandwe did indeed talk to the security police. The book thus asks that we acknowledge the evidence not only of her testimony, but also the way Ndwandwe continues to speak through the clues around her corpse – clues that contradict the evidence that was provided by her killers during their amnesty hearing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

In an atmosphere where death was the ultimate marker of one's devotion to freedom, those activists who managed to claw away from its grip were viewed with suspicion, as was the case with Justice Mafa Ngidi. The book eloquently shows how Ngidi's story highlights the cult of death that embodied South Africa's struggle for freedom, and also makes the case that some activists viewed the apartheid state as omnipotent. As one activist put it, to escape its clutches was 'possible, but improbable' (p. 72).

Dying for Freedom is organised into seven chapters. The introduction frames the book's arguments and introduces its central figures. This chapter is a *tour de force* of the author's intellectual rigour. Not only does it highlight the history of the veneration of death in South African political life, but it also links its arguments to the importance of martyrdom in early Christianity.

'Defying Death', the first chapter, focuses on Nelson Mandela. It argues that death or the idea of dying was a constant in Mandela's life. Moreover, the chapter uses Mandela's speeches to argue that the struggle against apartheid was, for Mandela, a masculinist enterprise. The second chapter, 'Dead and Proud', turns to Steve Biko, placing his life and death centrally in the cult of death that encompassed the struggle against apartheid. The chapter argues that Biko, much like Mandela, saw the struggle for apartheid as a cause worth dying for. Using Biko's interview with the apartheid police, the chapter highlights the centrality of masculinity in Biko's politics. In Chapter 3, 'Refusing to Die', Justice Mafa Ngidi's survival is shown to have been viewed with suspicion by his comrades because he did not die in the struggle for freedom. The book illustrates how MK soldiers saw death as the true test of one's commitment to the struggle.

In contrast to the first three chapters, Chapter 4, titled 'The Unmournable Death', focuses on Jacob Dlamini as an example of how those who were on the wrong side of the political spectrum were deemed unworthy of being mourned. The chapter questions this 'politicised' view of death and argues that every life deserves to be mourned.

Chapter 5, 'The Dignified Corpse,' focuses on the capture and murder of Phumla Portia Ndwandwe. Analysing records of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings and the ways that people remember and honour Ndwandwe's life, the chapter argues that her representation as a heroine who didn't talk when captured hinders South Africans' understanding of black collaboration with the apartheid state. Acknowledging Ndwandwe's engagement with her captors and her continued 'speaking' through available evidence would help our understanding of the complexity of black collaboration. Finally, the concluding chapter encapsulates the book's central arguments.

Dying for Freedom is deeply well-researched, written in the clear, understandable language that is a hallmark of Dlamini's scholarship. Like his other work, the book delves into uncomfortable aspects of the struggle against apartheid while being sensitive to the material and his subjects. It is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding South African history and its many layers.

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Coal Mining, Land, and Dispossession in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Dineo Skosana, *No Last Place to Rest: Coal Mining and Dispossession in South Africa*
Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2025

207 pp

ISBN: 978-1-77614929-2 (paperback)

What happens when a mining company can simply put a fence around a graveyard and, as Dineo Skosana puts it, 'the fence says to the buried and their next of kin that this is not your last place to rest' (p. 111)? In this timely, erudite monograph, Skosana highlights the perversity with which coal mining corporations and, to some extent, the state, treats communities who inhabit land which has been singled out for coal mining activities. From its earliest days, mining, whether for gold, diamonds or coal (which the book focuses on), has been associated with land dispossession. Mining houses have largely been treated with impunity for their actions towards of rural communities.

In her monograph, Skosana traces the effects of coal mining on two communities. Glencore relocated the first, in Mpumalanga, from private farmland in Ogies to Makause township, south-west of Emahleni. The second community is based in Somkhele, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and the area is mined by Tendele Coal Mining. The book uses oral interviews, conducted over a decade, to capture the stories of the individuals who were displaced by mining in these areas.

No Last Place to Rest: Coal Mining and Dispossession in South Africa is divided into seven chapters. In the introduction, Skosana frames the book's central argument, which is that companies 'see ancestral graves as standing in the way of profit making' (p. 3). The first chapter focuses on the usage of the country's mineral law to privatise land and exclude the poor. The chapter provides a broad overview of the legal history of mineral law, tracing it as far back as the early settlement of the Cape. It highlights how these laws have been amended to serve the needs of private individuals and corporations. The chapter argues that through the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act 28 of 2002 (MPRDA), the state 'places too much power in the hands of multinational corporations' (p. 30). Furthermore, with the creation of the authorisation system, embedded within the MPRDA, the state gave itself the authority to decide who can prospect or mine for any mineral, leading to what Skosana calls 'state-led mineral privatisation' (p. 29).

Chapter 2, 'Coal Mining and Displacement at Glencore Mine in Mpumalanga', indicates the coercive mechanisms employed by the mine to displace 120 families from private farmland for open cast coal mining. Despite having been on the property for multiple generations as labour tenants, with multiple relatives buried there, the families were displaced after the mine bought the property. However, as Skosana

indicates, the displaced community had a different claim of belonging to the land. To them, 'ancestry, the presence of ancestral graves and [...] labour' (p. 44) symbolised permanence and were primordial indicators of belonging on the farms. To persuade the communities to move, the mine promised to build them houses in three areas – eMalahleni, Clewer and Phola – and jobs, monetary compensation and service provisions. However, they did not receive any of these. Skosana uses the term 'material reductionism' (p. 51) to describe the mining companies' response to the communities analysed in this study. Communities were first profiled, racialised, and then classed – '[dehumanised] at first sight in order to further justify dehumanisation and injustice' (p. 51). The displaced families' poverty and unemployment were weaponised against them.

The third chapter focuses on displacements by Tendele Coal Mining in KwaZulu-Natal. Unlike in Mpumalanga, communities in KZN were displaced from tribal-owned land. The chapter depicts how these communities were not consulted adequately and were promised jobs and new houses. With at least 30 percent of the land in the province being owned by the Ingonyama Trust, the land the communities were displaced from under the control of traditional authorities. It was therefore the chiefs, not the state, who functioned as the agents of the communities' dispossession in this case. Tendele promised the communities jobs, but only the chiefs and indunas benefited from salaries. It evoked a British colonial form of administration through chiefs. The indunas are the first to rebuke the communities and environmental activists when they resist. As highlighted in Chapter 4, communities in Somkhele have engaged in a struggle for land rights through organisations such as the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation (MCEJO), formed in 2015 to challenge another coal mining project. Some of this resistance has been met with violence and the assassination of activists. Mining companies and some traditional leaders turn communities against each other, blaming activists for the mine's inability to create more jobs. In 2020, there were '14 recorded attempted assassinations and 38 assassinations in KZN alone' (p. 92). Why then would activists risk their lives? Skosana argues that the answer lies in the fact that the land and home are 'emotional spaces closely linked to some of our earliest psychological experience' and 'material sites of connection to one's psychological and spiritual being' (p. 95).

Chapter 5 focuses on the impact of Glencore's relocation of graves in Mpumalanga. Skosana argues that these grave exhumations evidence the mining companies' 'commercialisation of the sacred'. An interview with the director of an exhumation company indicates how the compensation provided for exhumation was based on the race and class of the individuals. Although the mining companies negotiated with some families, Skosana shows that most were 'consulted' – informed of when and how they would be relocated. Graves were exhumed through coercion.

Chapter 6 also focuses on grave exhumations by Tendele Coal Mining in Somkhele. The grave relocations were rushed and some of the new grave sites were unmarked, resulting in the loss of graves by living family members. Skosana argues that this loss is just as significant as the loss of land. It results in what the author terms 'spiritual dislocation'. The seventh and final chapter focuses on the dispossession of communities under post-apartheid law. Using Sol T. Plaatje's work as a departure point, the chapter highlights how dispossession has been a continuous process and, using grave relocations as an example, how individuals fight for land restitution. The book concludes by discussing present-day dispossession due to coal mining and the attempts of communities to resist.

No Last Place to Rest is well-researched, with penetrating and insightful arguments. Rooted in oral research, the book tackles a sensitive and neglected research niche in South African land scholarship. It is written in accessible language, while still being sensitive to the research participants and their plight. Although it is implicitly stated, the book asks for more than empathy for the communities – it asks for active participation from everyone to help them fight what has been a long battle. *No Last Place to Rest* is a timely and necessary contribution to South African scholarship.

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