



## **Taking from the rural to serve the urban: The Likhubula water project and the slow violence of water abstraction in Malawi**

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### **Abstract:**

Despite community protests in the Mulanje District of Southern Malawi, the Malawi government in November 2016 launched a \$23.5 million project to abstract water from the Likhubula River in rural Mulanje and transport it almost 70 kilometres away to Malawi's commercial capital of Blantyre. Drawing on findings from ongoing ethnographic observations in Southern Malawi, this paper presents the Likhubula Water Project as a form of slow violence causing social harms that perpetuate colonial legacies. It engages with the complexities of the project, recognising the pressure placed on water resources as a socio-political need in response to the impacts of climate change, population growth and rapid urbanisation while at the same time identifying this as a form of slow violence in which the harms from the water project are not only in the 'mining' of water to benefit urban life but also in terms of the disregard for the significance of the water to local communities. We conclude that the act of exposing the area to water exploration and exploitation presents the possibility of perpetuating other forms of environmental harm in areas where there is already significant pressure on land, forest and water resources.

## Introduction

The impacts of deforestation and climate change as well as an increase in population have led to rising pressure on water resources in Malawi (Adhikari & Nejadhashemi, 2016; Wilson, 2018). Urban areas that have witnessed a surge in population have been the worst hit in the scramble for water, especially as a result of younger people moving from rural areas in search of 'greener pastures'. Dry taps can sometimes occur for days, with the situation made worse by a lack of boreholes which are mostly the preserve of rural areas (Chipeta, 2009; Magombo & Kosamu, 2016; Tchuwa, 2018). In urban areas, people are expected – and encouraged – to get their water from community taps or, for the privileged few, their home taps.

The Malawi government has been seeking solutions to address water shortages in urban areas, especially shortages of potable water. In rural areas, much of the effort to address water shortages has been the responsibility of both communities and nongovernmental actors (NGOs). In urban areas, the Water Board (a government institution mandated to provide water to the public at a fee with the explicit purpose of making a profit from the sale of water) is responsible for addressing water shortages, with little NGO intervention.

In Blantyre, a city in Southern Malawi, water shortages have been a recurrent challenge across the years. Magombo and Kosamu (2016) highlighted that as of 2016, the Water Board catering to Blantyre city was failing to meet the demand for water caused by rapid urbanisation. The situation has since been exacerbated by climate change as well as the growth of informal settlements. The ineffectiveness of the Water Board has also been cited as a reason for the water problems in Blantyre. According to Tchuwa (2018), the geographical position of the city means that access to water should be relatively simple, which suggests that access issues are mostly political–economic and largely as a result of poor planning by the state and the ineffectiveness of the state-managed water bodies that not only affect lived communities but also the land upon which they depend (Lasslett, 2018; Willett, 2015).

In response to the water shortage challenges faced by the residents of Blantyre city, the Malawi government in 2016 embarked on a project of abstracting water from a rural location at least 70 kilometres away, that is, from the Likhubula River in Mulanje District into the city. This project likely tapped into the geographical advantage of Blantyre as detailed by Tchuwa (2018) as well as the perpetuation of colonial constructs of the city (Riley, 2020; Tchuwa, 2019). This project is the focus of the current paper.

This paper seeks to highlight the issues of water abstraction in modern Malawi as an example of increasing resource abstraction in which economic interests are being prioritised over environmental or indigenous ones (Heydon, 2019; Kelly, 2021). We focus on the harmful context of the Likhubula Water Project and trace the origins, foundations and philosophies of the project to show that rural areas in Malawi are continuously exploited to support urban areas. We argue that this exploitation is rooted in the historical colonial constructs of the city that have privileged urban life over rural life (Lasslett, 2018; McCracken, 1998; Tchuwa, 2019).

We advance the argument that the Likhubula water project is not just a case of resource abstraction but is also a form of slow violence (Nixon, 2011; Willet, 2015) which makes rural areas bear the burden of climate change rather than their urban counterparts. This is a position similar to that advanced by Lasslett (2018) in centring arguments on the crimes of urbanisation, albeit our arguments are more about rural–urban relationships. Our position is that in sustaining urban communities, little thought is given to rural areas which are often portrayed as resource abundant. While

climate change and resource abstraction have previously been discussed in the global geographies of a North–South divide (Roberts & Parks, 2009), we seek to contribute to these discussions by highlighting that resource abstraction and exploitation are increasingly wearing a more intranational look in which urban elites prey upon rural life (Nixon, 2011).

The article first explores the concept of slow violence to show that even though water abstractions in Malawi may not always be immediately detrimental and are, in fact, packaged as ‘development’ or ‘progress’, they can nonetheless have harmful effects which develop slowly and span both space and time. Second, we present the context of Malawi and the relationship between the urban and rural environments that are the focus of this research. Third, we position the urban and rural environments within the strategy of using water as a political tool. In the fourth section, we present our methodology which is centred on community experiences, and in the fifth section, we explore these experiences by presenting ethnographic data that reveal the slow violence that is occurring. Lastly, we highlight the harms and tensions created by abstracting water to serve a needy urban city but at a cost to an already vulnerable rural area and its people.

### Slow violence

This article uses the work of Nixon (2011) who introduced the concept of ‘slow violence’ to refer to environmental social harms often visited upon the poor. In his own words, Nixon defined social violence as ‘a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (p. 2). He indicated that slow violence is mostly considered as harmless and, therefore, nonviolent because it is dispersed over a period of time, it is *out of sight* and its qualities are due not only to their lack of immediacy in time but also because the violence is often directed at those who are poorer or, to borrow from Spivak (2003), the subaltern. The non-poor who are seemingly unaffected by this form of violence and actually benefit from it pay no attention to it or dismiss it as non-violence. Nixon builds on Galtung’s (1969) structural violence by suggesting that it is only over time that the violence can be revealed. Using this work of Nixon and in agreement with Davies (2019), we highlight that the out-of-sight notion of slow violence is not necessarily relevant to those affected by the violence. Rather, it falls on the ‘beneficiaries’ of this type of violence; in the context of this paper, the urbanites in Blantyre.

We are mindful that the concept of slow violence can be and has been applied to the environment (see Baird [2021] in southern Laos; Holterman [2014] in Tanzania; Maathai [2010] on the African continent; Willett [2015] in Kenya), but there are forms of social harm in addition to the harm inflicted on the environment (see Barnwell, 2019; Coddington, 2019). In this paper, we align the concept of slow violence to rural green criminology, taking our inspiration from the observations of Brisman et al. (2014) that rural green criminology is usually an overlooked area in research. We borrow from the definition of Ruggiero and South (2013) to define green criminology as ‘a framework of intellectual, empirical and political orientations toward primary and secondary harms, offences and crimes that impact in a damaging way on the natural environment, diverse species (human and non-human) and the planet’ (p. 360). Doing so draws to the fore the structural conditions of the violence (see Galtung, 1969), which often conceal these slower more pervasive forms of violence (Cock, 2014). In this discussion, our remit under green criminology moves away from traditional understandings and explorations in criminology, which are often limited by legal definitions and constructions of the powerful, to instead draw attention to not necessarily the harm of the Likhubula Water Project on the natural environment (the Likhubula river) or to the planet more broadly but to the secondary harm that the Likhubula Water Project has on the people of the area. The focus is on the social harm to individuals and communities over time (see Brisman et al., 2014;

Goyes, 2021; McClanahan & Smith, 2014). The harm is often hidden because it is not ‘immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, [or] erupting into instant sensational visibility’ (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). While our research reveals one particular sensationally visible form of violence – which we describe later – we are most concerned with the legacies of water abstraction in rural Malawi.

### Research context

A former British colony, Malawi has a population estimated to be at over 20 million people as of 2022 (Malawi Population, 2022); with an area of 118,484 sq km, it is the smallest country in Southern Africa. It is divided into three regions (North, Centre, South) with each of the regions having a main city. Blantyre, named after the city of Blantyre in Scotland, is located in the South and has become the second biggest city in Malawi after the capital of Lilongwe (Riley, 2020).

Declared a city in 1894, Blantyre mostly developed into a city to cater to colonial interests and perpetuate the racism and violence of the system. Thus, Blantyre was a colonial creation which sought to exclude indigenous black people from white spaces; a legacy it perpetuates to date with race being replaced by socioeconomic conditions (Riley, 2012; Tchuwa, 2019). To rephrase Lasslett (2018, p. 10), Blantyre can be understood as having been deliberately ‘cultivated, given specific meanings (of a city) to play to the rhythms of a colonial capitalist economy’ mostly driven by exclusion, a significant feature of most colonial cities in Africa (see Myers, 2006; Riley, 2012). Thus, Blantyre came to be acknowledged as a city because it excluded indigenous life and lifestyles; the areas that still maintained the indigenous lifestyles were then defaulted to being rural areas, demarcations that run to date with the average Malawian usually regarding the rural as a backward and uncivilised space.

From its historical foundations in colonialism, which ordered productivity and life as they still do today, Blantyre has always been alluring to most people outside of it despite its colonial and systemic violence (Mthathiwa & Ngwira, 2019; Riley, 2012). This attraction has intensified in recent years owing to a population boom in the districts near the city as well as the inequalities that continue to exist between urban and rural areas. The city has thus seen an expansion in both geographical size and population; a situation that has placed considerable pressure on natural resources and services available in the city. As the home of industries in Southern Malawi – a situation that earned it the tag of being Malawi’s commercial capital – Blantyre continues to attract most of the people from the rural areas in the 12 districts that surround or are near it. One of these districts is the district of Mulanje.

Mulanje district is approximately an hour’s drive away from Blantyre and is one of the earliest colonial settlements in Malawi. A predominantly rural area, colonists were attracted to the district as it is at a higher altitude and therefore mitigated risks such as malaria and heat (Potts, 2012). The district also has favourable water sources and soils that are good for farming. It is the combination of these factors that made Mulanje a hub of colonial farming with tea becoming the main crop grown in the area. The district is known for its tea estates which claim at least 30% of its arable land (Nangoma & Nangoma, 2013), a situation which in itself has been a source of consternation among the locals (Namangale, 2021). A key defining feature of the district is the mountain that imposes itself over the district and beyond. With the highest peak at 3002 metres and a breadth of 20 kilometres, Mulanje mountain is regarded as a religious site where historically some of its nine big rivers were used for rainmaking activities. At the same time, the mountain’s size has been a source of various indigenous mythologies and legends which have contributed to and shaped the discussion on resource abstraction on the mountain (Malijani, 2019). Thus, abstracting resources from Mulanje mountain is mostly contentious because indigenous people regard it as an attack on their

own heritage and beliefs. This has not stopped the water abstraction project even though the Blantyre Water Board acknowledged that they were tapping water from 'Dziwe la nkhalamba' (literal meaning: pool of the elderly), a historically religious site which in being appropriated, has come to be regarded – and was labelled by the Board – as a tourism site (Blantyre Water Board, 2016).

### **Water as a political tool in Malawi**

It is important to highlight that water in Malawi is a political tool. This puts into context the nature of the slow violence that is water abstraction. In elections, politicians campaign on the promise of providing potable water to people (Mathur & Mulwafu, 2018) with boreholes and piped water often highlighted by those campaigning for the lucrative position of a Member of Parliament. Even if it is understood that the actual production of water is not within the remit of politicians, good rainfall is always assumed to be a divine endorsement of the political leadership while poor rainfall is often taken to mean a divine rejection of the leadership (see Cammack, 2012; Gunde, 2017).

While rainfall is central to rural considerations of water, in the urban areas, the failures of the Water Boards to provide water are blamed on politicians. It does not help the case that the Water Boards are government enterprises with a mandate to make profits (see also Lasslett's [2018] work on state corporations, urbanisation and the environment) such that when they fail, the mass media announces the news with much fervour (see Sabola, 2021). The fact that it is politicians who occupy the membership of the Boards and usually have an influence in appointing employees means that water itself is a political issue, as is the Board's 'incompetence' or failure to 'deliver' water (Magombo & Kosamu, 2016; Tchuwa, 2018). It is not far-reaching to argue that water in Malawi is a 'make or break' of administrations. The presidential election campaign in 2020, for example, positioned the provision of free water connections as a central promise (the current price for a water connection is at least \$20 with monthly charges depending on water usage and disconnection if one fails to pay). Tchuwa (2018) further discussed the position of politics in water provision in Blantyre by highlighting that the government has provided loans to the Water Boards with the explicit expectation of repayment with interest; he sums this up by arguing that 'Blantyre's water access problems are not a result of its inherent physical geographical conditions, ... (they) are largely political economic in nature' (p. 6).

Thus, the politics of water in Malawi transcend what Adams and colleagues (2018) referred to as the micro-politics around this fluid resource centralised at communal decision making and politics. They play on the bigger national political scale, regulating the behaviour of government and not just relationships within the community or societies formed around the water, which is an area that previous research on water has mostly sought to understand within the context of Malawi (see, for example, Adams et al., 2018; Chipeta, 2009; Mulwafu et al., 2003 ). Our work focuses on the national politics on and around water while at the same time detailing how politics affect the daily relationships to water experienced by people from places in which water is abstracted (Orlove & Caton, 2010).

### **Research methodology**

This paper is based on primary observations and interactions which explored access to water and community adaptation to climate change impacts documented during ethnography conducted in both Blantyre and the Mulanje districts in Southern Malawi in 2021. The data for this paper is drawn from a larger project that explores climate change impacts, adaptation and eco-grief. Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Abertay University. This research used participant observation and unstructured interviews in Mulanje district and

Blantyre city (over 20 community members and two district council workers) as well as structured interviews with other community members (a total of five) and one journalist (three structured interview sessions) across an intensive period of eight months from March to November 2021. Immersion in the context and a prolonged period of time spent with communities in Malawi provided opportunities to develop deeper understandings of the relationships between community members, the state and water boards, water projects and the land and water more generally.

In addition to the observations and interviews, media coverage of the project was also used as part of the data. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) highlighted the necessity of using documentary evidence and indicated that such evidence provides some other information that might not be obtained from observation. The use of documentary evidence in the form of media coverage of the project was used to understand the foundations of the water project, and it thus contributed to a triangulated inquiry, an inquiry which May (2011) described as a constant comparison of data that is of interest to the researcher. Documents, observations and interviews therefore formed the triangulated inquiry (what Hammersley and Atkinson [2019] called information corroboration). Furthermore, immersion in the research context for a long period of time also allowed for ongoing member checking throughout the fieldwork.

The data was analysed with the intention to explore: (a) How the Likhubula water project emerged; (b) the relationships with and opinions about the project; and (c) the experiences of those living within the areas affected by the project.

Fieldnotes, interview transcripts and notes, and media reports were explored and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The first stage involved identifying data that discussed the Likhubula Water Project forward from the data collected on the whole research project. The second stage then used the concepts of social harm and slow violence to explore what were identified as emerging issues related to the Likhubula Water Project, a focus guided by the broader observations from when the ethnography began. The third stage involved going through the data once again but this time drawing on the idea of relationships, particularly with regards to state–community and community–land and –water.

The findings presented in this paper are a combination of quotations from participants as well as what Humphreys (2005) referred to as ‘narrative vignettes’ which, in the context of this case, means that ethnographic fieldnotes and observations are woven together to transport the reader to the context and narratives of the participants in a more fluid and logical manner.

### **Community response to the Likhubula water project**

Likhubula is one of nine major rivers that flow out of Mulanje mountain. Due to the lack of measuring instruments on the rivers, the actual volume of water is unknown (Nangoma & Nangoma, 2013). However, the water project was established based on the *possibility* of abstracting at least 20,000 cubic metres of water per day, thereby adding 20 million litres of water to Blantyre Water Board’s water capacity, which at that time, was only producing 101 million litres against a demand of 123 million litres (Blantyre Water Board, 2016; Chauluka, 2020). Apart from highlighting the greater good of the project (something we discuss later), this highlights the volume of the water at Likhubula. The huge volume of the river is not lost on the community members. In a conversation, a community member reported that:

In the rainy season, the river produces such water that it is enough to burst (galvanised) pipes (due to water pressure), it provides water all the way up to the villages around Mkando (20 kilometres away)...people there, they rely on this river and, *before this project*, it would

provide water all year round... (Formal interview, 15 April 2021, emphasis added).

Besides the large volume of water the Likhubula river holds, the water itself has historically had a significant spiritual value. As already indicated, the river is home to the Dziwe la nkhalamba pool, which was traditionally understood as a place for rainmaking sacrifices (Malijani, 2019). According to a community member who also works as a tour guide, the pool was historically used as a place that older community members would visit to offer sacrifices when droughts occurred or rains were delayed:

In the past, it was used for rainmaking practices. If there were no rains, like this year, elders would gather and make a pilgrimage to Dziwe la nkhalamba to make offerings so rains could fall. They would take with them food and beer to offer to the ancestors/spirits. Once they did, within twenty minutes, there would be heavy rains. But that was back in the days... these days it does not happen (the rainmaking practices), except for tourism purposes. (Formal interview, 2 March 2021)

The coming of foreign religions or 'Western knowledges' that were then embraced by the people of the area have erased the rainmaking practices; however, the area has been turned into a significant tourist spot which receives hundreds of tourists in the summer months. Dziwe la nkhalamba is, therefore, not only of spiritual value but is also a source of employment of primarily young men in the area who work as tour guides to accompany tourists to the (once) sacred spot.

In 2016, however, the Malawi government was faced with a thirsty and dry urban area, and it embarked – through the Blantyre Water Board – on water abstraction from the river just metres below the Dziwe la nkhalamba pool. That area was chosen due to the volume of water, its cleanliness and its steep gradient which meant that water would not need to be pumped from the river (Blantyre Water Board, 2016); but the Water Board faced community resistance. The project site was visited by a government minister responsible for water and irrigation (who was also a Member of Parliament for another area in the same Mulanje district) along with a Member of Parliament for the area, thus underlining it as a political project for which success would belong to the politicians. Although the constituency of the minister (who headlined this visit) was kilometres away from the Likhubula area, he was originally from Mulanje, and thus, he was of the same ethnicity as the people in the communities around Likhubula. The ethnicity of the government minister is important because it resulted in implications beyond his position as the government minister responsible for water and irrigation. For a project that was facing resistance from the community, his visit was, in a way, to make the project more welcome among the community members because, after all, 'belonging' in post-colonial Malawi has been understood based more on ethnicity than on nationality (Eggen, 2011; Vail, 1991). Thus, the people in the area were expected to be more receptive to the project as it had been brought by 'one of them', an insider who had also risen through the ranks of state machinery. Even some of the media reports on the minister's visit to the area – which ended in controversy – focused on him as an 'insider' in the community merely because he belonged to the district, and with this meaning, he was perhaps more trustworthy.

The controversy surrounding the minister's visit to the area came from community members who demanded that he specifically meet with them and address their concerns over the project before embarking on his journey to the actual project site on the river. They physically blocked the minister and his team and refused to grant them access to the river. A journalist who travelled with the minister at the time commented:

...as soon as the minister and the other officials went into their cars, the stones started flying everywhere; tree branches were being thrown from all directions. There were men, women and children all over the place and the trip was cancelled. (Formal interview, 20 June 2021)

The minister had participated in a closed meeting with one of the protest organisers and had promised to facilitate a discussion with the community. But he insisted on visiting the site on the river first, which led to the community members and their blockade turning angrier, more frustrated and more violent. They were already concerned about the lack of consultation, the lack of voice in the process, the historical and contemporary value of the site and the risk of exploitation of resources that amounted to a power structure similar to the historic framework that operated during the height of colonialism (Quijano, 2007) and which continues today. As a community member remarked, highlighting how the approach by the state rendered them invisible with the state operating in the area as if there are no people who live there (the emphasised part of the quote in which the emphasis is ours):

There were no meetings. We just started hearing rumours. Then we started noticing some activity, but in terms of meetings, then it was that time [the minister came]. *That there were people here, maybe they were even shocked when they came to find us here...* (Informal interview, 5 March 2021)

In addition, it was reported that the community members had demanded that the government should plant trees on the catchment area of the river *first* before embarking on the project, largely due to their concern for the wider implications of abstraction. On this day, however, there was no immediate resolution. The visit ended abruptly with the police using force to quell the protest and arresting those involved or, as described by a community member in Blantyre, ‘the enemies of development’. According to a community member from Likhubula, the episode became so violent that afterwards there was no person still willing to protest. He said:

This whole area was filled with teargas. They started from the court. Just after the ruling on bail (all protestors were eventually released on bail and the case was discontinued), when we were discussing the way forward...There was firing of teargas. (Fieldnotes, 15 June 2021)

Similar recollections of the visit and the violence were also recorded in the main newspapers in Malawi (see Malikwa, 2016; Sangala, 2016), thus giving its ‘sensational visibility’ (Nixon, 2011). During fieldwork in the area, the community members indicated that their refusal of the project was not necessarily related to waiting for conditionalities to be met; rather, it was that they did not want any water tapped from the mountain because ‘across the years, [the community have observed that] the water levels have been dropping [so much] that it [the water] is not enough as it used to be’ (Fieldnotes, 1 June 2021). After this failed visit, the government began to engage the community through chiefs and other community leaders, but these meetings were not without controversy themselves as there were – and still are – accusations of corruption and bribery between government representatives and some higher members of the community. In a conversation with one of the journalists who covered the events in Likhubula, the journalist indicated that accusations of bribery were not far-fetched and that ‘the calibre of the people that were sent to negotiate with the community are good at that: divide and rule’ (Formal interview, 14 June 2021).

This use of soft power and manipulation as well as physical violence against protestors is not only applicable to Malawi. Hoag (2019) also indicated the use of similar approaches in the context of Lesotho where once the South African Defence Forces gunned down members of the Lesotho Defence Forces when it seemed that the dam from which water is sent from Lesotho to South Africa was under threat due to political instabilities in the host country. In Chile, Galaz (2004) highlighted the way in which violence, the law, trickery and even money have been used in the contentious issue of getting water from the poor and providing it to the well-off. As in Chile, the water of Likhubula is abstracted from the rural to the urban, from the areas of greater poverty to those in more favourable socioeconomic conditions. In this context, however, this abstraction is not just the violence of



urbanisation in which the city extends into rural spaces (Lasslett, 2018); it is also a perpetuation of the colonial construction of the city (Riley, 2020).

By the time then President Peter Mutharika launched work on the water project, the protests had dissipated and there was little physical resistance, a legacy of previously violent protests and their equally violent police responses. There were nevertheless two outcomes: first, the government started planting trees on the catchment area of the mountain to meet what the newspapers reported as the 'demands of the people in the area' (see Malikwa, 2016; Pensulo, 2018); second, some of the protestors were offered employment on the project either at the tree-planting site or as guards (the latter still hold their positions). In an area with many people in poverty, it was difficult to turn down the opportunity for work. As a community member remarked:

If you go there today, you will find guards at the spot. Most of the boys who led the demonstrations are now there, guarding the spot. Of course, at first it made sense because we were so angry that we could have destroyed the structures there, but now they are just there because it is also a job to them. (Formal interview, 1 June 2021)

### **Saving the city: Slow violence for a 'good cause'**

The Likhubula Water Project was initiated as a way of saving the city which, in Malawi, has always been privileged over what has been considered as the more primitive and uncivilised life of the rural areas (Mathur & Mulwafu, 2018; Riley, 2020; Tchuwa, 2019). Public debates in Malawi have mostly drawn on the distinctions between rural and urban life – or the indigenous space against the colonial construct. These distinctions have privileged the colonial settler realities of urban life and their socioeconomic situations over rural life (Riley, 2012; Tchuwa, 2019). Mathur and Mulwafu (2018) also explored such relationships with a significant focus on colonial conceptualisations of water, further implicating the city as a colonial predatory space. The presence of industries in urban Malawi, long touted as the profitable ventures rather than agriculture in rural Malawi, have led to urbanisation and have also had an impact on perceptions of, and thus the privileging of, urban life over rural life (Njamwea, 2003). As those in Blantyre pay for water as a commodity and for profit (see Mulwafu et al., 2003), the people of Blantyre are prioritised. As Lasslett (2018) highlighted, it is the nature of urbanisation to prey over the natural world. In Malawi, the rural areas contain much of this 'natural' world, and those initiatives which are mostly packaged as developmental projects end up inflicting social harm on the environment as well as on the people who rely on it (see Canning & Tombs, 2021).

This social harm has not just been in the fact that the water abstracted from Mulanje and treated 40 kilometres away in the Chiradzulu district is never redistributed back to the people of Mulanje; it is also in the likelihood that the water project will affect the livelihoods of the people in the area. Unlike in other scenarios in which projects of a similar nature led to *forced* relocations of people or negative impacts on livelihoods such as farming and fishing (for example, see Baird, 2020), the people of Mulanje now mostly look at the mountain as a tourist attraction site which has its attractiveness rooted in historical environmental materialities that continue to be erased by intrusions such as the Likhubula water project. Although the historical spiritual values of the water of Likhubula appear to have been lost in the day-to-day lives of the community members, they continue to exist not only in the stories sold for tourism but also in the construction of traditional identities among the people of Mulanje (observations in the area revealed common references to ancestors not so much in the way of belief but rather as some form of attachment to the mountain). A disregard of these stories is in itself what de Sousa Santos (2014) would refer to as an act of epistemicide.

This likelihood of the deprivation of livelihood for the young people of Likhubula (a benchmark

for O’Lear’s [2016] consideration of slow violence) can therefore be considered as another form of slow violence – not only in terms of time but in terms of the erasure of valued knowledge and traditional connections that change over time yet are still central to the lives of community members.

In discussing the concept of slow violence within the discourse of climate change, O’Lear (2016) made an important point regarding the prioritisation of scientific knowledge over other types of knowledge. They argued for the need for involvement, openness and inclusion in decision making about the use of natural resources. This would include the use of water from Likhubula. However, as our research has established, the process leading to the implementation of the water project was not one that would have passed as transparent or inclusive. If anything, the way in which the project was implemented could be illustrated by the description a community member in Mulanje gave about how people in the urban areas regard them: ‘...as ignorant people, who know nothing, who do not know any better’ (Fieldnotes, 17 May 2021). Thus, when agreement over the project failed, violence and divisive tactics were used, and the project proceeded. The ‘poor’ that Nixon (2011) imagined in his work who are overcome through violence and other unorthodox tricks to weaken their sense of community are those that the water project at Likhubula engaged and, therefore, were made victims of this slow violence, the groundings of which are certainly colonial (see also Kelly [2021] for their work with the Mapuche). Sharp (2008) highlighted how colonialism assumed the position of having better knowledge of the environmental geographies of the places it colonised and better knowledge of the places and people that were colonised (see also de Sousa Santos, 2014). This superiority of knowledge, of people and of relationships to water is seen here not in terms of colonisers and colonised but in terms of urban and rural and the perceptions held about different ways of life and of knowing.

### **The myth of abundance**

Hoag (2019) argued that some of the justifications for abstracting water from Lesotho into South Africa are that Lesotho has abundant water and that the people of Lesotho do not know how to use the water. Similar justifications have also been advanced for abstracting water from the Mekong in Laos (Baird, 2020). These reasons, among others, have been known to be the drivers of large water projects even if they result in water being unequally distributed within an area. In Mulanje district, similar sentiments have been asserted and observed, especially with regard to water as being always available for the people. Nangoma and Nangoma (2013) highlighted how rivers carry water from Mulanje mountain to the areas near it and beyond all through the year. This perception of availability, however, is not in line with the noticeable effects of climate change that have led to a reduction in the amount of rainfall across Malawi (Adhikari & Nejadhashemi, 2016; Wilson, 2018) as well as its inconsistency. For instance, in the more current rainy seasons, rain has been starting in late November/early December when previously the first rain would have fallen in late September/October. In June in Likhubula, a community member lamented how the previous rainy season had been unreliable:

The rains came late last year. You know, back then they would be here – at least the first ones – by late September or October when late. Then we would plant and maize would be seen in the gardens by November. Last year, late November was very hot and the rains were nowhere to be seen. Usually, such heat in November would signal rains for the crops... (Formal interview, 10 July 2021)

The amount of rainfall in the rainy season has also been said to be less than in previous years as the rivers have not filled as they used to do. During one of many days in the community, a member suggested that the levels of the water were not the same in the river, that they had been dropping across the years. Of course, the community members said that the problem of water shortages

(even on their taps) was because of the Water Project, indicating that:

...before this project, we would have water on these taps. Now, this is June (a wet month in Malawi) and just last week we had no water in the taps for three days, we had to walk for distances to get water from boreholes in neighbouring villages. (Informal interview, 15 June 2021)

However, even the Water Board complained that its targeted daily output for the water abstraction of 20,000 cubic metres was not being met and that they were getting less than half of their targeted output from the river (Chauluka, 2020). In Bangwe, a peri-urban township in Blantyre that receives water from Likhubula, there were times when the community would have dry taps for days, forcing community members to walk long distances to water kiosks or boreholes for their water needs. This scenario has not affected the assumptions that Mulanje district has a lot of water. Even the people living in the district believe that they have a lot of water. Any thoughts about the insufficiency of water are certainly not entertained as 'the rivers from the mountain are perennial, they cannot dry. The ancestors cannot abandon (us) like that' (Fieldnotes, 17 May 2021).

Abundance is always accompanied by thoughts and feelings that the people who have the resource place little value on it or do not know how to use it effectively. In discussions on water management practices in Malawi, Mulwafu and others (2003) have pointed out how water management is better organised in urban and peri-urban areas than in rural areas that are close to water. This has also been argued as one of the drivers behind colonialism in which colonists often took up land for agriculture or appropriated water because they believed that indigenous peoples did not know how to use the resources (Potts, 2012; Sharp, 2008; Tchuwa, 2019). This form of slow violence continues. The ideas of value and productivity can be considered to have shifted such that ideas are held by the 'other' of the modern post-colonial state who stands to benefit from resource abstraction (see Kelly, 2021; Nixon, 2011). The urbanite of the post-colonial state has become the modern colonist who mostly influenced and even victimised by neo-liberal economic policies and processes of urbanisation (see Lasslett, 2018) gets to see every resource as a commodity for their own benefit.

As Nixon (2011) highlighted, resource abstraction from the poor is also there 'to maintain the unsustainable consumer appetites...of the urban middle classes...' (p. 22). In this sense, people from urban areas in Malawi where the political elites have their homes and businesses believe that water in Mulanje is wasted. That in its abundance, the people do not know how to use it and, therefore, it must be abstracted to urban areas where it will be put to better use. Not only is this a degradation of resources and livelihoods but also of a people and their way of life (Brisman et al., 2014; Kelly, 2021). In Blantyre, a person who works in Mulanje but is not a native of the area remarked that 'Mulanje is a beautiful district with a lot of resources which the locals unfortunately do not know how to use' (Fieldnotes, 5 June 2021). The slowly constructed ideas about people and their ways of life as well as their relationships to the land and water – often defined in terms of productivity – have had clear consequences.

This notion of abundance combined with a lack of knowledge of how to use (or indeed *exploit*) a resource is rooted in colonialism (see de Sousa Santos, 2014; O'Lear, 2016; Sharp, 2008; Tchuwa, 2019), and these ideas have come to be ingrained in society, and not just from the outside or other urban areas. Even people within the areas have come to accept this notion of abundance as a reality, oblivious to the implications of such acceptance. During fieldwork in another community within the same district of Mulanje, a participant commented that people in Mulanje (not just the community) did not know how to use the abundant water they have in the district. The participant remarked:

People here are lazy; they do not know how to use the water. We see the water but cannot use it. We have the mountain; we would rather get our money from the mountain...have you been

to Bvumbwe (a slightly rural area bordering Blantyre)? That area produces a lot of vegetables for Blantyre, have you seen its water? Let me tell you: if the people of Bvumbwe had access to the amounts of water we let go to waste here, they would supply vegetables to this whole country. We do not know what to do with the water. We have access to the water, we grow up seeing it, this is nothing new to us.

As we arrived at a house belonging to a tea estate worker which had a small vegetable garden watered from a gully made to divert water from one of the four rivers within the community, the participant remarked:

The owner of that garden is not from here. So they plant their vegetables there and sell them to the people here. They pay MK100<sup>1</sup>, imagine when they sell to ten or twenty people in a day. That is money one can make here if they just make use of the river, but we don't care here. The mountain takes care of us... (Fieldnotes, 8 June 2021)

The implication of the mountain 'taking care' of people – of its personification – combined with the slow processes of perpetuating ideas about the value of land and water, of abundance, of effective use and of productivity can all be considered within the framework of slow violence and, indeed, green criminology (Brisman et al., 2014; Goyes, 2021). The focus for those who reside near the mountain is not so much on the water that it provides but on what the mountainous lands can offer. Wood and its products that the communities source from the mountain and sell to people within the district are of central value, and some people also take the products as far as Blantyre where they fetch a better price (Nangoma & Nangoma, 2013). This creates a dilemma and a tension in the relationship between water, land and people. It is a dilemma that Nixon (2011) captured in discussing the poor affected by abstraction of resources who accept and even participate in the imposition of the exploitative on other than their own landscapes – and, in this case, waterscapes – due to their own poverty and situations of economic deprivation.

## Conclusion

Throughout the Likhubula water project, the nuances of climate change and long-term effects on rural livelihoods have been ignored and overshadowed by the opportunity to benefit urban life, something that O'Lear (2016) discussed as slow violence in climate change discourse. Thus, if Blantyre city is running low on water and suffering the impacts of climate change – on top of the rapid urbanisation it has faced – Mulanje district, which is also grappling with the impacts of climate change (Nangoma & Nangoma 2013; Wilson, 2018), is still tasked with the responsibility of meeting the needs of the city; that is, the needs of those that are typically constructed as being more productive. The adverse effects of this uneven development or resource abstraction from already vulnerable areas is often hidden, slower and overshadowed by the need to serve the urban. With short-term gains, it is often difficult to mobilise against resource abstraction, and thus, the colonial violence of the city that both Riley (2020) and McCracken (1998) discussed in their work continues as a process of slow and undisturbed violence in a 'postcolonial' Malawi, often under the guise of development and progress. As the impacts of climate change worsen and the demands of a growing population increase, there will be a need for various interventions. It is important that such interventions take into consideration the needs and realities of the areas that are involved.

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