

Miescher, Stephan F. 2022. *A dam for Africa: Akosombo stories from Ghana*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. ISBN: 9780253059956. US\$50.

Reviewed by Satyajit Singh. Email: [satyajitsingh "at" ucsb.edu](mailto:satyajitsingh@ucsb.edu)

While there are about a thousand large dams in Africa, there are only a handful of epoch-defining dams that shape the course of a civilization, a nation, and the aspirations of the people. Akosombo Dam in Ghana is one such dam. According to Miescher, it was built in accordance with the imagination of the Ghanaian socialist leader Nkrumah and became his pet project, to channel the energies of a decolonized nation in a primarily agrarian setting toward modernization. It was a model of economic development, *a la* Arthur Lewis, through the creation of opportunities in agriculture as well as industrial development. The dam became a symbol of this model of economic development of the nation.

Stephan Miescher's choice to title the book *A Dam for Africa*, and not just a dam for Ghana, points to how the Akosombo captures the imagination of a continent and its aspirations. The second part of the title, *Akosombo Stories from Ghana*, is modest. This book is more than a relation of captivating stories. This not a typical historical book crafted in the archives about the dam and its imagination by the state and the people of Ghana. It is that and much more. For instance, it has rich ethnography—Miescher remembers, reflects on, and retells stories of displacement and resettlement, he recalls stories of the old and new ways of life, and shows the remaking of relationships with the land and the ancestors. It is an excellent sociological work that builds on the early benchmark study by Robert Chambers (1970) and others. This book maps the changing social and agrarian relations due to resettlement, and how the dam benefits Ghanaians through the introduction of irrigation, fisheries, and electricity in the command area. Meanwhile, Miescher also relates to the people who lose out on the dam's benefits and migrate to the city.

Miescher's analysis of the building of the dam and its impact on the people in Ghana is starkly different from how dams and their long-term effects have been analyzed in South Asia (Drèze *et al.*, 1997; Khagram, 2004; Roy, 1999; Singh, 1997). In South Asia, dams are seen as ecological disasters that also uproot Indigenous communities from their land, culture, and economy. In contrast, Africa in the 1950s had a more even land distribution with sufficient land for resettlement; thus, resettlement plans in Africa were better than those in India. Apart from the book's deep dive into the history of the dam's construction, impacts, and sociological ramifications, this book is a political history of Ghana. The dam and its construction were intertwined with the developmental imagination and the art of political communication in the new Republic.

Miescher's narrative is a sophisticated and balanced study of the dam. The Akosombo Dam of Ghana is an aspiration for Africa; its conception and construction by Nkrumah intersected with similar ideas of high modernization from his contemporaries like Julius Nyerere and Robert Mugabe in Africa and Jawaharlal Nehru in India. Miescher also documents the changing demands that Ghana's leaders had from the dam. Initially, the needs of the global market for bauxite, aluminum, electricity, and fisheries were prominent in Akosombo, and later there was a shift in the national focus to agriculture, water supply, and flood control. Significantly, Miescher also highlights how constituents can exercise pressure on political leaders: politicians can only expect to win elections by delivering on the promise of electricity.

The book provides more than a simple analysis of resource extraction, displacement, and destitution; rather, it contemplates a complex narrative of how a dam becomes a symbol of people's hopes and faith. In his telling, the Akosombo Dam demonstrates to the world, and the erstwhile colonizers, that an independent African nation can harness science and technology in the pursuit of agricultural needs as well as industrialization. It is a dam that helped Ghana become a leader in the race to modernization in Africa.

In total, Miescher brings a fresh perspective to the debate on large dams. The depth of research, both archival and ethnographic, is extraordinary and emerges from Miescher's two-decade-long relationship with Ghana, some of which can be seen in the book's length and extensive endnotes—which make it an approachable read. Indeed, this is not one, but two books. The first is about Nkrumah and the imagination of a nation through the prism of a dam. The second is about the afterlife of the dam's construction—how it changes people's lives over time and how perceptions of the dam changed over time. In this sense, the afterlife of the Akosombo is important, as most of the existing literature on evaluating dams is centered around conflict, displacement, and

destruction. This book starts in the 1950s (the Volta Dam was imagined before independence) and follows the footprint of the dam in political and everyday life up to the present.

This book illustrates Miescher's craft of engaging with contemporary histories, combining history with ethnography, and utilizing film documentation (the book has an accompanying documentary series, *Ghana's Electric Dreams*, by Stephan Miescher & R. Lane Clark).¹ Miescher demonstrates how the Akosombo Dam was the first major political economy project that aligned itself with nation-building, modernization, and political communication in Ghana. Unlike most modern-day assessments of large dams that are critical of the ecological damage caused by them, Miescher's unique perspective shows the multiple ways in which the dam captures people's needs, aspirations, and desires—while also changing their lives.

The Dam unleashed multiple expectations amongst the electorate, for example, a demand for continuous electricity supply that continues to dominate electoral discourse today. One externality of the Dam was the subsequent changes in the local ecology and the gradual evolution of fisheries, the in-migration of fisherfolk, and the subsequent changes in the local economy, politics, as well as the exploitation of child labor. It is a book written with dedication, sensitivity, and empathy to bring out the constraints as well as the opportunities that arose for the people who got access to electricity, benefitted from fisheries, or began to grow tomatoes. In mapping both the political economy needs of an emerging nation, the challenges to state building, and the continuous relationship that the people of Ghana have towards the Dam, the book covers a long seven decades of rich analysis. It is for this reason that *A Dam for Africa* will have a long shelf life and inspire scholars with its multifaceted perspective and innovative methodology that helps us look at political ecology and technopolitics in a new way.

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Satyajit Singh is a Professor in the Departments of Political Science and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA.

¹ *Ghana's Electric Dreams* (2022). Documentary series available at <https://ghanaselectricdreams.com/>