

BOOK REVIEW

Stephan F. Miescher. *A Dam for Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022. 598 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$50. Paper. ISBN: 9780253059956.

Part of review forum on “A Dam for Africa”

It is an honor to read these generous reviews about *A Dam for Africa: Akosombo Stories from Ghana* written by four scholars whose work I deeply admire. Having spent seventeen years working on this project, it is gratifying to know that the book is finding its readers and that it resonates with the contributors to this forum. An author could not wish for more from his peers.

When I started researching the history of the Akosombo Dam, I was intrigued by the multiple meanings of Akosombo. I learned that Akosombo not only stands for the dam, but also refers to the model city built at the foot of the dam and for the print-cloth produced by Akosombo Textiles Limited. In addition, Akosombo is a shorthand for electricity, in the Akan-Twi language referred to as *Akosombo kanea* (light), and thus for Ghana’s power grid that has brought electricity to the nation’s homes and to the country’s neighbors. Reading Kwame Nkrumah’s speeches on Akosombo and going through the press reporting from the late 1950s and early 1960s, I came to appreciate the dream and aspirations that Ghana’s first prime minister and president associated with Akosombo, which journalists and propaganda officers popularized. The Akosombo Dam was to transform Ghana by providing ample electricity for its industrialization and modernization. Moreover, Akosombo was to offer electric power to the West African subregion and become a model for Africa within a Cold War context. Visiting the resettlement towns, seeing the slow pace of electrification, it became apparent that Akosombo also represents what did not happen, or only gradually and partially happened with these grand promises. This is well captured by Jeffrey Ahlman who notes that the book “presents the dam as a cipher through which to interrogate Ghanaians’ hope, ambitions, and frustrations with its political leadership, national development, Ghana’s place within the international community.”

Several of the forum contributors mention the book’s methodology, its multi-sited archival research combined with an extensive oral history project, which enabled me to write this historical study of technology, infrastructure, and politics. Abena Osseo-Asare succinctly groups the people caught in the drama of Akosombo as “the Big Men, the little people, and the modern citizens, and the electric citizens.” Indeed, I became obsessed with tracking their stories, which I found in Ghana’s dispersed archives, in the files of the Volta River Authority (VRA), in the boxes of the Electricity Corporation of Ghana, in newspapers, in the


Kaiser papers, and in oral history interviews. The rich Akosombo stories became the center of the book and are vividly featured in the accompanying documentary *Ghana's Electric Dreams*, for which I collaborated with filmmaker R. Lane Clark and co-producer France Winddance Twine.

The contributors raise important questions. Nana Osei-Opare wonders whether Ghana would have been better off without Akosombo. The dam has been central to Ghana's economic development, has enabled the country's electrification, even if it took decades to achieve. In hindsight, a smaller dam could have accomplished the initial objectives of powering the smelter and providing electricity to southern towns and industries, without causing so much environmental and social harm. A smaller and cheaper dam would have flooded the livelihoods of fewer people in the Volta Basin and created less of a debt burden for Ghana.

Tasha Rijke-Epstein asks about the multiple temporalities at play in the making and remaking of Akosombo and the embrace of electricity, and how the temporalities were "bound up with the multiple materials comprising the Akosombo Dam, with their different life cycles and paces of decay." Akosombo was built as a rock-filled dam with an impenetrable clay core. Extracting these materials left scars on the landscape around Akosombo. In January 1962, Nkrumah set off a blast at the dam site that became the formal beginning of construction. The moment was immortalized in a film clip, first shown in the documentary *The Volta River Project* that premiered at Ghana's International Trade Fair in 1967, now included in *Ghana's Electric Dreams*. This and other blasts produced the rocks that cover the dam's impenetrable clay core. A visitor standing on the dam can see the transformed hillsides to the west of Akosombo, or more comfortably while sipping a drink on the Volta Hotel's terrace. Sourcing the clay also left permanent marks on the landscape. The clay was excavated along the Volta River, an area that was once the village of Kyease and now includes the Ghana Fisheries research station, whose fishponds cover the ground dug up by Impregilo, the Italian contractor. The fisheries that emerged in Volta Lake behind the dam have their own temporality. Initially the lake's fisheries multiplied rapidly on their own. Recently, the Fisheries Department, seeking to mitigate overfishing, has been raising fingerlings in the cavities left by the clay excavation to bring new life to the lake.

The Akosombo Dam and the stories told in *A Dam for Africa* stand for an age of infrastructure, as Rijke-Epstein suggests. Since Akosombo has aged, as I frequently heard, its capacity must be supplemented by other power plants to generate sufficient electricity for Ghana's growing domestic demands and export commitments. Aging infrastructures remain full of surprises. The period from the 1970s through the 2010s, chronicled in the book, brought times of low rainfall and drought when Volta Lake did not fill up, causing power outages and load shedding. With the erratic weather patterns of climate change, the catchment area of the Volta River system has seen increased precipitation. In September 2023, after heavy rainfall, the VRA opened the floodgates at Akosombo to save the dam. The spillage led to flooding across the Lower Volta, displacing 25,000 people, impacting their businesses, and destroying crops. As Ghana experienced its biggest flooding since the 1964 closing of the Akosombo Dam, the history

of sacrificing the livelihoods of rural communities to protect national infrastructure repeated itself, though downstream in the Lower Volta. The flood victims called out the VRA for not having alerted them and sought relief from state agencies. The final word on Akosombo's impact and meanings has not been told. We need to learn from the ongoing Akosombo story as we strive to implement truly sustainable energy solutions to the current environmental challenges.

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