

Orange-Senqu River Awareness Kit

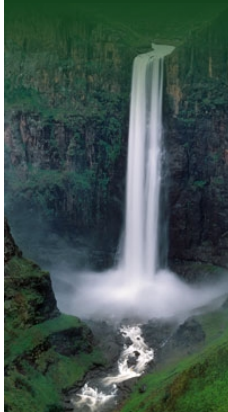
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People and the River

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There are many water-related cultural traditions (rules, rituals, stories etc.) rooted in the diverse cultures of the Orange-Senqu River basin. These traditions came into bearing as instruments to teach people the sustainable use of a precious and scarce resource.

Today, however, these traditions are "endangered species" in our modern world. They could disappear if not kept alive. Concerted efforts should be made to carefully check how far cultural traditions can be integrated or combined with modern concepts to sustainably use water resources.

The following accounts allow for a glimpse into the rich world of water-related culture – as does the series of stories compiled in the next section:

Water in the culture of the Khoisan People

For the San people water is engrained as the ancient symbol of life. In the ancient culture it is believed people would acquire good or bad rain making abilities at their birth and then again at their death. They were renowned for their abilities to control the natural environment and for their healing powers and would be employed by outside tribes to make rain or heal the sick. The two abilities are connected as some San claimed that they learned to heal below the water (Saetersdal and Saetersdal 2009).

Water and Culture in Botswana

In a conversation with the authors of this OSRAK Batswanas Bogadi Mathangwane and Jackson Aliwa explained the following:

Culture is the means by which one understands self and can relate their experience, achievements, hopes, desires and fears from family to nation and to the world. It is through culture that we build respect and identity. With culture we can communicate ideas, feelings, insights, our very selves, to others so as to build mutual understanding. Water is one means to bring together individuals and nations across the globe. There are quite a number of practices that we do in Botswana that relate water to our culture and these clearly show where we are coming from as a nation. It is through culture that we learn and develop as people. Its place in us is so fundamental that it is impossible to imagine a person, or a human society, in the absence of culture.

Like most African countries, culture is one aspect that drives most developmental activities in Botswana. Water is the backbone of the country's economic and developmental activities; without water, life ceases to exist. The society in Botswana has great value in rain which ultimately gives us water. There are many ways that rain or water are celebrated in Botswana. The Setswana word for rain which gives us water is 'Pula.' The currency unit is also called 'Pula'. This goes a long way in asserting the value and place of rain and water in the country. The caption at the bottom of Botswana's Coat of Arms is 'Pula'. This is perhaps the highest honoured and revered instrument of state. The names of children born during rainy seasons are called 'Mmapula' (for girl child) or 'Rapula' (for boy child). This clearly shows that even human resources are valuable, hence the association of names to rain. It is also not uncommon to see young children dance and jump in the rain whenever there is a downpour chanting 'Pula nkgodisa', the myth associated with the practice that 'encourages vitality and healthy growth of the young one.

In Botswana culturally, water is used in different rites and ceremonies. When there are prominent national celebrations or key national gatherings to be addressed by the highest officials in the land, including the President, the chanting slogan is often 'Pula!!' In fact when the said officials of high standing conclude their speeches, they end with chants of 'Pula!!' – at least three times. The crowd enthusiastically responds similarly. This is done in wishing and anticipation for more rain, which gives us abundant supplies of water. When a prominent visitor is received, the guest is accorded a special welcome, again with reference to rain. The expression in Setswana goes thus: 'Goroga ka Pula!' (literally translated 'arrive with rain'). Yet another usage of the word rain in the Tswana culture is when droughts persist for too long, or when rains delay beyond the usually expected season, communities hold prayers. At these sessions, the congregation members incessantly chant and cry 'Pula! Pula! Pula!', while gazing to the heavens – perhaps in expectation of mystical cloud formation! The circumstances described above reflect the manner in which Batswana revere rain and ultimately the precious resource of water as something that brings life to Botswana.

However, water comes in different forms and colors. It is for this reason that, realizing the severe scarcity of water in this country, during the review of the **National Water Master Plan -2006 (BNWMP)** the country updated and strengthened the available strategies for the development of water resources taking into account the social, environmental and economic implications. The plan defined and assessed the potential of integrated water resources management and efficient water use strategies taking cognizance of other alternative water supplies such as treated wastewater effluent, grey-water recycling, rainwater harvesting etc. in conjunction with surface and groundwater sources where possible. Nevertheless, culturally there are negative perceptions in this country about the use of treated sewage effluent. This is a challenge to the government and to address this, extensive education and awareness coupled with appropriate and smart technologies are being implemented. All this is done to ultimately build a water- wise and water efficient Botswana.

Interactive

Basin Map

Explore the sub-basins of the Orange-Senqu River

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Video Tour

Tour video scenes along the Orange-Senqu River related to People and the River

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Timeline

View a historical timeline of Orange-Senqu River countries, including water agreements & infrastructure construction

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River Journey

Journey along the Orange-Senqu River through images and interviews

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Due to the harsh living conditions in the arid regions of the Orange-Senqu River basin, the Khoisan people had to be ingenious when it came to storing and transporting water. Khoisan hunters to this day use ostrich eggs buried in the ground to store water along hunting paths.



Water and rain are critical for survival in southern Africa and as such form central components of culture and life in the region.

Source: ©iStockphoto/Dumbleton 2009
(click to enlarge)

Lessons from Oral Histories of the Herero People in Namibia

In an analysis of the connection between land and culture in Herero oral histories, Larissa Forster (2005) tells of the network of natural springs and hand dug wells that cover the countryside in the Herero territories. Place names of the region reflect the geography of the land and the connection with civilisation – Ovitombo (muddy soil in the river bed nearby) and Okambukomatemba (well of the troughs). As with most cultures, settlements are associated with water sources, springs, marshes/vleis and wells.

The water available from the land was essential to the survival of the Herero families that migrate across the landscape, moving with the availability of water for their own needs and that of their livestock. Land rights and access to water points are part of the oral history of the region and have been handed down through generations. This is obviously counter to the modern concept of land tenure, but must be respected.

The Rain Queen in South Africa

South African leaders from throughout the country have historically paid homage to the Rain Queen or Queen Modjadji of the Lovedu tribe in the Limpopo basin. From King Shaka of the Zulu to Nelson Mandela, over the last 400 years many have travelled to the Queen to pay their respects in the hope that she will bless them with rain.

Seasons Change in Lesotho

Prior to colonial times in Lesotho, months were not named in the same way they are now in the modern Roman calendar and were simply observed as cycles of the moon. When interactions with missionaries and colonials increased, the months were named; most in some way linked to the agricultural calendar and the seasons:

- January, Pherekhong (to increase, to swell)
- February, Tlhakola (to mature, because the grain is nearly ripe)
- March, Tlhakubele (maturity or harvest time)
- April, Mesa (the burning, because fires are now lighted in the lands to scare away the birds)
- May, Mots'eanong (to complete, to become mature)
- July, Phuptjane (to thrash)
- September, Loetse (to water the land, i.e., rain time)
- November, Pulungoana (the seed is coming)
- December, Ts'tioe (the name of the small beetle)

Source: Martin 1903

Account after visiting Qacha's Nek, a village in Lesotho by Claire Hilger

The following account was given by a US Peace Corps volunteer upon her return from volunteering in a community.

Lesotho is a very dry country, so water is revered. Rain and snow are greeted by dancing and singing. We had no snow this year, and it is very dry. People are not planting and are worried that there will be no harvest this year. To alleviate the problem, one of the nuns from the mission asked some students to play the *lesokoana* (A *lesokoana* is the thick stick used to stir *papa*, a thick porridge of maize meal that is eaten at every meal with vegetables or meat.). Each family has its own *lesokoana*, which is cut from the branch of a tree; the bark is removed and the stick becomes smooth with use. A few of my students accompanied me to the edge of the cliff where we could watch the game.

One girl is chosen to go into a house in a neighboring village (about an hour's walk) and steal the *lesokoana*. Once she has it, the girls of that village chase her and try to get it back. If she does not get away, she has to go back and steal it again until she gets it.

After two tries, Pulane was able to throw the *lesokoana* ahead to Neo, who ran until she passed it to Lerato, waiting up ahead. Using this relay method the girls were able to bring the stick safely to us at the top of the plateau. By this time it was dark, but the girls went back for another stick. I went to get dinner. A few hours later they ran through the mission triumphantly carrying the two sticks in front, singing rain songs. They then made a ceremony at the chief's house just outside the mission.

A few nights later I woke up to the sound of heavy winds and rain. The next morning there was a knock on my door. "Do you see, Ms. Claire, the *lesokoana* thing has worked!"

As our Sesotho classes began, I had my chance to learn about "*Khosto, Pula, Nala*." The English translation is "*Peace, Rain, Prosperity*." I was surprised that rain would be a part of their motto. I had always thought of rain as being somewhat negative. I know we need rain, but I always thought of rain as something that chilled my bones, darkened the sky, and ruined my plans for a day at the park or a ball game.

But the people of Lesotho view rain in an entirely different way. This country is very mountainous, rocky, and dry. The people do not have much money, so in these harsh conditions, they must grow enough food for their families to survive. They depend on water—to the extent that it is truly a national wish. The people of Lesotho ask for rain proudly, loudly, when they raise their voices to sing the national anthem, "*Khosto, Pula, Nala!*".

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