

International Conference: Flows from the Past

**Keynote Address by Mr MP Nephumbada, Manager: Information Management of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry on behalf of Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Maccavlei Training and Conference Centre, Vereeniging
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Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, I wish to apologise for her not being able to deliver this keynote address today. The Minister is departing on an official visit to China later today and I was asked to deliver the address on her behalf. It is a pleasure to be here today, to speak to you at the start of this conference on Flows from the Past. I am sure the Minister would be glad that many people are gathered here to discuss the history of water in Africa. She would be glad for two reasons. The first is that, as the Minister in charge of water resources management in South Africa, it is good to see the issue of water being discussed by such an interesting variety of people not only from around the continent but from further afield as well. The second reason is that as you would know better, we forget our history at our peril. This applies whether it is the history of conflict and peace, the history of art and culture, or, as in this case, the history of water.

Unfortunately, for many years, our history was written, or rewritten, by the process of colonialism. Much of Africa's pre-colonial history was lost in the shadow of colonialism, and it has taken many decades for our intellectuals to reclaim Africa's history. In the field of water, this work must still, to a large extent, be done.

When we study the history of the development of the ancient civilizations of the world, one of the key civilisations is that of ancient Egypt, a civilisation borne out of the life giving waters of the biggest river in Africa, the Nile. We can trace many principles of irrigation, water resource engineering and water resource management to the history of the Nile River and of Egypt. As a result of the combination of remarkable and durable buildings, and a written language, much is known about the ancient Egyptian way of life. The same is not true of a wide range of other ancient African civilisations. Much of our history of water management has not been captured and recorded. More importantly, much of our history of water management has not been used to inform the way we manage water today.

In South Africa, since our liberation in 1994, we have been through a major reform of our policy and legislation governing water resources. The previous 1956 Water Act was premised on the legislation and practice of Europe - practices and laws inappropriate for a water-scarce, arid land. We now have in place one of the most progressive pieces of water legislation anywhere in the world, a piece of legislation that balances environmental, social and economic concerns in managing a scarce and precious resource. And yet, it is a sad fact that during the process of developing this legislation, it was the experience and practices of Europe, Australia, the United States of America, that we drew on, not the historical practices of our own people, our own continent. I am sure that our history has lessons for the present if we can only learn to listen to the past.

When we talk about water, we are talking about something that affects all human beings, indeed all living things on earth. In the case of Africa it is a conversation of particular importance. Ours is a continent of great diversity, a diversity that applies to the availability of water as well. We have areas of great water wealth, areas rich in lakes, rivers, areas of high rainfall. Yet much of the continent is arid or semi-arid, and vulnerable to droughts and floods. In many areas, what water is available has not been harnessed in the interests of development. In the United States of America there is approximately 6 000 m³ of water per capita per annum stored in dams. In South Africa the figure is around 800 m³ per person per annum. In Nigeria it is 300 m³ and in Kenya just 100 m³, and in Ethiopia it is around 50 m³. We must increase our storage of water in Africa if we are to be able to use our water to sustainable social and economic development. Without adequate water storage our economies will remain vulnerable to draught and erratic climatic conditions.

That is at the macro level. However, we must also consider the micro level - and that is perhaps where our history is most important. For centuries our people, across the continent, have managed water to produce food, to wash, to drink, to make bricks and pots. They have managed water in an integrated multi-purpose manner. We need to capture and understand these systems, not only to understand and preserve our past, but also to learn from them for the future, for there are always lessons to be learned from the past.

This conference, "Flows from the past – a transdisciplinary conference on the history of water in Africa," has been organized by North-West University and the International Water History Association.

The International Water History Association, as is known today, had its origins in 1999 at a conference, similar to this, held at Aberystwyth in the United Kingdom where attention was given to "Water in History: Global

Perspectives". Then in 2001, the Association was formally founded at a subsequent conference in Bergen, Norway. Then, in December 2003, Alexandria in Egypt, one of the African cities of the Mediterranean that has historically linked our continent to Europe, hosted the subsequent conference.

The Association now has 62 members from 17 African countries. Perhaps they are also amongst the movers, behind the scenes, who have been responsible for making this Conference a success. I understand that the intention is to develop a substantial research project, specifically on Africa. We may even see the first results of your work in 2005. I hope that I have already made it clear that I would like to strongly endorse your plans and that I look forward to reading the results.

I believe that such research would support the aims of NEPAD in terms of supporting our understanding of water management practices across the continent, and increasing our understanding of our common history.

The story of humankind, we know, started in Africa. Indications are that water played an important role. Today at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in line with the thoughts expressed by President Thabo Mbeki, we have a vision of making this the African century.

In a recent discussion on water in Africa, Don Osborn writing from the edge of the Niger Desert in February 2004 wrote:

"In the Futa Jalon region of Guinea - which is not dry - I recall seeing in some villages where some families had actually put clay water jars for passers by outside their enclosures.

In general, though, requests for water also can't be refused - I can't imagine anyone in this region - even in towns - saying "no" to a stranger asking for water unless the situation were somehow unusual. Someone with a well in their compound is not going to refuse neighbours wanting to draw water. (I noticed this often in Mali.)"

This sharing of water at the community and household level can be seen too at the international level. We have made great strides in managing our water resources peacefully and in the interests of all people - despite the difficulties imposed on us by colonial boundaries.

- In the Nile Basin, all 10 riparian states are working together, for the first time in history, in the Nile Basin Initiative to open up the benefits of the Nile River to all the people of its 10 countries.
- In Southern Africa, River Basin Commissions between the riparian countries have recently been established for the Zambezi River, the Orange River and the Limpopo River. These Shared Watercourse Institutions are guided by the seminal SADC Revised Protocol on Shared Watercourses, adopted by SADC in 2000.
- SADC will adopt a Regional Water Policy for Southern Africa early in 2005 - a milestone for the History of Water in Africa, comparable to the European Water Directive.
- Africa is committed to achieve the water and sanitation targets of the World Summit on Sustainable Development by 2015 by halving the number of people without access to safe water and sanitation. This is a huge challenge and one, which will require all the ingenuity and commitment of our governments and our people.
- The African Ministerial Council on Water (AMCOW) brings together water Ministers from all over the continent to discuss issues related to the management and provision of water.
- In the Congo River Basin, Africa is about to embark on the next phase of the Inga Hydro Electric Project, which will be the biggest project in Africa since the construction of the Suez Canal.

Water is life, and water is the key to the Renaissance of Africa. Without clean water and sanitation, our peoples cannot escape poverty and cannot take the first step towards a better life. Without water, our towns, cities, mines and industries cannot develop. Without water, we cannot generate electricity. Without water, our environment cannot be sustained. We need more water resource development in Africa, we need more dams, and we need to make sure that it is developed to benefit its entire people, with minimum impact on the environment and the people around these projects. The people affected by water resource development projects and big dams should be the first to benefit from these projects.

At this conference, I understand that up to forty papers will be read by experts from all parts of the world. Along with researchers in Africa, they will be sharing ideas and observations that could be of importance to our understanding of facing the challenges of the future in Africa.

There have been indications of parties in the private and public sector suggesting that they would make contributions towards your proposed work. In all parts of the continent there are people in the offices of governance, but most of all perhaps, ordinary people in all walks of life, who might just like to hear from experts who can tell a historical story, to inform them on some of the water realities of our continent. As historians and scientists you are in an exceptionally good position to make an impact on African society. As a people, we Africans love history. We like hearing about the past. It informs us how to address the future. If we can be informed about your deliberations in a manner that is comprehensible to the people of the continent irrespective of the fact that our peoples speak about 1 000 different languages, there is potential. The story of human hope and trust and willingness for sensible development, forms part of a universal language of ideas that can cross many cultural frontiers. I trust that this will inform the deliberations scheduled over the next couple of days.

I want to conclude with Minister Sonjica's wish that your deliberations will be fruitful and will contribute to the building of this remarkable continent that is ours.

I thank you.