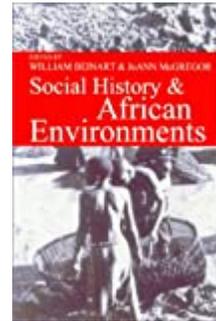




**William Beinart, JoAnn McGregor, eds.** *Social History and African Environments*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. xii + 275 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85255-950-5; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1537-5; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1538-2.



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## Culture, Nature and Environmental Ideas in Africa

Certainly the fast-expanding field of environmental history is inspiring some of the most creative current research on Africa.[1] The “dialogue” between humans and their environments in Africa has been investigated by historians in terms of the struggle for human survival in an environmentally hostile continent.[2] In 1999 James McCann wrote: “The environmental history of Africa is beginning only recently to take a coherent shape with the publication of a new generation of empirical, field-based studies that challenge firmly held assumptions about past patterns of land use by documenting past conditions of African natural resources and human response to environmental change. These studies have dispelled the myth of a lost African Eden and established a more workable hypothesis that Africa’s historical landscapes are both historically and currently anthropogenic.”[3] Since then a wealth of articles in this field has been published.[4] Entire issues of journals have been devoted to African environmental history.[5] Some book-length environmental histories of regions in Africa have recently been published.[6] Lance van Sittert identifies two contending trajectories in African environmental history: (1) a shift away from political economy to the history of ideas, and

(2) a fidelity to the late twentieth-century radical social history tradition and its focus on the social relations of production.[7] However, despite the increasing number of publications on African environmental history, Jeremy Rich recently referred to the “embryonic state of environmental history in Africa.”[8] In my review I shall return to the issue of the current status of African environmental history.

All the chapters in *Social History and African Environments* are based on papers presented at a conference on African environments, held at Oxford University in July 1999. It is never an easy task to identify common concepts around which such a large number of very diverse conference papers can be organised in a logical way. As far as some sort of focus can be discerned in the book, it is on the social and cultural dimensions of human interactions with nature. The work’s purpose is “to explore the historical contexts in which knowledge and ideas about nature, conservation and landscape were formed.” The publishers claim that the contributions to this volume challenge “some of the interpretative conventions of Africanist scholarship,” bring “fresh perspec-

tives to bear on well-developed debates about the politics of colonial conservation and African resistance,” and represent “the cutting edge of this diverse and expanding field” (back cover).

Although the editors do not wish to bind themselves too closely to current ideological and policy debates (p. 2), one can discern a specific ideological orientation in the greater part of the work. In the introduction the editors add their voices to those of other authors who have started challenging “declinist” arguments, which emphasise environmental degradation in Africa. The anti-declinist position is also linked to anti-colonialism, which focuses on the environmental damage caused by colonial intervention and the strategies employed by African rural societies, often under severe stress, to manage their interaction with the natural environment constructively (p. 1). This stance in environmental history fits into a broader tendency in recent African historiography away from the celebration of African victimhood to an emphasis on the agency of Africans in shaping their own history. In this book it is only the chapters by Helen Tilley and Grace Carswell that do not follow the anti-colonial line.

The material is organized in three thematic sections, preceded by an introduction written by the editors. Part 1 deals with “African Environmental Ideas and Practices” and consists of five contributions. Emmanuel Kreike writes about fruit trees in southern Angola and Namibia. His idea of a moving fruit tree frontier is interesting. He challenges the declinist paradigm, emphasizes human agency, and indicates the limitations of the political ecology framework of analysis, which overrates the role of the state. Karen Middleton tells the story of the prickly pear as successful “colonizer” of southern Madagascar and the “Malagasisation” of this New World plant. Her contribution reinforces the concept of the importance of intercontinental plant transfers in human history. She makes a very important point, overlooked by some of the other contributors: in environmental history, human agency is not the full story, and it is a mistake to assume that landscapes are nothing other than cultural and political artefacts (p. 59). It is no surprise that, “as pure environmental history,” Freund gives her the prize for “the most thoughtful and far-reaching contribution of the volume.”[9] Innocent Pikirayi brings an important corrective. He challenges the theory, put forward by archaeologists, that environmental factors, such as drought and soil exhaustion, primarily caused the abandonment of Great Zimbabwe. He suggests that more attention should be paid to political and economic factors, par-

ticularly conflicts and wars. In a contribution rich in empirical data, Terence Ranger investigates the role of women in “ecological religion” in Zimbabwe. He reaches the conclusion that, despite the constraints of patriarchy, men and women have played complementary roles in eco-religious ideology and practice. The interaction between humans and their environment is portrayed in a compelling way by JoAnn McGregor. She traces how the mighty Zambezi River has left its mark on the “river people,” both as a source of and a threat to life. She shows how a minority group has used the politics of landscape ideas to assert their claim to resources and to mark out a physical and cultural place for themselves. The river has become a source of identity for them.

Part 2 focuses on “Colonial Science, the State and African Responses” and consists of four chapters. The first of these, by Helen Tilley, is a contribution to the history of science and deals with the African Research Survey of the 1930s. She argues that the survey had “progressive and liberalising effects” (p. 130), thus countering the image of “colonial planners and rulers as environmental bullies and bumbler.”[10] Van Sittert, in a review of the book, regards her conclusion as an example of a “socially disembedded history of ideas,” which resurrects “an older liberal historiography founded on the ideas and archives of great (states)men.”[11] There are two chapters on soil conservation policies, respectively in Uganda (by Grace Carswell) and Nyasaland (by John McCracken). Carswell shows that colonial soil conservation policies were implemented successfully and with little local resistance in Kigezi. On the contrary, McCracken investigates the role of conservation policies in the eruption of anti-colonial peasant protest, with special reference to the militant strategies of “General” Flax Musopole. He mentions the formidable difficulties in reaching firm conclusions on the extent and causes of environmental degradation in Africa. Ingrid Yngstrom looks into colonial ideas about traditional land use practices in central Tanganyika and how it can be linked to the invention of the “Gogo tribe.”

Part 3 is called “Settlers and Africans; Culture and Nature” and includes four chapters. David Bunn reminds readers how white South Africans once perceived the Kruger National Park and how this perception was expressed in photographs. This supposedly “natural environment” was converted into an “imaginary landscape” and a “therapeutic environment,” where apart from the game, whites could also encounter “raw natives.” He also investigates the class distinctions between visitors. Bill Freund in his review of the book classifies this chapter as history of leisure rather than environmental history.[12]

Sandra Swart in her chapter indicates how Afrikaans cultural brokers used Eugene Marais's allegations that the famous Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck plagiarized his work on termites, to promote Afrikaner nationalism, although the incident amounted to no more than a storm in a teacup. Afrikaners rallied behind Marais and took national pride in what they perceived to be local scientific achievement. The perception of themselves as "sons of the soil" with a "special knowledge" about nature also shows how landscape reflects the self-definition of people within a particular cultural context. Robert Gordon looks into the "social role" of dogs in Namibia, both in native Namibian and white settler communities. His contention is that the definition, use and treatment of dogs provide insights into the nature of colonialism. Jane Carruthers investigates the ideological contestation over land in the Kalahari Gemsbok Park. Making comparisons with Australia, she portrays national parks in South Africa as divisive institutions. These parks made the rural landscape accessible to urbanized whites and contributed to a "naturalistic nationalism," but this happened at the expense of the indigenous people. In the case of the Kalahari Gemsbok Park, the San people were systematically evicted and moved to a reserve nearby. Carruthers traces the history of the Khomani San up to the present, discussing their land claims and their role in the tourist industry.

In a review of this book, Van Sittert asks whether a compilation of such a diverse "cabinet of curiosities" makes any academic sense and suggests it obscures rather than answers questions about what actually constitutes "African environmental history" as a field of research. He argues that there is no need for the term "environmental history" as long as the field remains no more than a melding together of political economy, culture, and ecology.[13] As I shall point out further on, I agree with aspects of this criticism, disagree with other aspects, and regard the criticism as altogether a bit harsh.

What are the strong points of the book? Because most of the chapters are based on pioneering research and include new empirical data, they make for interesting and challenging reading. I would tend to agree with Wels that several contributors offer exciting analyses which constitute sound social scientific writing, "intellectually challenging, accessible and empirically solid." [14] Important issues are addressed in the book. One area where I would argue that this book makes a major contribution is in its scrutiny of the relationship between ideas (particularly ideas about the environment) and identities. According to the editors, "the essays illuminate

ideas about nature, about environmental interventions, and about past practices," which are key elements in the development of a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between people and nature. They rightly contend that "we need to know about these ideas and practices in order to discuss historical legacies, to evaluate past regulation, and to grasp the fervour with which present positions are held" (p. 3). Most of the contributors succeed excellently in highlighting the crucial relationship between ideas about the environment held by Africans, colonial officials, settlers, and scientists, and the construction of cultural identities. Another strength of the research presented here is the use of a broad range of sources, with oral tradition and interviews supplementing colonial records. The majority of contributions are well-written examples of good historical storytelling and, therefore, a delight to read.

But the book also has a few major weaknesses. First and most importantly, African understandings of environmental change are not really well-represented in this work. Of the contributors, seven are women and seven men, so that the gender balance is just right. However, thirteen of the contributors are white academics and only one a black African. Seven of them are based at British universities, three at U.S. universities, three at South African universities, and one at a Zimbabwean university. From their Western perspectives the authors try hard to let the various groups of African people about whom they write "speak for themselves" through the sources. They recognise that sources must be used with caution, because they are at once evidence and representation (p. 6). In this regard the chapters by McGregor and Ranger are most successful. But, as Wels rightly points out, these Africans remain "objects of Western representation." This is the dilemma of Western scholarship in the domain of African studies. Western scholars have made a huge and appreciated contribution to African studies, but as outsiders they can only represent the African Other. Representation works with an assumed homogeneity in society, something which is never found in real life. This implies that the African may often be silenced as an individual, and it may lead to "a reductionism and simplification of social complexity." Wels's conclusion, that the book produces and in some cases reproduces exactly what it tries to criticise and demythologise, i.e. colonial assumptions about and representations of Africans in their relation to natural environments, is not too far off the target.[15] Apart from the fact that the authors write from a Western perspective, they all reflect rather orthodox Western views. There is no contribution from

a radical green perspective.[16]

Another shortcoming, of which the editors are well aware, is that the book does not cover Africa as a whole, only the southern, eastern, and central regions. One chapter is of a general nature. The other twelve chapters deal with a total of nine African countries—three with South Africa, three with Zimbabwe, two with Namibia and Angola, and one each with Madagascar, Uganda, Malawi and Tanzania. There are no contributions on West Africa, North Africa or the Horn of Africa.

A further point of possible criticism is that the book covers a limited time-span. Of the chapters, one deals with the pre-colonial period and the other twelve with the colonial period, of which the majority focus on the early and mid-twentieth century. This focus on the colonial period, of course, has much to do with the availability of sources.

Because I support Donald Worster's call to overcome the culture-nature divide through genuine interdisciplinary collaboration in environmental history research, the most obvious shortcoming of the book to me is the lack of genuine interdisciplinarity.[17] Although the editors acknowledge that "the integration of scientific, historical and social science approaches is essential for an understanding of environmental change" (p. 2), this is not achieved in this book. Beinart and McGregor also state that in writing environmental history it is difficult to steer between "environmental determinism" and "social relations determinism" and mention that African environmental history in the 1970s and 1980s was criticized because it "saw change simply as a response to capitalist penetration rather than casting the environment as dynamic in itself" (p. 8). Unfortunately most of the contributors to this book have not succeeded in escaping from this very dilemma. McNeill distinguishes between material, cultural/intellectual and political environmental history as the major varieties of the field of environmental history.[18] This book focuses on the cultural/intellectual and political dimensions and contains very little about the material aspect, i.e. changes in biological and physical environments and the impact of those changes on human societies. Beinart and McGregor view environmental history as "a fresh shoot within a larger social history project rather than a field that will take on its own very distinctive life." [19] Almost the entire book falls within the category of social history, which is also part of the title. This results in environmental raw data largely being used to comment on social and political issues. The element of social history is so strong that

often the natural environment fades into the background.

Some of the authors do take cognisance of research done in the fields of anthropology, archaeology and geography, but there is little evidence that genuine dialogue with natural scientists is sought. For example, the editors reject theories of overstocking out of hand as lacking legitimacy (p. 2), without a thorough critical analysis of such theories or giving supporters of these theories the opportunity to defend themselves, which is certainly not conducive to debate. Overstocking may be only the last link in a chain of events, in which social and political relations play a major role. However, from a biophysical point of view, it remains the immediate cause of dry land degradation. Scientists from different disciplines may differ about the validity of concepts such as "carrying capacity" and "overstocking," but if they do not engage in genuine dialogue with a willingness to have their own preconceived ideas tested, the gap between human and natural science approaches will not be bridged.

Let me take this point a little further. I agree that the social-cultural dimension is important for the environmental historian, that environmental change can hardly be explained outside the cultural context in which it takes place, that local empirical studies on any environmental issue must go beyond determining the state of the biophysical environment to include also culture and social relations, and that the very existence of environmental history depends upon human perceptions of the natural environment. However, in my view, culture is only one element of environmental history; otherwise there would be no need for the term "environmental history." Although environmental history can be practised as a unidisciplinary or multidisciplinary science, it is often regarded as a truly interdisciplinary field, involving interpenetration of the research approaches and methodologies of the human, social, and natural sciences. On the homepage of H-Environment it is stated: "Environmental history is an interdisciplinary field. Scholars doing environmental history come from disciplines such as historical geography, landscape architecture, urban planning, archaeology and anthropology, agricultural studies, sociology and natural sciences, such as biology and ecology, to name a few." [20] To operate on an interdisciplinary level an environmental historian needs to have a basic knowledge of, perhaps even advanced training in, one or more natural science disciplines and to penetrate the intellectual circle of the natural sciences. This type of interdisciplinarity is not very evident in this book.

Reviewers of the book have pointed to a few more

shortcomings. It is, according to Van Sittert, ironic that Beinart and McGregor acknowledge the separation of indigenous African and scientific settler ideas as a weakness of past writings, but then reproduce the problem by relegating indigenous and settler ideas to separate sections of their book.[21] Although the introduction is a well-considered overview of the contents of the book, I agree with Wels that a concluding chapter, offering a meta-perspective, would have been appropriate.[22] Freund points out that only McCracken's chapter is provided with a map.[23]

What is the significance of this book? I wish to return to Rich's view of the "embryonic state" of African environmental history. Beinart and McGregor contend that the field of African environmental history "has moved on" over the last decades in terms of the increasing importance of intellectual history and cultural perspectives (p. 9). But Bill Freund assesses their book as follows: "I do not detect in this collection any sense of overriding paradigm or passionately held ideas that would take environmental history forwards in Africa." [24] My response to this would be to ask, in the light of the contributions to this book: has African environmental history really managed to overcome the stalemates of the old anti-colonialist discourses? Has it succeeded in developing African scholarship, that is, scholarship among blacks in Africa? It seems to me that a lot of preliminary work still has to be done for African environmental history to really take off. The editors realize the nature of the problem facing a relatively new field of investigation: "The huge body of careful research that is needed to make meaningful judgements about longer-term environmental change in different places over a diverse continent is taking time to accumulate" (p. 9). My final assessment would be that this book is, despite its weaknesses, a valuable contribution to building this body of knowledge. Johann Tempelhoff regards the book as a good anthology for the reader interested in exploring a variety of themes in environmental history.[25] Wels is probably right when he calls it a "must-read" for everyone interested in how African environments past and present are constructed.[26] It definitely offers valuable pointers for further research in this field.

#### Notes

[1]. For an overview of trends in African environmental history, see J. R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," in *History and Theory*, 42 (December 2003): pp. 25-28 (special issue on environmental history).

[2]. See, for example, John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1, 110.

[3]. James C. McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: An Environmental History of Africa 1800-1900* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999), p. 4.

[4]. A list of such articles published since 2000 is supplied in Lance van Sittert, "The Nature of Power: Cape Environmental History, the History of Ideas and Neoliberal Historiography" (review article), *Journal of African History*, 45 (2004): pp. 305-306.

[5]. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26, no. 4, (December 2000), Special Issue: African Environments Past and Present; *Kronos*, 29 (2003) Special Issue: Environmental History; and *Journal of Historical Geography*, forthcoming, Special Issue: Landscape, Politics and the Historical Geography of Southern Africa.

[6]. See e.g. S. Dovers et al., eds., *South Africa's Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002); Nancy J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and William Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment, 1770-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[7]. Van Sittert, "The Nature of Power," p. 306.

[8]. Jeremy Rich, "Review of James C. McCann's *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: An Environmental History of Africa 1800-1900* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999)," *African Studies Quarterly*, 5, no. 3, (Fall 2001): <<http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v5/v5i3a15.htm>> <<http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v5/v5i3a15.htm>>

[9]. Bill Freund, Review of William Beinart and JoAnn McGregor, eds., *Social History and African Environments* *Kronos* 29 (2003): p. 224.

[10]. Freund, "Review," p. 225.

[11]. Van Sittert, "The Nature of Power," p. 311.

[12]. Freund, "Review," p. 225.

[13]. Van Sittert, "The Nature of Power," p. 307.

[14]. Harry Wels, "Review of William Beinart and JoAnn McGregor, eds., *Social History and African Environments*," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42.3 (September 2004): p. 467.

- [15]. Wels, "Review," p. 468.
- [16]. See Freund, "Review," p. 222.
- [17]. Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. viii, 20, 27.
- [18]. McNeill, "Observations on Environmental History," p. 6.
- [19]. Freund, "Review," p. 222.
- [20]. H-Environment homepage at [\\$http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/welcomeletter?list=h-environment](http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/welcomeletter?list=h-environment) A similar position is taken by the two major journals in the field of environmental history, *Environmental History* and *Environment and History*.
- [21]. Van Sittert, "The Nature of Power," p. 313.
- [22]. Wels, "Review," p. 468.
- [23]. Freund, "Review," p. 226.
- [24]. Freund, "Review," p. 222.
- [25]. Johann Tempelhoff, "Towards New Avenues of Research in African Environmental History," review of W. Beinart and J. McGregor, eds., *Social History and African Environments Historia*, 49, no. 2 (November 2004): p. 226.
- [26]. Wels, "Review," p. 467.

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