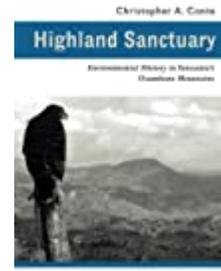


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Christopher A. Conte.** *Highland Sanctuary: Environmental History in Tanzania's Usambara Mountains.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004. 256 S. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1553-5.



**Reviewed by** Shane Doyle (School of History, University of Leeds)

**Published on** H-Environment (April, 2006)

Christopher Conte chose a fine case study area for an environmental history. The Usambara mountains possess undoubted natural beauty, ecological complexity, an intriguing relationship with their surrounding lowlands, and the site of East Africa's foremost research center for tropical agriculture and botany, Amani. Moreover, Conte has been able to build on the work of Steven Feierman, whose books on the Usambaras, *The Shambaa Kingdom* and *Peasant Intellectuals*, are two of the finest histories written on any part of Africa. They both revolve, moreover, around the relationship between the Shamba people and their local environment.

There is no doubt that *Highland Sanctuary* is a fine piece of work. It is clearly written, carefully contextualized, and is evidently the product of serious, sustained scholarship. It should certainly be read by anyone interested in African environmental history during the colonial period. Conte is at his best when detailing the destructiveness or ignorance of European interventions in complex, fragile environments. He argues convincingly that the real ecological destruction in the Usambaras was committed not by African peasants but by white coffee planters and government foresters, whose commercialism caused them to see mature forests as "idle capital" full of "weed" species for which there was no market. The persistent underfunding of the colonial forest depart-

ment was used as a justification for over-cutting until independence.

The second half of the book tells a familiar story. African farmers were viewed by Europeans as a danger to pristine, high-value environments, ignoring their role in creating these environments in the first place. The administrative doctrine of Indirect Rule was used by chiefs as an opportunity to use their unprecedented power to interfere in their subjects' daily lives in generally negative ways. Colonial officials consistently misunderstood local ecological practices. Conte shows, for example, how administrators supported supposedly traditional hereditary ownership rights over irrigation resources, whereas customary rights were in fact dependent on usage and maintenance. It would have been interesting to explore what kinds of conflicts arose within local communities as a result of such misunderstandings.

By the 1930s the restrictions of colonial policy combined with rapid population growth had begun to upset local communities' relationships with their environments. Population pressure forced a reduction in fallowing periods. Smaller holdings were compensated for by the adoption of exotic crops such as maize, which were higher yielding than traditional crops but were more vulnerable to drought and exposed the soil to more erosion.

The crisis came during the Second World War when prolonged drought led to the cultivation of marginal lands such as upland marshes, thus increasing environmental vulnerability. In colonial eyes, local production systems had become excessively intensive and extractive. The solution to this perceived crisis of overfarming and overpopulation, as in so much of the British empire, was to encourage the poor to leave, to enforce the consolidation of holdings into sustainable economic units, and to introduce a range of conservation measures, such as hedge planting, contour ridging and plowing, and the stall feeding of livestock. Unsurprisingly, some of these innovations were met with great resistance, as they were found to increase demands on scarce labor, to further reduce fallowing, and in some cases to accelerate erosion. As opposition to agricultural policy became caught up with nationalist agitation the British backed down, allowing farmers to retain only those innovations which

had proven effective. This analysis is the best part of the book, expanding on earlier research, and constructing a persuasive narrative.

Overall, this is a very useful local study, but it seems to have been more hindered than helped by Feierman's pioneering work. Only once, when he presents a darker picture than Feierman had of the inequality that became such a feature of East African life during the colonial period, does Conte really engage with his predecessor. One might have expected that a second-generation environmental history would have sought to distinguish itself by more innovative methodology, perhaps through the analysis of aerial photographs, intensive family histories of land conflicts and migration, or follow-up surveys of communities which had been investigated by colonial scientists. But this is nonetheless a valuable addition to the growing body of research into Tanzania's environmental history.

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**Citation:** Shane Doyle. Review of Conte, Christopher A., *Highland Sanctuary: Environmental History in Tanzania's Usambara Mountains*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11613>

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