

WATER MANAGEMENT AND STRUGGLES AT KILIMANJARO

Water Brings No Harm: Management Knowledge and the Struggle for the Waters of Kilimanjaro.

By Matthew V. Bender.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019. Pp. 336. \$34.95, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2359-2); \$80.00, hardcover (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2358-5).

doi:10.1017/S0021853720000122

Key words: Tanzania, environment, historical ecology, oral narratives, political ecology.

Matthew Bender's *Water Brings No Harm* is a welcome contribution to the growing historiography of environmental history of Africa. Specifically, this book joins a growing catalogue of prominent books on African water history. The book explores the history of the Chagga-speaking peoples' water management on Mount Kilimanjaro in Northern Tanzania over the course of three hundred years. The core of Bender's analysis rests on literary evidence (oral sources, field data, photographs, archived information, and a fair review of published sources) which he uses to show that, since the 1500s, the Chagga managed water through hydrological, technological, social, cultural, and political knowledge. However, since the 1850s a stream of incoming Western interlopers and the independent Tanzanian state infused the mountain waterscape with new technologies and perceptions, forcing shifts in the Chagga perceptions of water and water engineering technologies.

Bender's work becomes even more important when historians recall that, during the 1990s, several think tanks predicted that the bloodiest conflicts of the twenty-first century would be fought over water, and that Africa would be a central theatre of water wars. At the core of that viewpoint was scientific corpus borne out of research on the glaciers of Kilimanjaro by a crack team of scientists from Ohio University, interestingly where this book was published in 2019. In that regard, the book presents itself as a tool of assessing these twentieth century Malthusian predictions. Bender closes by arguing that water conflicts should be understood as struggles between competing forms of knowledge over time and place. Water resources are socially constructed and historically mediated, and thus conflicting views of resources produce struggles over time and space among users, as well as between users and outsiders.

Furthermore, Bender distinguishes himself as an acute researcher and historian who understands the art of history in non-literate societies. To understand the nuances of these conflicts over water, which occurred largely in the absence of written records, Bender follows the streams of the sources of Africa's precolonial past — Chagga adages, proverbs, and fables. In fact, the title of the book is a precise translation of the Chagga mega-proverb 'Muriga uwore mbaka voo'. As Bender shows, the use of symbolism and narration is an innovative and powerful way of telling an African story in a scholarly realm. The employment of proverbs is significant, given that historians have yet to recognize the full value of proverbs as sources of history. In my own writings on Kamba proverbs, I demonstrate how examining historical markers within the proverbs can unveil important information about the past. Bender's engagement with Chagga proverbs is an important achievement and reveals that water in and of itself was viewed as the source of life and brought no harm. The Chagga approach to water-related problems involved

careful management that tied together technology, spirituality, and community. These three components should be at the center of our understanding of water scarcity, access to water, and the development of water as a resource that unites rather than brings humanity to war. At the end, the author rightly cautions that water can be harmful if it is contaminated, and if state and society do not reign in tensions relating to its access.

However, the book is not without some shortcomings. For example, the author runs into the trap of prediction and prescription. ‘Millions around Africa’, he writes, ‘face chronic water scarcity. Population growth and climate change will only exacerbate this crisis’ (32). These contentions have played around Africa for decades, but in the end are harmful to science. Because of the consistent failure of scientific predictions about population and environment, there have been crises of public trust in science since the 1970s. I think historians (considering the 1960s popular-prophetic books like *The Population Bomb* and the 1990s predictions of water wars) would consider treading with caution when handling ‘scientific predictions’ relating to African environmental and demographic trajectories.¹

Another problem relates to how Bender handles his primary and secondary sources. In Chapter One, for example, it would have been helpful to the reader if the author could have distinguished legends dating from precolonial times from those created more recently and cast as originating from antiquity. The legend of Kibo and Mawezi, for example, represents a juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. In the ‘legend’, there is borrowing of fire embers (which is traditional) and there are shops with matchboxes, which represent westernization from 1900. The content analysis of oral art must be used as a guide to determine the general period from which they emerge. In this case, that ‘legend’ emerged during the 1900s, when Europeans introduced shops and matchboxes.

Bender makes another problematic assumption when he posits that Chagga identity was invented during colonial rule. This contention profoundly misinterprets the East African past, and contradicts arguments made by prominent scholars who have demonstrated that the invention of tradition is an overstretched proposition.²

Regardless of these faults, *Water Brings No Harm* is an invaluable contribution to African environmental studies. It will be extremely useful to those interested in the history and politics of water in Africa. I used the book in a senior seminar in History of Modern Africa and it was well received among students. I highly recommend it to scholars and students interested in the environmental history of Africa.

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1 See P. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York, 1968).

2 See T. Ranger, ‘The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Africa’, in T. Ranger and O. Vaughan (eds.), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa* (Basingstoke, UK, 1993), 62–111; T. Spear, ‘Neotraditionalism and the limits of invention in British Colonial Africa’, *The Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), 3–27.