

AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTS: IMAGINED AND REAL

William G. Moseley and B. Ikubolajeh Logan, eds. *African Environment and Development: Rhetoric, Programs and Realities*. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2004. xii + 240 pp. Map. Illustration. Tables. Bibliographies. Index. \$89.95. Cloth.

William Beinart and JoAnn McGregor, eds. *Social History and African Environments*. Athens: Ohio University Press/Oxford: James Currey, 2003. x + 266 pp. Illustrations. Bibliographies. Index. \$44.95. Cloth. \$22.95. Paper.

The characterization of African environments—and of Africans' interactions with them—has come under scrutiny from a number of academic disciplines, and especially from multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary analysis. Stereotypes and generalizations largely unfounded on fact (and usually pejorative) were codified during the colonial era. Although some colonial officers did put forward alternative perspectives, systematic challenge came in the late twentieth century from studies of specific places at particular points in time that contradicted established beliefs. Initially considered to be radical, this kind of critical analysis has become such an accepted area of study that it has generated its own debates. However, deliberation is less about whether colonial perspectives were accurate than about how to construct better explanations. The initial gross oppositions are in the process of being refined or replaced by more nuanced understandings that accept the possibilities of variability in nature and human response.

This recent literature of criticism, rich in terms like “narrative,” is supported by new theoretical formulations in both the physical and social sciences. As orthodoxies are being challenged, the best research uses these new perspectives to enhance understandings of a place; the least useful use a particular location to demonstrate the validity of a theoretical construction. One way to ensure that a dynamic environment, rather than a theoretical construction, prevails as subject is to include a historical perspective. Landscapes and human reactions to them differ in time, whether measured within a year or over several years, decades, or centuries. Accounting for variation, or even complete change, is often a challenge for theoretical models.

Two quite different volumes of multidisciplinary conference papers contribute to this redefining of the African environment and human relations to it. William G. Moseley and B. Ikubolajeh Logan set out to present a critical analysis of environmental narratives as they relate to environment and development policy, particularly in West Africa. William Beinart and JoAnn McGregor, on the other hand, consciously avoid discussion of environmental policy and responsibilities for environmental change in East, central, and southern Africa, preferring, as the back cover blurb proclaims, to challenge “some of the interpretive conventions of Africanist scholarship”

with a collection of essays concerning social and cultural perspectives on environmental change. Moseley and Logan's introduction includes instructive overviews of the ideology of sustainable development, the meaning and application of political ecology, and a discussion of environmental narratives, political economy, and global environmental politics as they relate to specific African realities. Beinart and McGregor are less clear in identifying which narratives—or aspects of them—their collection “challenges.” The word *Africanist* is used frequently in their introduction to identify categories of scholarship, but its meaning is not always clear: is it meant, in some instances, to evoke the complex South African concerns about types of economic analysis or the “privileging” of certain groups of people? Despite the “social history” of the book's title, the introduction briefly reviews African environmental history, with an emphasis on those areas of study that do not involve detailed analysis of the environment itself. Only two essays in their volume could be identified as having the environment's history as subject. Emmanuel Kreike engages with the larger literature about local land users and the existence of trees. Using oral histories collected in Ovamboland, northern Namibia, Kreike explains the importance of fruit trees to survival in times of drought and documents the spread of fruit trees in Ovamboland following the expansion of human settlement. This perspective contests colonial beliefs about wild fruit trees. Also working in a dry landscape with the use of oral evidence and engaging current ideas in environmental history, Karen Middleton explores the arrival and spread of the prickly pear in southern Madagascar. What she thought would be a simple narrative in imperial history with a “twist”—the introduced plant becoming a barrier to further imperialism—becomes a complex interweaving of stories with often ambiguous interpretations.

The contrast between the books is evident in the titles of their subsections. In Moseley and Logan's book they are titled “Environmental Narratives and African Realities,” “Political Economy, Rural Livelihoods and the Environment,” and “Global Environmental Politics and Conservation”; in Beinart and McGregor's they are “African Environmental Ideas and Practices,” “Colonial Science, the State and African Responses,” and “Settlers and Africans; Culture and Nature.” The latter volume includes papers by South Africans dealing with settler perceptions and responses to nature: thus Sandra Swart's essay on the entomological writings of Eugene Marais and Afrikaner nature identity, and the complementary essay by David Bunn on the meaning of Kruger Park. Robert J. Gordon draws attention to colonial administrators' attitudes toward domesticated nature through an examination of Namibia's substantial legislation and activity related to settlers' and Africans' dogs.

Several essays in *African Environment and Development* are informed by commitment, if not anger, born of years in Africa. Most noteworthy is Emmanuel Kreike's compelling description of southern Africa's wars from the 1960s to the 1990s as experienced by local people and their environ-

ment. Oral testimony makes real South Africa's destruction in Namibia's Ovamboland and Angola's adjacent Cunene Province in the west, and in Mozambique's Gaza Province and South Africa's Gazankulu. Soil was dug and compacted, vegetation destroyed, animals dispersed or killed, and people made refugees, disrupting the essential roles each had in the region's environment. B. Ikubolajeh Logan takes a strong stand against the "mainstream discourse" that shapes and guides environmental policy in Africa. Tracing sustainable development's roots to globalization, he refutes it as a mechanism for poverty alleviation and questions its efficacy as a framework for community-based development projects. Logan prefers the model of environmental security which, he argues, allows for greater attention to local realities. His theoretical discussion is not well supported, however, by his overview of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. William G. Moseley's dismantling of the argument that environmental degradation is related to poverty in Mali identifies links with Malthusian notions of overpopulation and neoclassical economic theories of time preference and discount rates. The lack of correlation is shown in crop and soil data from Malian cotton farmers.

Some essays from the separate volumes should be read together. David Bunn's discussion of the significance of Kruger National Park to early-twentieth-century English settlers and Jane Carruther's of South Africa's Gemsbok National Park to the indigenous San people in the Beinart and McGregor volume are provided with critical context when read in conjunction with Rachel B. DeMotts's comparison of the approaches to wildlife protection by independent Namibia and postapartheid South Africa in Moseley and Logan. Anthropologists in preindependence Namibia successfully asserted the integral relations between people and animals in rural landscapes as a basis for wildlife management policy and practice, while postapartheid South Africa persists in the creation of parks, with local people's access subject to negotiation and contractual arrangements with the state. In the same volume (Moseley and Logan), Jennifer E. Coffman considers the idea of community-based wildlife management as applied by Maasai people in a project called Maendeleo kwa Uhifadhi (MKU), which they have created on their amalgamated homesteads in Kenya. The value of building on local knowledge systems and incorporating local practices in state conservation programs is further explored by Grace Carswell's study of colonial administrators and their successful soil conservation interventions in Kigezi, Uganda (Beinart and McGregor). Finally, the significance of the environmental destruction detailed in Kreike's essay on war in Moseley and Logan is enhanced by reading his environmental history of fruit trees in the Beinart and McGregor collection.

A consistent theme in both books is the influence of outsiders' environmental perceptions on the formation of policy and programs. In *Social History and African Environments*, for example, Helen Tilley's densely referenced discussion of the 1930s African Research Project shows the extent to

which scientific research was able to modify some of the more fantastic notions of colonial administrators but ultimately failed to transform policy. John McCracken details the resistance in northern Malawi to conservation programs informed by prejudice rather than knowledge, in contrast to Carswell's Ugandan conservation officer's attention to local practices and the application of research. The extent to which a complete misunderstanding of local people's relations to the environment skewed colonial policy is considered by Ingrid Yngstrom. The Gogo people of central Tanzania consistently failed to respond to programs intended to serve a colonially constructed tribal identity that had originated with characterizations made by participants in precolonial Swahili-speaking caravans.

African Environment and Development provides analysis of environmental policies and programs from several theoretical political ecology perspectives. Paul Laris invokes a "chain of explanation approach" to explore the linkages between the dominant fire narratives and specific changes in rural burning practices from 1900 to 1991. Belief-based narratives informed policy from the beginnings of the colonial era through independence, but they were effective only in the first postindependence government, when a nationalist appeal against burning reduced early-season fires to such an extent that massive and destructive wildfires broke out within two years. After several changes in government, national debate resulted in a fire code moderated by local knowledge and traditions about burning. Jim Bingen's analysis of pesticide policies and politics in Malian cotton production traces the power and influence of corporate interests on scientific research and argues that alternative pest management practices not only shift power from global interests to local growers, but also reduce the problems of resistance to pesticides.

Ecological variability is understood by Mirjam de Bruijn and Han van Dijk to be a type of risk, with individuals occupying structurally different risk positions that are not only highly politicized, but also impermanent. Using risk analysis, they trace the fate of Fulbe pastoralists in central Mali from their status as noble vassals in precolonial empires to their marginalization and loss of access to grazing areas in the late twentieth century, while former slaves became landed farmers. Ecological variability has also resulted in diversification of production systems, an idea explored by Stephen R. Wooten using "the livelihood concept" and anthropological jargon. He found that Malian farmers within bicycling distance of Bamako created irrigated market gardens in wetter lowland areas once covered with dense vegetation, but only after (not in competition with) harvesting their dry-season staple crops. Like many recent social science considerations of agricultural production, this analysis does not refer to that of agronomists and agricultural economists who already in the 1970s identified unpredictability and risk as reasons for avoiding single crop systems.

Interpreting the significance of things in another culture is always tricky, for as diverse as one's own culture may be, one can never be certain

in another. Apparently seeking a debate with unspecified “European feminist literature,” Terence Ranger (Beinart and McGregor) explores the meanings of women and the environment in African religion through an examination of spirit mediums in Zimbabwe. Using archival material and references to modern Zimbabwean poets, Ranger builds his case to show that despite patriarchy, “men and woman play a complementary role in Zimbabwe’s eco-religious ideology and practice” (83). With a team of research assistants and translators, JoAnn McGregor investigates the significance of the Zambezi River to the Tonga people on the Zimbabwean side who had once lived in its floodplain. Moved to higher and drier ground with the construction of the Kariba hydroelectric dam in the mid-1950s, modern Tonga still remember unkept promises of past governments and assert rights based upon links to a submerged land and way of life.

Two essays seem misplaced. Innocent Pikirayi (Beinart and McGregor) fails to demonstrate the importance of integrating archival texts with archaeological evidence in reconstructing Zimbabwe’s climate; one wonders whether another conference paper with more appropriate content could have been selected by the editors. Phia Steyn’s uncritical description of the Shell Oil Company’s role in Nigeria’s Ogoniland, on the other hand, might have fit better with the papers in *Social History and African Environments* rather than in Moseley and Logan’s intentionally analytical and policy-oriented volume.

African Environment and Development concludes with an essay by Moseley summing up the collection’s major themes: the influence of global environmental narratives on African environmental policy; the interaction between regional political economy and rural livelihoods; and environmental management that results from global environmental politics and local agency. Beinart and McGregor’s work comes to no conclusion; each author is left to offer his or her own challenge.

Finally, the two books are not comparable in production quality. Ohio University/James Currey’s clothbound volume has been well edited and proofread. The same cannot be said for Ashgate’s plasticized card-covered book. Not only is the binding weak (it cracked when first opened), but typographical errors abound, and a good copy editor would have sorted out tangled sentences, demanded that terms specific to one academic discipline be translated, and ensured a standard citing of references in the text: some are listed chronologically (ascending or descending order), others are random; the most disconcerting is an alphabetical listing. It is a shame that the hard work of scholars has not been matched by care at the press.

Each of these collections has merit. Beinart and McGregor’s more descriptive volume concentrates on East, central and southern Africa, providing essential information about human (largely European) relations with Africans and their landscape. The history and context of colonial struc-

tures and their policies is important for understanding not only what happened in the past, but perhaps more important, for predicting how current residents of a particular location might respond to newly formulated policies and programs. Indeed, despite claims to the contrary, Beinart and McGregor's volume is implicitly very much about policy. The documentation supporting most papers is extensive, and the use of oral testimony as well as archival materials by several authors provides unique perspectives and sources of information. Mosely and Logan's volume offers a good synthesis of criticisms of environmental narratives, sustainable development, and environmental policy. Most papers include a historical analysis along with whatever piece of political ecology theory they employ, so that readers can learn about places and events as well as intellectual manipulations. Extensive footnotes and documentation of many chapters provide a base for further exploration of the topic at hand. The quality of the papers in each volume is uneven, but most make a contribution to better understanding what has been said about Africa, and even a bit about what might really be going on.

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