

### Towards New Avenues of Research in African Environmental History

**W. Beinart and J. McGregor (eds), *Social History and African Environments***

James Currey, Ohio University Press, and David Philip, Oxford, Athens and Cape Town, 2003

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Environmental history is currently developing into a field of rapid research enterprise. Much of its appeal can be ascribed to the perspectives it offers our pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial interpretations of the continent's past. With good reason most of the significant work being done in the field at present, comes from either the United States of America (USA) or Britain. The subdivision of environmental history in Africa, however, still is a young field. Much of its results are the product of researchers in the Northern Hemisphere, or at least researchers of European origin. Amongst these, the name of William Beinart stands out. Apart from individual contributions,<sup>1</sup> Beinart has been able to present some collaborative work of great value in the field.<sup>2</sup> The latest work, *Social History and African Environments*, edited in partnership with JoAnn McGregor, is a welcome addition to the *corpus* of knowledge in the field.

For the reader interested in exploring the potential of a variety of themes in environmental history, the work offers a good anthology. Contributions range in theme from aspects of the history of the domestic dog in Namibia to that of the prickly pear in Madagascar, and from soil conservation in Uganda to the ideology of landscape in South Africa.

According to the editors, the publication introduces new work that is being done in the field of the social and cultural dimensions of environmental history (p 3). Still, the major accent, as the title suggests, remains firmly in the field of social history. Cultural dynamics is still an under-explored field in social history, as a result of the strong territorial claims of anthropologists and cultural sociologists. It is thus good for historians now to lay a claim to their rightful share. The extent to which the historian can shed more light on the field, is exemplified in Terence Ranger's contribution on women and environment in African religion. The study, clearly an extension of his recent groundbreaking work on Zimbabwe's Matopos,<sup>3</sup> deserves the attention of environmental historians. It is a narrative, constructed beyond the confines of colonial history and related reference frameworks. Ranger is one of a small group of historians who have managed to get into the mindset of indigenous culture, thereby perceiving a reality that is original and sought-after. It is hoped that his example will be emulated by more African environmental historians.

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1 See, for example, his historiographical study "African History and Environmental History" in *African Affairs*, 99, 2000, pp 269-302

2 W Beinart and P Coates, *Environment and History: The Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa* (Routledge, London, 1995)

3 T Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos* (James Currey, Oxford, 1999)

John McCracken, working from a heterological premise, has explored the “barren” north of colonial Malawi in his chapter dealing with conservation and resistance to colonial rule. Working from Richard Groves’ *Green Imperialism*, he points out in the study which borders on chorographic synthesis, how the popular colonial conservation trend took root in the former Nyasaland and the effect it had on indigenous people. Their resistance, despite the attempts at staving off an imminent “environmental disaster”, makes for interesting reading. Perspectives of this nature have already featured in some earlier work done in collaboration with Australian environmental historians.<sup>4</sup> It nevertheless does make sense to revisit the theme and look at it from a different perspective. Robert Gordon’s work on dogs in colonial Namibia, is historiographically one of the early contributions to canine historical investigation in Southern Africa. His point of departure has a strong environmental slant on the historical dog in Namibia, whilst the more recent work is firmly in the field of social history.<sup>5</sup>

Emmanuel Kreike’s perceptions of colonial and indigenous dendrological preoccupations, has Northern Namibia for a backdrop. He offers some sensitive interpretations of the manner in which the fruit of the indigenous trees had traditionally been used, their ownership, and the manner in which population mobility and communal age groups relied on the seasonal harvest of nature to survive in what outsiders consider as being a “harsh” environment. JoAnn McGreggor’s chapter has a similar objective. She focuses on the “river people” of the Zambezi and the manner in which the landscape was altered by dam construction in colonial times. Writing on river environments as a rule is a complex issue, especially when the subject is preliterate society. Many of her valuable insights into the culture of the residents along the rivers are valuable for the fact that it provides very recent and some historical insights. This particular study might have benefited a lot, had more sources of early travellers along the Zambezi also been included in the narrative.

Helen Tilley’s exploration of Lord Hailey’s *African Research Survey* is interesting. The latter research endeavour, which reached an apex as Africa prepared for independence in the 1950s, was focused on the potential of development in Africa. Today, though, it has achieved the status of a valuable source for environmental historians of Africa. Tilley’s exploration into the history of science is welcomed. It could shed more light on similar investigations in intellectual environmental history. Sandra Swart’s work on Eugene Marais can be categorised in the same field. Jane Carruthers’s work on the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park can be read against the backdrop of the land claims process that has been taking place in South Africa since 1994. It is also significant in the light of the debate on the San people and their claims to land and human dignity in Southern Africa in the twenty-first century. As an expert on the game parks of South Africa, she makes some important statements that the enquiring reader needs to take note of.

David Bunn’s chapter dealing with the advent of tourism in the Kruger Park, is one of the “jewels” in the book. It is a highly readable piece that stands out because of its originality in terms of varied discourses. Apart from tourism, Bunn is able to give

4 T Griffiths and L Robin (eds), *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History and Settler Societies* (Keele University Press, Edinburgh, 1997)

5 See L van Sittert and S Swart (eds), Feature: “*Canis Familiaris* – a Dog History of South Africa”, *South African Historical Journal*, 48, May 2003, pp 138-251 for a number of articles on the theme

some impressions of the history of wildlife photography in the Kruger Park, as well as the infrastructure of bureaucratic and cultural politics. Moreover, he writes on different levels of environmental signification by explaining how the waterholes of the Park were considered as prime spots for photographers. An outstanding feature of this chapter, like many parts of the book, is that it deals with the discourse on the Afrikaners of South Africa. It appears as if, apart from having been lionised in the history of racism for their contribution towards the ideology of apartheid, they are now also taking their deserved place in the historiography dealing with the African environment.

On the whole *Social History and African Environments* is a valuable work. The introduction is of particular importance as Beinart and McGreggor go into considerable detail about the historiography of African environmental history and the contributions of individual authors. Perhaps more important, is the contemplation on methodological strategies. Environmental history is a field which lends itself to trans-disciplinary research. It is hoped that more historians will be able to tap into the potential of cross-border encounters with the natural past. If researchers can maintain the momentum of constantly putting their theoretical assumptions to the test under circumstances of empirical investigation, the position of history as a field contributing to the scientific understanding of the environment could well be enhanced. When the geographer, Hartmund Leser, introduced the geomethodological approach to ecology in Africa at Basel University in the 1970s, it was in part a local response to interdisciplinary trends in the French research environment. By 1992 – when the musical chairs of fashion and trends had shifted – it was possible for these perspectives on the African environment to make a contribution towards the formulation of long-term objectives at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. It is hoped that the academic leadership of the historical fraternity in the Northern Hemisphere will lay down a firm foundation for future historians, when the tides of change once again put investigations into the African past to the test. *Social History and African Environments* might well become a pointer towards new avenues of research.

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